



**MAINE
AQUACULTURE
ASSOCIATION**

March 5, 2026

The Honorable Rachel Talbot Ross, Senate Chair
The Honorable William Plueker, House Chair
Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry
State House, Room 214
Augusta, ME. 04333

Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker, Honorable members of the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry:

My name is Sebastian Belle and I am the Executive Director of the Maine Aquaculture Association (MAA). I am also the currently serving President of the National Aquaculture Association. The MAA is the oldest state aquaculture association in the country. Next year will be our fiftieth anniversary. Our members raise finfish, shellfish and sea vegetables using a wide variety of species and production methods. Our board of directors is selected to represent that diversity and a mix of company sizes. The latest economic impact analysis shows that our farmers annually produce over 106 million dollars in farm gate revenue and directly employ over 1200 Maine citizens. We purchase goods and services from over 400 Maine businesses and create over 1700 full time jobs in the state. Our total economic impact is roughly 208 million dollars annually. Although we are small by world standards, we have doubled our revenue and number of jobs in the last ten years. We are one of the only natural resource based sectors in the state that has consistently grown over the last twenty years. We expect that growth to continue. In a recent grower survey 77% of respondents expected their sales revenue to grow by at least 50% in the next 4 years.

I stand before you today to testify in strong support of LD 299 "An Act to Support Investment in Agriculture". Why you might ask, is an aquaculture trade association here to support investment in agriculture? The answer is simple. Aquaculture is Agriculture helps make that clear. We farm animals and plants, we just happen to do it in water instead of on land like our colleagues in agriculture and forestry. But the other part of the answer is we are here to support our colleagues in the agriculture and forestry sectors. Many of the challenges they face are identical to the challenges our growers face. The cost of doing business in Maine, constantly changing regulations, a changing environment, rural gentrification and cheap imports from countries that subsidize our competitors are all challenges we share. All these are serious and our family owned businesses whether they are sea farms, land farms or forestry operations struggle to remain competitive and grow in an incredibly dynamic and competitive regional and global marketplace.

One of the biggest challenges we all face is access to capital for business improvements. As small business owners we must often find capital for increasingly sophisticated and expensive equipment in order to improve our efficiency and keep production costs low enough that we can compete with subsidized imports. Traditional financing institutions and methods are often not available to our sectors and this constrains our ability to grow our businesses to a scale where we remain competitive. The states working landscapes and waterfronts need a sustainable long term fund that supports infrastructure investments in their communities. Our sectors currently do not have access to this type of consistent low cost investment capital and we compete against other states and countries that do.

LD 299 is NOT asking for any new taxes or fees to be imposed on Maine citizens, it is merely shifting some money internally that the state already collects. Our working landscapes and waterfronts are being lost due to conversion to residential use at the fastest rate in Maine history. Those working farms, forests and sea farms are one of the most important and iconic parts of the Maine image. Their preservation is critical to the state's tourism industry which is the state's largest economic driver. The best way to preserve the Maine "brand" is to ensure that working farms, forests and waterfronts can remain viable and competitive businesses. LD 299 helps do that. I ask that you Vote **Ought to Pass** on LD 299. Thank you for your attention, I would be glad to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'S. Belle', written in black ink.

Sebastian M. Belle
Executive Director