



March 5, 2026

The Honorable Chip Curry, Senate Chair
The Honorable Traci Gere, House Chair
Joint Standing Committee on Housing and Economic Development
State House, Room 206
Augusta, ME. 04333

Senator Curry, Representative Gere, Honorable members of the Joint Committee on Housing and Economic Development:

My name is Sebastian Belle and I am the Executive Director of the Maine Aquaculture Association (MAA). 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. Our blue economy sector is diverse in terms of species, production method and company size. The latest economic impact analysis shows that our farmers annually produce over 106 million dollars in farm gate revenue and directly employ 1207 Maine citizens. We purchase goods and services from over 400 Maine businesses and create 1720 jobs in the state. Our total economic impact is roughly 208 million dollars annually. Although we are small by world standards, collectively we are the second most valuable "fishery" in the state and 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 to have 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 support of LD 2216 "An Act to Establish the Maine Blue Economy Center". The Maine Aquaculture Association has been engaged in the discussion around the formation of a Blue Economy Center from the very beginning. As the President of the National Aquaculture Association I have witnessed first hand the formation of similar centers in other states over the last 5 years and seen the impact they have had on those states economies. Done right these centers can attract investment and support business development.

LD 2216 outlines in detail how a Maine Blue Economy Center would be formed and many of the specifics around the proposed Centers role in supporting the growth of the sector. Having discussed with colleagues in other states some of the lessons they have learned during their centers development and operation I would like to raise a few issues the committee may want to consider as it discusses the Bill.

1. The Centers board makeup should be private sector heavy and representative.
One of the lessons I have heard over and over again is to be effective Centers must be driven by the private sector. In a number of instances centers were created and then

became overly research focused instead of development focused. The centers tended to become yet another way to channel money to the research community instead of substantively supporting commercial development. The current version of LD 2216 only specifies 5 board members out of 15 total must come from the private sector. I would respectfully suggest that number needs to increase and that those board seats should be identified with specific blue economy sectors to ensure fair and equal representation. Those changes should occur without increasing the total number of board members to ensure it does not become so large that it becomes dysfunctional. I would also suggest that the Governor should be directed to consult with trade associations in addition to MTI and FAME when considering board appointments.

2. The Center should be directed to coordinate its work with and not duplicate existing institutions, research and/or economic development initiatives. Maine already has one of the highest concentrations of Marine research and economic development institutions in the nation. LD 2216 should clarify that the proposed Blue Economy Center will play a coordinating role and will NOT result in the development and/or construction of another brick and mortar institution that will then compete with existing institutions for financial support. Any reference to construction or maintenance or reconstruction of facilities should be stripped from the bill. Any reference to "property" in the use of funds section of the bill should also be struck.
3. The process for how an entity becomes a "certified blue economy business" should be clarified. In order to qualify for funds from the Center a business MUST be "certified". The current version of LD 2216 only states that the centers board of directors decides whether a business qualifies as "certified" or not. There is no clarity as to the standards a business must achieve, or the criteria which will be used to judge whether they qualify or not. There is also no clarity as to the process of application and review. Although LD 2216 contains strong conflict of interest provisions the blue economic sector in Maine is relatively small. A clear set of criteria, standards and application and review process will be critical to preventing confusion and ensuring fairness. While I recognize it maybe appropriate to establish certification criteria and the application process during a rule making exercise, I would suggest the committee may want to have those rules be major substantive not routine technical to ensure the authority and responsibility you have designated to the centers board of directors is appropriately executed.

Given these suggestions I ask that you Vote **Ought to Pass** on LD 2216. Thank you for your attention, I would be glad to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,



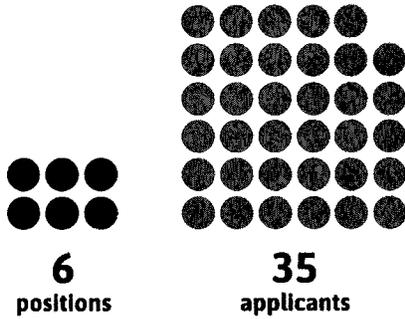
Sebastian M. Belle
Executive Director

Maine Aquaculture Apprenticeship

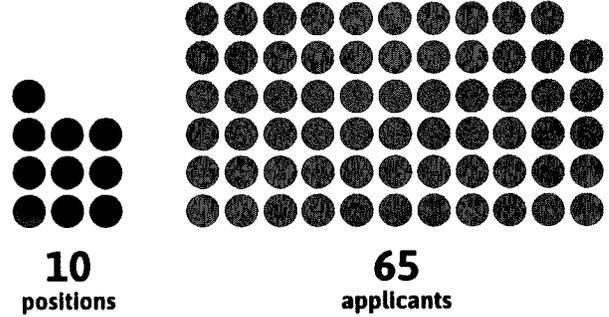
The Maine Shellfish and Seaweed Technician registered apprenticeship is a year-long program offering paid, full-time positions, including 2,000 hours of on-farm training and 144 hours of coursework, preparing participants for long-term careers in Maine's aquaculture sector. It was launched in 2023 and has attracted many applicants from across the nation. It is the first aquaculture apprenticeship in the nation.

● = Available Positions ● = Applicants

2023 Apprentice Cohort

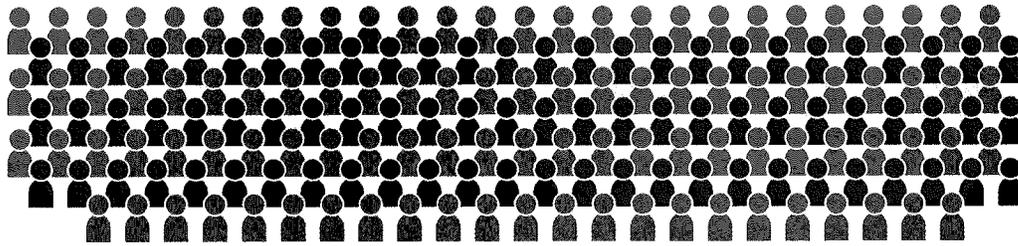


2024 Apprentice Cohort



Aquaculture as Diversification

Aquaculture is a growing opportunity for Maine's working waterfronts, helping fishermen diversify their incomes while staying connected to the water. As traditional fisheries face increased challenges from climate change, rising costs, and gentrification in coastal communities, aquaculture offers a sustainable solution that bolsters the resilience of our working waterfronts. With more fishermen recognizing the potential of aquaculture, we can strengthen Maine's working waterfronts and secure the future of our maritime economy.



179 Mainers*
hold both a commercial
fishing license and
an aquaculture license

*does not include fishermen employed on farms or farm employees who also fish

Economic Impact of Aquaculture

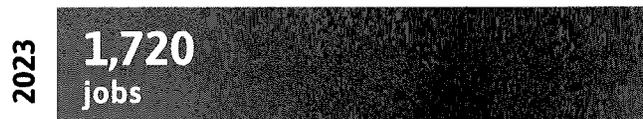
Growth in Maine's aquaculture sector creates new jobs and career opportunities, boosts the state's economy and seafood brand, and attracts new businesses to our working waterfronts.

Total Economic Impact

Total impact is the combination of business revenues, business spending, and employee spending driven by aquaculture

Total Employment Impact

Total employment impact includes direct farm jobs, jobs related to aquaculture services (e.g. insurance, equipment, tourism) and related to needs of employees (e.g. health care, restaurants, real estate, etc.).



for more info, visit us at www.maineaqua.org

Public Perceptions of Aquaculture (2024)



The Critical Insights on Maine tracking survey, conducted by Digital Research, Inc., is a long-standing public opinion poll of registered Maine voters, providing insights on a variety of topics for over 25 years. The Fall 2024 survey gathered responses from 604 participants via phone and online, ensuring a representative sample reflective of Maine's voting population. Results specific to the Maine aquaculture sector were drawn from proprietary questions included in the survey and have a margin of error of ± 4.0 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

Of Mainers familiar enough with aquaculture to rate their support:

89% believe aquaculture can play a role in **strengthening Maine's working waterfronts.**



89% believe aquaculture can play a role in **diversifying Maine's coastal and rural economies.**



85% believe Maine aquaculture is an **important and valuable part of the local food system.**



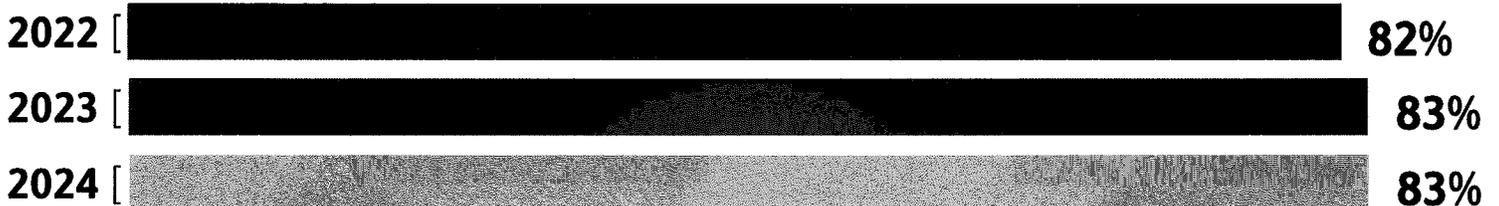
82% believe aquaculture products are **sustainable and environmentally responsible.**



73% believe Maine aquaculture products are **delicious.**



Year after year, support for the growth of aquaculture has remained strong. Consistently, **8 in 10 Mainers** familiar with aquaculture support the growth of the sector:



Results reflect that **better understanding of the industry** is directly correlated with higher **support for the industry**. This highlights the importance of **proper education and outreach**.

for more info, visit us at www.maineaqua.org