



Rachel Talbot Ross
Senator, District 28

THE MAINE SENATE
132nd Legislature

3 State House Station
Augusta, Maine 04333

**Testimony of Senator Rachel Talbot Ross
Introducing LD 473, "An Act to Support Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry in
Maine"**

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

Representative Pluecker and esteemed members of the Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee, my name is Senator Rachel Talbot Ross. I represent Senate District 28, which includes part of Portland, the Casco Bay Islands, and the University of Southern Maine campus. I am here today to present LD 473 and the amendment before you.

I want to speak plainly about why this bill is needed and what it is intended to do.

In recent weeks, Maine potato producers, processors, and seed dealers contacted the Legislature with a level of concern that made clear this was not a hypothetical issue. They alerted us that a shipment of seed potatoes had been transported into Maine from Colorado, an area with a long-documented infestation of the Columbia Root Knot Nematode, commonly known as CRKN.

CRKN is a federally and internationally regulated, quarantinable pest overseen by the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. It has been present in parts of Colorado for decades, particularly in the San Luis Valley. Once introduced into soil, it is extremely difficult, often impossible, to eradicate.

The immediate concern raised by growers was not just that this pest exists elsewhere, but that seed potatoes grown in an infested region had already entered Maine and were in a buyer's possession before questions could be resolved. That reality exposed a serious vulnerability: when a dangerous plant pest threatens Maine agriculture, the State must be able to act quickly and decisively to prevent its spread.

The stakes could not be higher. If CRKN were to become established in Maine, the impact on our potato industry alone could be devastating, potentially hundreds of millions of dollars in lost revenue, long-term soil damage, and costly treatment requirements. And this risk does not stop with potatoes. CRKN has a wide host range, affecting other vegetables, grains, ornamentals,



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weeds, and more. Once present, it becomes not just an agricultural problem, but a long-term land-use and economic problem.

Producers also raised a broader concern that deserves attention. Maine's agricultural economy depends on trust, trust from buyers, processors, and trading partners across state and international borders. If Maine is seen as allowing imports from known infested areas, other states or provinces may restrict trade with us preemptively, even before a pest is detected here. In that scenario, the damage is done not by infestation, but by risk alone.

LD 473, the amendment before this committee today, is intended to address exactly this kind of situation.

This bill reinforces and clarifies the authority of the Commissioner of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry under Title 7, Chapter 409 to establish and enforce plant quarantines when a dangerous pest or disease threatens Maine agriculture, particularly when federal action has not yet occurred.

In practical terms, the bill ensures the State has clear authority to restrict the movement of plant materials that could spread a quarantinable pest, to inspect or seize those materials when necessary, and to take appropriate steps to prevent further distribution or contamination. It also ensures that quarantine rules are enforceable through civil penalties that are meaningful, proportional, and fair.

This is not about expanding government authority for its own sake. It is about making sure the tools we rely on to protect Maine agriculture actually work when they are needed most. It is about prevention rather than cleanup, and preparedness rather than regret.

The amendment also preserves important safeguards. Any quarantine rules must still be adopted through established rulemaking processes. Enforcement remains civil. Courts retain discretion to consider proportionality, economic benefit, and fairness. The goal is balance, strong protection for Maine agriculture paired with due process and accountability.

At its core, LD 473 reflects what Maine farmers and producers are asking of us: that when a real, credible threat emerges, the State of Maine is prepared to act swiftly, responsibly, and lawfully to



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protect their livelihoods and the agricultural economy that so many rural communities depend on.

I want to thank the Maine Potato Board, the Maine Seed Executive Council, my colleagues and the producers who brought this issue forward clearly and urgently.

Thank you for your time and attention. I am happy to try and answer any questions you may have, but I think the stakeholders who will follow me will be best prepared to answer detailed questions.