

Good afternoon, Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry:

My name is Garrett Hemphill and I am the current President for the Maine Potato Board as well as a 5th generation potato farmer in Presque Isle. I am here today to speak in strong support of LD 473 and strict restrictions on importing seed potatoes from areas with known nematode infestations. I would also like to thank the bill sponsor, Senator Talbot Ross, for bringing this bill forward after grave concerns from the Maine potato industry.

Agriculture depends on healthy soil and seed health standards exist for a reason. Allowing seed potatoes to be imported from areas where these pests are known to exist creates a risk that far outweighs any short-term benefit. A single introduction would threaten potato production, harm farmers' livelihoods, and affect the broader agricultural economy that many communities depend on.

Once harmful pests like Columbia Root Knot Nematodes (CRKN) are introduced into farmland, they can persist in the soil for decades and are extremely difficult—sometimes impossible—to eliminate; meaning that a single introduction can affect farmland for an entire generation of farmers. Prevention is far less costly than trying to manage an infestation after it occurs.

If this pest is found in Maine, it will have a devastating impact on the Maine potato industry, costing it upwards of hundreds of millions of dollars in lost revenue and potentially necessary treatments. CRKN also has a wide host range, including other vegetables, grains, ornamentals, and weeds, not only putting other crops at risk as well, but also contributing to its difficulty to manage and eradicate. Infestations have been known to reduce potato yields dramatically, cause deformities that causes rejection for fresh market and processing and trigger quarantines that restrict the movement of crops and soil. Those kinds of restrictions do not just affect one farm—they affect entire regions, markets, and the reputation of a state's potato industry.

Farmers work hard to protect their land, their crops, and the long-term stability of our food supply. Chapter 255 and Chapter 409 should have protected our industry and the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry should prioritize biosecurity and prevention to help ensure that our farms remain productive and that future generations can continue farming. We are hoping with the requested changes to Chapter 30, this will prevent this risk from happening in the future.

For these reasons, I respectfully ask the committee to support LD 473 and policies that prevent the importation of seed potatoes from known nematode-infested states and areas.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony and for your commitment to protecting agriculture and our State's precious farmland.