

Isabel Ruffin  
[isabel.ruffin@maine.edu](mailto:isabel.ruffin@maine.edu)  
207.570.8308.  
Swanville, ME

**Testimony of Isabel Ruffin of Swanville, Maine before the 131<sup>st</sup> Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry**

Good afternoon members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry.

My name is Izzy Ruffin, I am a resident of Swanville, Maine, and I am here today as a Farmworker and Agricultural Service Provider to express my support of LD 5688 - An Act to Provide Funding for the Fund to Address Food Insecurity and Provide Nutrition Incentives. I moved back to Maine, the state I was born and raised in, after graduating from college in the summer of 2017. Since then, I have worked for five farms and worked at seven different farmers markets in the state, primarily in the Midcoast region. Currently, I am an employee of Lost and Found Farm in Dresden, Maine and Winter Hill Farm in Freeport, Maine, primarily working at the Brunswick Farmers Markets year round. Since living here full time, I have spent the majority of my year working at least one farmers market a week, and in the summer, two.

At the seven markets I've worked, I have watched over the years the impact that programs like the Maine Harvest Bucks Program have had on the community. I have watched that impact grow to include more and more markets and expand access even further. I have had the opportunity and pleasure to inform customers directly about the benefits of using their SNAP/EBT dollars at the farmers market, and watched it light up faces and be met with pleasant shock that it was even a possibility. I've been there, behind the booth, as customers would trade a gallon of milk for a symbolic wooden coin, and tear up at not only the opportunity to enjoy fresh, local products from nearby farms, but revel in the experience of being rewarded for doing so. These customers and their experiences are essential to the community, and essential to the success and story of what makes Maine Agriculture so special and unique.

As an Agricultural Service Provider and a Graduate student, my professional work focuses on Farmer Well-being and Mental Health. A big part of that well-being, and the reason that many farmers get started in their work, is community. For many farms, creating an equitable, safe, and accessible environment for everyone to enjoy local food is central to their founding morals and their businesses. The Maine Harvest Bucks Program is a founding building block of the community. Cutting the funding would be doing a disservice to many Mainers, who would otherwise be limited in their access to local, nutritious food without it.

Most importantly, I am coming to you as a person who grew up in Maine in a lower-resourced household and who often did not have access to food that was considered nutritious. As a small child, there was a brief period of time where my mother would take me and my siblings to a nearby farmers market in Orono, Maine. I remember very vividly how vibrant and fun it felt being inside the greenhouse structure, surrounded by colors and textures and shapes I had never seen before. My mom would often leave empty handed, or with very little, but I explicitly remember that there were still vendors at the Farmers Market who would remember her, remember us, and would watch over the years as we grew up; always offering

up a friendly smile and an occasional snack. I was little enough to not fully comprehend, but thinking back now, I can assume that was my first exposure to what a community felt like, and certainly my first experience with agriculture.

It wasn't until I was 16 when I stepped foot on my first farm and fell in love with the work. It's been 11 years since, and my passion for agriculture and my experiences of childhood has shaped where I find myself now. Had a program like Maine Harvest Bucks existed when I was a child, it could have made a world of difference in the food that I consumed, along with countless other children. For a state that has nearly 145,000 people living in poverty, and hundreds of thousands of people struggling to make ends meet above the poverty line, we should be creating more access and opportunity, not taking access and opportunity away. The people, the children, the farmers – the communities of Maine rely on this vital programming; cooking the produce in their weekly meals, sharing it with their neighbors, building relationships with the people that grow their food, supplying them with the nutrition they need and require.

The impact of the work of the Maine Harvest Bucks extends much beyond that of one hand of one individual trading in their wooden coins for a bag of carrots, and touches the hearts and bellies of so many more. This is the good work of the world in action, right here in Maine, at our very farmers markets, in our very communities – something worth way more than its weight in gold... or tokens.

Sincerely,

Isabel Ruffin

*Farmworker - Lost and Found Farm & Winter Hill Farm  
Agricultural Service Provider - Maine Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network  
Graduate Student - PAX Program, University of Maine at Orono*