

Rachel Vallance
Rockland
LD 568

Testimony of Rachel Vallance of Rockland before the 131st 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 Rachel Vallance, I am a resident of Rockland and I am here today as a shopper at Maine farms and Maine Farmers markets to express my support of LD 5688 - An Act to Provide Funding for the Fund to Address Food Insecurity and Provide Nutrition Incentives.

As a mom of four young children on a tight budget we struggled to afford healthy food even before the pandemic, and the Maine Harvest Bucks program is essential to my children and many Mainers ability to afford healthy local food.

We learned through SNAP education that through the Maine Harvest Bucks program we could get extra tokens or vouchers for fresh fruit and vegetables when using our EBT funds. Fruits and vegetables at grocery stores are expensive, often harvested before they're ripe, treated with preservative coatings and frequently recalled because of various contamination. I have found several markets that participate in the Maine Harvest Bucks program, including the Farmers Market at Mill Park in Augusta, Pumpkin Vine Farm market in Somerville, Brunswick Farmers Market, and the Rockland Farmers Market and because I stretching our budget with Maine Harvest Bucks has changed our health and family life in so many positive ways.

A trip to the Farmer's Market has become a weekly family adventure and educational opportunity for myself and my children. We have the opportunity to meet the farmers, they take the time to tell us about different varieties of veggies and fruits and the animals they raise, we have established relationships with many of them who help us further stretch our budget with deals on slightly imperfect crops or bulk purchases. We often spend an hour or more walking around the market, seeing which farmers have special deals, planning meals for now and to store for the winter. We will often buy a loaf of fresh bread made from all Maine ingredients, a couple dozen farm fresh eggs with golden orange yolks, a jar of creamy organic yogurt, a package of natural sausage from forest raised pigs for a special weekend breakfast. Many markets are located in parks or next to nature preserves, so we can take our bread, cheese, and bag of cucumbers for a light meal and enjoy a hike or bring a soccer ball to play in the field. Without Maine Harvest Bucks I would not have the ability to buy from these farmers, to support their work, and to enjoy the outdoors. It provides us with healthy food and a reason to go outside as a family.

In the spring we rely on Maine Harvest Bucks for a csa, saving additional money and guaranteeing the farmer has funds to grow a fun healthy variety of organic vegetables for us, allowing us to try new foods like sunflower shoots, purple carrots, and sunshine squash. The Maine Harvest Bucks bonus for fruits and veggies means I have enough in my grocery budget to use my SNAP benefits to purchase seedlings to grow some of our food, my children learn how food is grown while having the pride and satisfaction of seeing a small plant turn into a fresh salad, a loaf of zucchini bread, a jar of roasted tomato sauce, a jar of low sugar jam, and processing green beans, kale, and spinach into the freezer for soups during the winter months. In summer because of the Maine Harvest Bucks program we have been able to shop weekly instead of once a year as we did before the program, and we have developed relationships with vendors, knowing which ones sell discounted bags of greens at the Brunswick Farmers Market such as Six River Farm in Bowdoinham, that we can order flats of strawberries from Fairwinds Farms, 5 pound boxes of Wild Maine blueberries, bushels of mixed winter squashes. We can shop directly from farms who offer the Maine Harvest Bucks, buying bulk bags of sweet peppers from Whatley Farms in Topsham, or bulk tomatoes and summer squashes and meats from Olde Haven Farms while learning how their happy pigs help transform tick-infested woods into clear space and how sheep help 'mow' the solar farms.

Originally the Maine Harvest Program doubled what we spent, a dollar for dollar match. In 2022, the program turned down into a 50% match, and with the massive price increases for all groceries we were forced to make tough choices and only spend \$100 per week of our SNAP benefits at the markets, where previously we often spent \$200 plus the bonus Maine Harvest Bucks; \$50 is a small amount to provide vegetables for a family of six. This hurt our family, as I'm sure it hurt the farmers we had been shopping with. The cut in Maine Harvest Bucks matching meant we often had to choose between filling up on cheap processed meats and rice, and breakfasts of sugary commercial yogurts and cereals so we could still buy a box of tomatoes and bags of greens. Instead of a plate filled with microgreens, a pan of roasted root vegetables, or a bowl of tomato soup from the freezer, we have looked for veggies at community free food tables

and the food pantry. The reduction of Maine Harvest Bucks from dollar to dollar, to a 50% match was hard enough, but if the Maine Harvest Bucks program is not supported my family will be back to eating ramen and whatever canned or frozen vegetables we can find on sale. Failure to support the Maine Harvest Bucks program at a time when the cost of living has skyrocketed and the SNAP program is set to return to pre-pandemic benefits level in March, would be a travesty for the health of Maine families, the elderly, and the many farmers who grow and raise and produce the foods we purchase with our Maine Harvest Bucks. Continuing to fully fund the Maine Harvest Bucks program is vital to the health of Mainers and the healthy growing agricultural economy.