

Ben Conniff  
Portland  
LD 1274

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee. I am writing in support of LD 1249.

I'm a co-founder of Luke's Lobster. We're a vertically integrated seafood company that buys directly from fishermen, runs our own production facility, and operates a group of restaurants in Maine and around the country, as well as a branded grocery business and online seafood market. We process about 5 million pounds of lobster per year, and between our different businesses we employ 250 Mainers.

While we are not directly involved in agriculture, we are deeply invested in the overall well being of our state, as both a business and individuals. LD 1249 is a hugely important step for both the economic and moral health of our state

From an economic standpoint, it's clear that we are losing farmland at an alarming rate. Kids growing up on farms are too often giving up the business, and every farm that sells to a non-agricultural use decreases the amount of food we produce locally and increases the existential threat of dependence on unreliable global food supply chains. One need only look to how commodity egg prices skyrocketed due to avian flu in South America while egg prices at the local farmers market held steady to understand how important in-state farms are to our wallets, our health, and our safety. We know there are many New Englanders of color who are eager to find land to farm, and LD 1249 can match them with landowners who are eager to sell and might otherwise sell to non-agricultural uses.

Beyond the economic and food security benefits, LD 1249 is simply the right moral thing to do given the historical and current racial inequity in our state and our country. While we perpetuate the myth that slavery and racism are a southern thing, the fact is that Maine was part of the Massachusetts colony when it became the first colony to legalize slavery; much of Maine's infrastructure was built by free enslaved labor as it was in the south, and Maine's wealth was accumulated via a textile industry that depended on cheap cotton from enslaved labor in the south, and via a shipping industry that raked in money by participating in the transatlantic slave trade.

Since the Civil War, land has been violently stripped from black people throughout the US, including in Maine. In worst cases, they were lynched for trying to keep their land, or they were shipped to homes for the "feeble-minded" as was the case for the inhabitants of Malaga Island in Maine. Others were forced to live in segregated, red-lined neighborhoods where they were denied mortgages and kept from owning property and building generational wealth while white Mainers got those attractive mortgages and accumulated property and wealth. This is but one example of gifts our government has given to white people and withheld from black people. Informal redlining still exists, and right now—not in the past—studies show black workers with college degrees get fewer job interview callbacks than white workers with high school degrees--again, just one example of how racial inequity persists today.

We have a long way to go to correct the historic and current racial inequity in our state—inequity that's costly for us all, as it keeps people of color from reaching their economic potential. LD 1249 won't fix everything, but it will connect people eager to contribute to our economy and food security with land that's ready for them to till, and be just one step towards leveling a playing field that has been so far tilted against people of color. It will show the country and world that Maine, despite being the whitest state in the nation, welcomes diversity, not just in its cities but in its rural areas as well. That welcoming reputation will help us attract the in-migration that we need to keep Maine's farms and businesses working, and improve the lives of all Mainers. Anyone who wants a to strengthen our state should support this bill.

Sincerely,

Ben Conniff  
Co-Founder and Chief Innovation Officer  
Luke's Lobster