

**Testimony of Monique Coombs,
Maine Coast Fishermen's Association
In Support of LD 921**

March 22, 2023

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs.



My name is Monique Coombs and I am the Director of Community Programs for the Maine Coast Fishermen's Association located in Brunswick. Founded in 2006, MCFA works with Maine fishermen to restore the fisheries in the Gulf of Maine and sustain Maine's fishing communities for future generations.

Today, I'm submitting testimony in support of LD 921 "An Act to Allow the Local Foods Fund for Public Schools to Be Used for Processed and Value-added Maine Food Products."

The Maine Coast Fishermen's Association operates a program called Fishermen Feeding Mainers. This program was created in response to the COVID pandemic and the massive disruption that took place within our seafood-related food system. For those who catch groundfish (species like cod, haddock, and flounder) landing value plummeted an astonishing 73% in the months following the shutdown, and markets have been slow to return. At the same time, Maine communities were facing spiking food insecurity with high-quality protein being some of the hardest donations to source. In response, MCFA created Fishermen Feeding Mainers which helps provide market stability for fishermen and has supplied over 800,000 seafood meals to food banks, local community groups, and Maine schools. Within this program, fish is purchased directly from Maine Fishermen. Local businesses on Maine's working waterfront then cut and package and freeze the fish and then it is donated around the state.

We have been particularly focused at helping reduce the barrier for schools to receive and use local fish. School meals are the most reliable source of nutrition for many students, and seafood is one of the best things that kids can eat for their mind, body, and community. A recent analysis of over 44 studies on seafood consumption show that children who regularly eat seafood had lower risk of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, better school grades, and higher I.Q. by as much as 9.5 points compared with their peers who ate no fish. The highest intakes — more than 8 to 12 ounces a week — were associated with the greatest benefits. (Study out of University of Texas at Austin). We believe strongly in building a better future for the next generation of Mainers, and one of the best things we can do for them now, is to feed them more fish.

MCFA has received funding for this project from foundations, individual donors, and federal COVID relief funds allocated through the Maine Department of Marine Resources. Fishermen Feeding Mainers has been incredibly successful at supporting our working waterfront and feeding our community, and now we are looking to figure out how to keep a program of this scale of impact going after crisis funding and COVID relief funds go away. LD 921 may be a part of that solution.

Under normal circumstances, most schools cannot afford to buy local seafood and that does a disservice to our communities, our schools, and our children. LD 921 represents an

opportunity to empower schools to get more local food into their kitchens and support the local businesses who make up Maine's food system.