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Senator Brenner, Representative Tucker, and distinguished members of the Committee on Environment and Natural Resources:

My name is Alyssa O'Brien and I am a resident of Lincolntonville, Maine. I am a writer and an educator, and I also work on a farm along the Midcoast. I am testifying in strong support of LD 1429, An Act To Implement the Most Time-sensitive Recommendations of the Maine Climate Council.

I support this inspiring piece of legislation — and would like to express my gratitude to House Majority Leader Dunphy for introducing it. Maine cannot delay comprehensive action any longer on the most pressing issue of our time: our changing climate.

The aspect of the bill that I will narrow my testimony to today is my support for the Maine Farm and Fish to School Program. This program has many wonderful benefits. Aside from creating new market opportunities for Maine farmers and people who fish, and cutting down on greenhouse gas emissions by reducing the shipping miles of food that is served in Maine schools, there are additional important advantages.

First, this program supports the health and educational development of Maine students. During my time as a public school classroom teacher, I visited a farm with my class and witnessed students pulling carrots from the ground who had never done so before — and seeing the look of amazement and utter sense of wonder upon those children's faces is something I'll never forget. Afterwards, the farmer said to me that every time she harvested a carrot from that point forward, she would try to pull it from the ground with the same sense of amazement and wonder that she had seen on their faces during our trip. Visiting a separate farm, the students collected eggs from a hen house and watched cows being milked and cheese being made. Maine children are amazed by this.

I'd like to point out that the Education Committee is also considering a bill this session that addresses this issue — [LD 636](#), An Act To Encourage the Purchase of Local Foods for Public Schools — and I encourage you to read the testimony connected to that bill. Confirming my own observations, Maine's Child Nutrition Director recently explained how "[t]he produce fund is great for students and local farmers alike. Teaching moments are provided for students when the product is recognizable due to minimum processing. This affords students the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the origin of each produce item, what it looks like, and how it can be prepared."

I can attest that gaining this awareness changes children's lives by strengthening their relationship with the natural world.

The breakfast that was served in my school was mostly packaged in plastic and full of cane sugar and other preservatives. It would lead to routine mid-morning crashes and afternoon sluggishness that interfered with my teaching. There are so many beautiful, healthy meal options available in this State — such as wild Maine blueberries, free-range eggs and locally grown apples — but most children in our schools are not receiving this in their daily diet. The Portland Public Schools breakfast menu for this month, May 2021, includes a selection of cinnamon buns, Trix cereal bars and donut holes. We can do much better than this for our youth. LD 1429 is an important step in the right direction.

Additionally, there are benefits to the adults who grow, catch and harvest the food that would be purchased under this program. Many people are struggling in this day and age because they lack a basic sense of purpose. If you give farmers and people who fish additional opportunities to grow food and catch fish for Maine children, it enhances their life by providing them with a sense of purpose, leading to renewed joy in their work.

I have worked on a small farm for several years. There, a farmer who recently completed his final season of a twenty-year CSA said that, looking back over decades of providing produce to families in the community, what he felt the most pride in was having mothers say to him that the food that he was growing was “growing her children.” This farmer woke up before dawn each and every morning over those decades with an extra sense of purpose and worth knowing that he was doing his part to contribute to the growth of strong and healthy children in this State.

And the same holds true for people who fish. My husband worked on a boat for several years — and if he knew he was going to be providing lobsters to a Maine family with young children on a given day, he said it was a completely different mindset then selling the catch wholesale to fancy restaurants or Canadian processing plants.

As you can see, there are both tangible and intangible benefits to this program that extend far beyond the common-sense and desperately needed environmental outcomes that it seeks to address. The Maine Farm and Fish to School Program, and LD 1429 as a whole, will make Maine more self-sufficient as a state, make our children healthier, protect our beloved environment, and give many Mainers a greater sense of purpose in their work.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to testify today. We cannot afford to let any more valuable time slip away before taking bold, comprehensive action to address our changing climate. I urge you to vote Ought To Pass on this important bill.