

Ben Conniff
Portland, Maine/Luke's Lobster

My name is Ben Conniff, and I'm submitting testimony in support of LD338. I am the co-founder, Chief Innovation Officer, and for several years was the Chief Marketing Officer of Luke's Lobster. We buy and sell about 5 million pounds of Maine lobster each year, purchasing directly from fishermen and coops and selling through our own restaurant group, through national and regional grocery chains, through our own online market, and through wholesale accounts. As such I am intimately familiar with consumer perceptions of seafood, and the fluctuations in their demand.

In the time that MLMC has existed and done its work I have seen an immense lift in public awareness and appreciation for Maine lobster as compared to any other seafood on the market. When we founded our business in 2009, it seemed our audience was limited to folks who already vacationed in Maine and had firsthand experience with the state. In recent years we have immense interest from people who have never been to Maine but have just gained an awareness that the state is synonymous with quality seafood and particularly with delicious and sustainable lobster.

The MLMC team has done an excellent job at a difficult task: walking the line between positioning lobster as accessible to an ever-widening audience, while continuing to emphasize premiumization and never devaluing the product. The result is that MLMC has helped redefine "value" for seafood consumers to not just mean low price, but to mean a strong but still fantastic price considering the delicious taste, pristine quality, and sustainable sourcing of a high end product. Lobster has thus appeared in more diverse settings and been purchased by new audiences like never before.

MLMC has also done an admirable job defending the lobster brand against the onslaught of potential negative issues like whale entanglements. They continue to prove that, in large part due to work they do to counter negative messaging, the average consumer is undeterred from buying lobster by the misplaced attacks of some in the environmental community.

For all who are wondering why boat prices continue to defy the odds and stay high in spite of the normal cyclical fluctuations, the trade war with China, the obliteration of the restaurant market due to COVID...it's because of a continued demand spurred by MLMC's work. It's critical that we not lose that momentum and that we continue to validate and support MLMC's efforts. I can say for certain as someone who sells lobster in many different channels that I would not have product in nearly as many grocery chains, would not have as many people ordering from our restaurants, and would not be shipping to nearly as many doorsteps around the country were it not for MLMC. The positive ripple effects of those gains on the entire supply chain and supporting industries is huge for the state of Maine.