

April 12th 2021

To Whom It May Concern In the Maine State Legislature:

I am writing to express my opposition to the proposed act LD 1146. I am an aquaculture business owner and operator who has been involved in the industry for the past five years. I am a merchant mariner, a boat builder, and a ship-wright. I have a multifaceted skill set that I have honed to allow for a life-time of working on the water. I stand in support of preserving and expanding all aspects of Maine's Working Waterfront and its many related and associated industries. Maine's fishing, shipbuilding, and seafaring heritage sets deep roots for the relatively burgeoning industry of aquaculture. We as a state are blessed with bountiful resources in terms of productive waterbodies, we have nearly perfect conditions for the cultivation of premium crops, and we have the opportunity to build on the steadfast Maine brand that has been fortified across all industries in the state for years. We have an opportunity to choose a path forward that will ensure responsible and proactive approaches to the impending effects of climate change. We have the opportunity to expand a workforce that incorporates modern science and engineering skills with the time-tested seamanship and Yankee ingenuity that has always graced our coast. We have the opportunity to support a Working Waterfront that makes space for all sectors of commercial industry, recognizing that we are much stronger together than we are divided. We have the opportunity to continue building upon the steadfast foundation for our tourism economy through the development of sought after seafood and shellfish, already driving a steady flow of revenue throughout the hospitality and restaurant industries. We have all of these opportunities for growth and success on the horizon, or we have the short sighted, ill-intentioned desires of a few individuals with the time and resources to amplify their unfounded concerns and manipulate our governing systems. We have choices to make, and I implore you to not take lightly the decisions before you.

I have spent the last five years tirelessly working to build an aquaculture business focused on the cultivation of oysters. We have sought to build a brand that can take pride in premium products brought to market, pride in sustainable and ecologically friendly growing practices that care for the waterbody in which we operate, and pride for being a cooperative and friendly member of our community. We have worked with nearby landowners and local fisherman to develop our plans and site our farm. We have asked for feedback and incorporated changes to help minimize our impacts on other uses of the bay. We have worked to build solid relationships with our restaurant partners who serve our products, and the marine suppliers who provide our grow out gear. We set out from the beginning knowing that we had to make the right choices along the way and always strive to make decisions with the whole industry and local community in mind. Aquaculture is not an industry of fast return, it is an industry of patience, perseverance, and dedication. Initial investment in growout gear, mooring

equipment, boats, license fees, and seed, may not see a return of a product brought to market for at least two years, likely more. Unless someone approaches the industry with bottomless coffers, these first returns must immediately be reinvested to keep the business rolling forward and edging ever closer to the breakeven point. One year of bad growing conditions, one storm, or one lost bag of seed could mean the difference between achieving that economic milestone, or deferring that moment for yet another season. This is the long game, this is an industry based on developing value in a product, a unique cultivated crop. Our premium products are the result of the choices we have made in selecting our farm site for specific growing conditions, matched with particular choices made for growout gear and handling practices. The endlessly unique products on the market are the result of every farmer making these decisions, fitting their operation into their farm location, and cultivating a marketable crop.

The proposal of LD 1146 cuts straight to the heart of this industry. It opens the door to allow influence by an opposition group to write the very rules for an industry that they oppose. In its vaguely worded yet strategically specific construction it sets its sights on gutting the opportunity for growth within this industry. It is obvious that the influence of lobbyists and well funded patrons have merged to ceaselessly combat the positive direction aquaculture is heading in the State of Maine. They have worked to manipulate the viewpoints of fisherman throughout the state, pitting members of the Working Waterfront against each other, driving a wedge that will gradually make the whole collective marine industry crumble. Choking off any economy of scale or diversification for marine suppliers, seafood retailers and distributors, and restaurants. This ill-intentioned group has planted the seeds of distrust and conflict, they are merely fanning the flames for their own gain.

There is no place for this undue influence on the the governing body of our state. If there are changes to be made to the systems of any industry, it is imperative that all stake holders have a seat at the table. Start at the ground and build up, bring together members of the fishing, aquaculture, merchant marine, passenger vessel, and recreational use industries for a series of discussions to find a path forward. Start in communities with land owners, harbor masters, business owners, prompt a discussion and lead a process to find a common good for the state as a whole. Undermining the entire aquaculture industry at the behest of a few shortsighted individuals is unacceptable.

The passing of this bill will create such an uncertainty in the future of the industry as a whole that it will likely jeopardize the viability of my business. The ripple effects of endlessly changing regulation practices and the realization that any opposition group can simply buy their way into control will mean that the risk of further investment into this business does not make sense. Loss of jobs for my employees, loss of product for the thriving local restaurant sector, loss of diversity for marine suppliers and seafood distributors. I have jointly founded two other businesses related to the aquaculture industry, one that specializes in site design and mooring installation and the other that distributes a compostable packaging material for seafood distribution to reduce plastic in the waste stream. All of my business endeavors will be jeopardized by the passing of this bill and the uncertainty it will create as to the viability of this industry in the State of Maine.

Please do not let this decision pass lightly or be influenced by the very forceful yet ill-intentioned opposition groups.

Regards,

Willy Leathers

Maine Ocean Farms LLC