

4/12/2021

Testimony against LD 1146

My name is Emily Selinger. I own and operate Emily's Oysters, a small-scale oyster business based in Freeport. I am a thirty-one-year-old woman, born and raised in Freeport, and I've worked my whole life in marine trades and industries. I've been running my own oyster farm in my hometown for five years now. I'd like to provide testimony in opposition to LD 1146 on behalf of myself and other Mainers who have built businesses in aquaculture. I believe passage of this bill poses great threat to my business, livelihood, and all the hard work, time, money and sweat I've poured into it.

I can testify from first-hand experience to the fact that the aquaculture leasing process is NOT broken. I am two years into my own leasing process for a 6.8 acre lease and I have another 6-8 more months of public hearing and review to go before I receive my decision. Decision criteria for leases requires there be no other existing uses of the area, and as such conflicts of use are effectively evaluated in public hearings already. Requiring DMR staff to direct resources toward yet another study will only further slow an already lengthy process. Additionally, I strongly oppose the revocation of aquaculture's exemption to NURPA and site development law for leases greater than 5 acres because it will allow opponents to require visual impact and alternative site studies, and I know for someone like myself, adding ANY additional time and cost to the process would make for a near insurmountable barrier to entry. In no other business sector would you be required to wait this long and jump through this many hoops before you are permitted to go to work in a small-scale manner.

Additionally, making aquaculture leases non-transferrable or saleable at the end of their terms essentially renders our businesses valueless. Not only does this make exiting the industry financially challenging, but it will also make it nearly impossible to get business loans or other funding for start-up or growth. Aquaculture leases should not be compared to fishing licenses in this way. They are completely different types of business.

Finally, aquaculture has proven itself to be a resilient, growth industry for Maine, especially during Covid, and the low environmental impacts (often environmental benefits, in the case of kelp and shellfish aquaculture) are essential for keeping our working waterfronts thriving and alive for years to come. Part of this resiliency comes from the fact that the system as it stands allows for a range of business sizes to thrive, from small-scale operators like me, to bigger farms that employ local community members and reach customer bases further afield. This bill will discourage existing companies from investing and growing and will inhibit entrance into the sector to young Mainers like myself who don't have access to the capital and time required to go through this proposed evaluation process.

The anti-aquaculture group behind this bill spreads blatant misinformation far and wide on a daily basis in an effort to pit different working waterfront groups against one another instead of supporting their cooperation and growth. This bill is no different. Its goals are thinly veiled attempts at hindering the growth of a successful and environmentally sustainable industry that supports thousands of Mainers, many of whom are also fishermen, and it stands to give too much power to people who should not have a say in the leasing process.