

Valeria Steverlynck  
Freeport

Honorable Members of the Marine Resources Committee,  
My name is Valy Steverlynck. My husband and I have owned and operated an oyster farm in Freeport for the last 25 years.

I write today to testify neither for nor against LD 1146, An Act to Protect Maine's Ocean Waters and Support Regulatory Oversight and the long-term Health of the Aquaculture Industry.

As someone who's seen oyster farming explode in the last few years, I can relate to the desire to control the growth of the aquaculture industry. The exponential increase in leases granted has no doubt caused anxiety among current users of Maine's coastal waters. Lobstermen, fishermen, anglers, recreational boaters and shore-land owners are wondering if there is an end in sight to the influx of suspended leases (floating gear) that sometimes interferes with existing activities on the water. Many folks on the coast are feeling displaced. Others, like myself, worry about the breakneck speed at which the changes are happening and, foremost, lack of strategic planning. Additionally, I have concerns about the industrial-level oyster aquaculture that we are headed towards under the current rules. Take the lease acreage limit, for example: One can successfully run an oyster farm on 30 acres. Yet the acreage limit for all aquaculture leases is 1,500 acres. I fear that with such high acreage limits we are creating a situation where soon (and it is happening already in the Damariscotta River and throughout the coast) large corporations will start buying out the small farms and consolidating into a handful of large firms that will out-compete the smaller farms. Personally, I think that is a terrible idea. Maine should create the conditions to help small, family-run oyster farms thrive. This will preserve the culture of this great State, where individuals have the opportunity to start and run their own businesses successfully, in the mold of the lobster industry.

One way to start is to limit the combined number of acres granted to 50 acres per applicant\*. Our neighbor, Massachusetts, has a 3-acre limit, and the oysters industry there is very healthy and competitive in the national marketplace. My husband and I have raised our three children farming on 15 acres.

Another way to ensure that Maine's resources are enjoyed and leveraged by Maine people is to institute a residency requirement for all applicants: Currently many out-of-state residents can easily obtain leases on Maine waters. This puts pressure on the waterfront, nudging out Maine applicants who compete for the same locations.

Let's use Maine's natural resources to create good jobs for Maine people. Let's not continue to give away our best resources to out-of-state companies, large and small, that are well-funded and can afford to buy everyone else out. I'd much rather see Maine people own and operate small farms, working independently alongside one another, than have a handful of out-of-state companies running large-scale operations, paying Mainers minimum wage to work in industrial-like conditions.

Please don't increase aquaculture lease rent and application fees. At \$100/acre annually, and \$1,500 for each lease application, that is enough and quite high for small, owner-operated farms like ours.

Also, whatever you do, grandfathering rights should be instituted and respected. It is not fair to change the rules of the game retroactively. Suggesting that at the end of a lease term, the lease reverts back to the state and can only be transferred under new standards and regulations is unwise. What would happen, for example, to a 200-acre farm in the event that the acreage limit is reduced to a number smaller than 200? Would they have to give up any acreage in excess of that new limit at the time of renewal or transfer? That would be patently unfair.

Requiring that all aquaculture lease-holders be subject to Title 38, Chapter 3 regulations is the right thing to do. We need to preserve the pristine nature of our coast, and everyone should participate in that endeavor. In this case, the grandfathering exemption should not apply. Every one of us is responsible for protecting Maine's environment, whether we've been in business for a long time or not.

The time is right for the State to engage all stakeholders in a conversation about the future of aquaculture in Maine. All voices should be given readily-accessible opportunities to voice their thoughts on this important matter.

Respectfully submitted,

Valy Steverlynck  
Maine Oyster Inc., Freeport

\*This acreage limit suggestion applies to oyster farming only. I don't know enough about other types of aquaculture, such as finfish, mussels and seaweed, to have an educated opinion on appropriate acreage limits for those sectors that would allow them to stay economically competitive.