



**Enhancing
opportunity &
prosperity for
Maine people.**



Public Hearing for LD 586, LD 487

**Testimony of Dana O'Brien, President of FocusMaine
March 16, 2023**

Good afternoon, Senator Reny, Representative Hepler, and members of the committee. My name is Dana O'Brien, and I am the President of FocusMaine.

First, I want to say thank you – to each of you – for your service to the people of Maine. Your job is not an easy one. But it's an important one. Our institutions – like the Maine State Legislature – play an indispensable role to the public, to our country, and to the strength of the economy.

The government has significant influence on business investment and attraction and the resulting job growth and economic activity.

Policymakers must regularly evaluate opportunity cost when deciding what laws to consider and appropriate levels of regulation. They must weigh whether their actions will foster or limit innovation, investment, and responsible business growth.

That is what this committee is considering today.

I am proud to lead FocusMaine. We are a unique economic development organization funded by foundations, financial institutions, companies, and government grants. We work statewide to create quality jobs and build a thriving workforce in Maine's food economy (including aquaculture) and bioeconomy. Our emphasis is on innovation and positioning Maine's economy to thrive over the next 25-years.

When I look to Maine's future, I see headwinds for our heritage fishing, farming, and forestry industries – headwinds brought on by climate change, advancements in technology, supply chain disruption, and population demographics.

But because I'm an optimist, I see opportunity through this challenge.

Opportunity to invest in science and to enable innovation that will position Maine people and communities currently leading our heritage industries to flourish into the future.

This theme of accelerating opportunity in the face of challenge is central to the state's 10-year economic development plan, to the Governor's climate action plan, and to SEAMaine – an industry wide seafood accelerator coalition that FocusMaine helped to form with Maine Technology Institute with funding from the Economic Development Administration.

Since launching our work five years ago, FocusMaine has invested heavily in growing Maine's aquaculture sector– with more than \$6 million devoted to data development and industry tracking, business and farmer skill development, seafood market acceleration, financing matchmaking, business attraction, and public support building. To get the job done, we partner with organizations like Maine Aquaculture Association, Coastal Enterprises, Maine Center for Entrepreneurs, Gulf of Maine Research Institute, New England Ocean Cluster, Educate Maine, among others.

We are seeing results.

According to data from the U.S. Department of Labor, from 2015-2021, Maine aquaculture jobs doubled, employing 410 individuals with an average salary of \$52,000. Maine aquaculture is a small but rapidly growing presence in our state's economy. And data underscores Maine's competitive advantage as compared to other states and countries. This rapid growth and competitive advantage are more and more recognized in domestic and international markets. And must be supported by our policymakers.

For example:

- Just last week, Maine Center for Entrepreneurs hosted hundreds of Maine companies at the Boston seafood show – connecting them to buyers and distributors who will put more Maine seafood and value-added products on store shelves around the country and world.
- Last year, a major international seaweed aquaculture conference – SEAgriculture – chose Portland as its first North American host. It was a huge success. The organizers recently announced the trade show will be coming back to Portland in September. Because we are a national leader.
- UMaine's aquaculture educational and workforce development programs continue to grow. And we are facilitating opportunities for UMaine business and law school students interested in aquaculture and the blue economy via the New England Ocean Cluster.

- The Roux Institute, Gulf of Maine Research Institute, Maine Center for Entrepreneurs and the New England Ocean Cluster are accelerating Maine's blue economy business growth through creative workforce and business programs.
- The port of Portland recently broke ground on a large cold storage facility to facilitate much more aquaculture and seafood trade in and out of Maine.
- And the Gulf of Maine Research Institute, Maine Aquaculture Association, EducateMaine, and we have initiated very popular experiential learning programs because young people are excited about aquaculture career opportunities.

This is exciting and impactful progress. We can't slow it down.

In conclusion, I'd like to issue a call-to-action. For you our elected leaders, representing the great people of this state in this institution.

Let's work together to accelerate progress that will position Maine people and communities to confront headwinds through innovation. Let's embrace aquaculture and position Maine to capture its competitive advantage – to grow new jobs and opportunities that will have a lasting positive impact on our state.

We urge you to vote against LD 586 and LD 487. And instead engage in a dialogue with industry and community leaders to address your questions and those of your constituents outside the legislative and regulatory realm.

Let us know how FocusMaine can help in that constructive pro-innovation and climate-forward conversation.

Thank you.