

Cameron Barner
Freeport
LD 1596

My Name is Cameron Barner, and I am Co-Owner and operator of Love Point Oysters in Freeport, Maine. I am writing in support of LD1596.

This bill addresses the primary issue of all aquaculture lease holders who are attempting to make a living on the water. Plain and simple, aquaculture in Maine is being strangled by our inability to innovate. The current law mandates that we outline all our possible gear types, configurations, and quantities for a lease that will hold for 20 years. If we want to change anything on our farms no matter how insignificant, we need to file an amendment. A process which is convoluted, rarely fits the requests being made, and in many cases can take over a year to be approved, if it is approved at all.

The process for a standard lease can take well over four years to complete now. This means that if a farmer is lucky enough to be granted a lease, they are expected to build it out based on detailed descriptions that they provided in the application over half a decade ago. If they happen to learn anything about their farmsite or business over that period of time and want to adapt accordingly, they may have to wait another year to potentially make those changes via an amendment. If a farmer hasn't learned anything about how they should be configuring or operating their farm in the course of four years, they are not farming... Maybe the site they chose is behaving differently due to changing environments, and requires different gear so that is both safe and functional. Maybe there has been innovation in the types of aquaculture gear that is available and something new on the market better suits their goals. Perhaps even, they just want to use a different style of anchoring system so that they stop losing gear in storms. All of these things require a lengthy amendment process and stymie our ability to stay agile as businesses operating in an ever changing environment.

The state says they want our industry to grow! But if we can't learn from our experiences and adequately react in a timely manner, we may not survive as businesses, let alone grow as an industry.

This bill has the added benefit of alleviating some of the workload placed on the hardworking staff at the Department of Marine resources (DMR). Operating farms are currently applying for amendments all the time, year after year, in an effort to try and adapt. This creates an ever-lengthening backlog of lease and amendment applications. The passage of this bill would hopefully ease that application load. Additionally, allowing farms to contract third party divers for in situ site reviews, it would mitigate this burden currently placed on DMR staff, and allow them more time to work through the backlog of applications.

This bill is critical to the success of the aquaculture industry in Maine. It addresses key problems while still maintaining clear guidelines for farmers to adhere to. I strongly urge you to vote Ought to Pass on LD 1596. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,
Cameron Barner