



**Testimony to the Joint Standing Committee on Marine Resources
In Support of
LD 1596, An Act to Support Maine's Sea Farmers**

April 24, 2025

Senator Tepler, Representative Helper, Representative Reilly, and Honorable Members of the Joint Committee on Marine Resources:

My name is Steven Hedlund, and I am the director of public affairs for Cooke USA. I stand before you today to testify in support of LD 1596, An Act to Support Maine's Sea Farmers.

Cooke USA has been farming Atlantic salmon in the Gulf of Maine since 2004. We operate a number of marine farm sites throughout Downeast Maine, a processing plant in Machiasport and three freshwater hatcheries – two in western Maine and one in eastern Maine. Our fish are sold at supermarkets and restaurants throughout New England and across the United States. We employ approximately 230 people throughout Maine – people who are passionate about their contributions to Maine's seafood economy and working waterfront.

The intent of LD 1596 is to reduce the administrative workload on the Maine Department of Maine Resources (DMR) to allow the agency to focus on its mission of conserving and developing the state's marine and estuarine resources while protecting public trust and the environment.

At the core of LD 1596 is the ability of Maine's kelp, shellfish and finfish farmers to innovate and remain competitive nationally and internationally. Aquaculture is a sector that's constantly evolving. For aquaculture production methods to remain economically viable and ecologically sustainable, farmers must adopt new technology and equipment. For finfish farmers like Cooke USA, it's a necessity, as the global salmon-farming sector is extremely competitive.

LD 1596 would allow lease holders to innovate while establishing clear thresholds that would trigger the need for a lease amendment. As it stands now, even minor modifications to gear or operations force lease holders to apply for a lease amendment or for a new lease altogether, a process that can take up to three years.



Last year, DMR held a series of listening sessions open to all stakeholders and the public. Representatives of Cooke USA were among the participants, and one the main challenges – if not the main challenge – cited by farmers was the time associated with attaining a lease amendment or a new lease. Simply put, the administrative changes recommended in LD 1596 would reduce DMR's workload and free up its staff to conduct site reviews and write site reports in a timely manner.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Steven Hedlund".

Steven Hedlund
Director of Public Affairs
Cooke USA