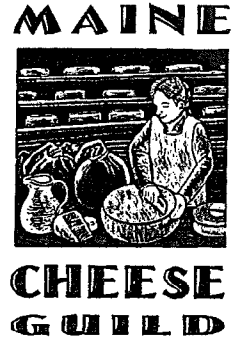


Maine Cheese Guild Testimony on LD 1786

Senator Vitelli, Representative Dill, members of the Joint Legislative Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry, and members of the public, thank you for allowing me this time to testify **Neither For nor Against** LD1786. My name is Eric Rector and I am President of the Maine Cheese Guild. I will begin with the Guild's Quality Statement -- published in 2009 -- which is a fundamental tenant of our group:



The Maine Cheese Guild believes that cheese of the highest quality can only be made with a thorough and regularly refreshed knowledge of food safety.

The Maine Cheese Guild promotes and sponsors regular opportunities to learn about best practices for cheese making. The Guild also believes that the best way for professional cheese makers to guarantee the quality of their product is by being appropriately licensed by the Maine Department of Agriculture, as only licensed cheese makers are legally allowed to sell cheese to the public, and only licensed cheese makers receive feedback from the dairy regulatory unit through regular testing for contamination and facility inspections. This feedback is critical, together with on-going education, in maintaining the high quality of award-winning Maine cheese.

The Guild testified against LD1282 last year because it would have allowed off-farm sales of unregulated dairy products. We felt the bill's result would be confusing for consumers and difficult for the dairy inspectors to implement the unusual regulatory aspects described in it. The Guild also believes, as our Quality Statement indicates, that there is great value in becoming a licensed dairy processor in Maine. To prove this point a 2012 University of Vermont study showed that Maine is the fastest growing producer of artisan cheeses in the US, with the second most number of artisan cheese producers behind only New York State. Maine's helpful and accessible regulatory environment is a critical contributor to this dairy success story. In contrast to many assumptions about how licensing works, Maine's dairy inspectors focus on helping farms and businesses who have never been licensed get licensed and stay licensed. We would not have the cheese industry we do today without the skills and resources offered by Maine's dairy inspectors and the Maine Maine milk lab, efforts that are also in the best interest of the dairy consumer.

Whether this bill passes or not, we expect that this beneficial relationship between our industry and State regulators will continue to help both professional cheese makers (offering pro-business resources) and cheese consumers (offering more high quality local cheese to choose from). The Guild understands that this bill is a compromise between LD1282 and the status quo. Rather than the quagmire of rules, re-defined terms, and self-inspection described in LD 1282, this bill is simple and straight-forward and would not require additional money to implement. It could help dairy inspectors and dairy producers understand where the clear line between professional and informal dairy sales is set. We also think that consumers might benefit from open disclosure on the labels of unregulated products.

Ultimately we hope that the Legislature will support efforts at the Department of Agriculture to educate all cheese makers about the benefits of being licensed, to educate consumers about the value of licensed products, as well as to help all dairy processors understand the implementation of the federal Food Safety and Modernization Act. There used to be three dairy inspectors in Maine back when there were fewer than 20 licensed cheese makers, but now the two remaining dairy inspectors are stretched very thin managing the list of 70+ artisan dairy processors in this geographically large state. Our inspectors could use more help reaching out to everyone who might benefit from their knowledge and resources.

Thank you for your time.

--Eric Rector
President, Maine Cheese Guild

Eric Rector, Monroe Cheese Studio, Testimony on LD 1786

Senator Vitelli, Representative Dill, members of the Joint Legislative Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry, and members of the public, thank you for allowing me this time to testify **In Favor** of LD1786. I believe this bill is in the best interest of small farmers, consumers, as well as commercial dairy processors at no additional cost to State government for oversight.

My name is Eric Rector. I own and operate Monroe Cheese Studio in Monroe, Maine. As a licensed cheese maker I sell my dairy products to the Belfast Coop and to restaurants around the state, I have won awards for my cheese at national competitions, and I am proud to have a booth with my company's name on it at the Belfast Farmers Market where cheese lovers from around the world learn about what I do and purchase my dairy products. I could do none of these things under the terms of this bill. But before I became a licensed dairy processor in 2006 this bill would have helped me understand the distinction between being a hobby cheese maker and a professional, and these rules would have given me a clear path toward becoming a licensed dairy producer. I believe this bill is pro-business in its reach, pulling underground cheese makers into the public realm and giving them a path towards becoming licensed professional dairy producers together with all the benefits that come with that.

Along with the Maine Cheese Guild I testified against LD1282 last year because we felt that products sold under its guidance would confuse consumers, those products would require additional state resources to regulate, and the bill re-defined many dairy products so as to invite federal regulators to question Maine's ability to adequately regulate dairy products for Maine consumers. LD 1786 instead offers a compromise between the intent of LD1282 (which was vetoed) and the status quo, providing small farms with options. LD1786 is simple, clear, and requires no additional money to enforce.

I believe LD1786 benefits existing commercial licensed dairy producers because it requires a labeling statement that clearly distinguishes unregulated products from those made by licensed commercial producers. The label also provides traceability back to the unregulated producer in case of a public health emergency.

I believe LD1786 benefits the Department of Agriculture dairy inspectors because it provides them with a clear boundary between those who should be licensed if they are not already, and informal producers. The valuable and shrinking time of our dairy inspectors is best spent on licensed producers and their products which are distributed throughout the state and national marketplaces.

Some have argued that this bill would exempt on-farm dairy producers from any inspection or oversight, but I believe the opposite is true. This bill requires on-farm dairy producers to allow their customers to inspect their production and processing facilities, which is the ultimate form of oversight for consumers. Realistically, dairy inspectors serve as a necessary and educated proxy for consumers of commercial dairy products, whereas individuals who purchase unregulated dairy products defined in this bill take full responsibility for the integrity of the on-farm dairy producer's production practices, and their unregulated products.

If this bill is passed it will be very clear to consumers and inspectors what dairy products are legal and what are not: products without a license number or an exemption notice on the label are illegal; advertising unlicensed products is illegal; off-farm sales and/or transfers of unlicensed products are illegal.

For these and other reasons stated here today by others in favor of this bill, I urge the Legislature to pass LD1786. Thank you for your time.

--Eric Rector
Owner and Cheesemaker
Monroe Cheese Studio, Monroe, Maine