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Photo provided by Keith Butterfield

# A Guide for Shellfish & Seaweed Farmers in Maine:

## **WORKING TOWARDS SOCIAL LICENSE TO OPERATE**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*This guide was written by a team of researchers at the Maine Aquaculture Innovation Center in collaboration with thirty Maine shellfish and seaweed farmers who shared insight into practical ways of earning community support.*



Photo provided by Carrie Byron

Beyond this, farmers talked about how earning stakeholder support can be protective in the face of threats. Several farmers brought up examples of supporters going to bat for them when facing regulatory hurdles or pockets of opposition. Riparian supporters would also act as stewards of the farm, letting farmers know if anything was “awry” at the site. Lastly, from a business perspective, though social license work does have costs, there are monetary gains to be made from building relationships. Annie, an oyster farmer from Downeast Maine, talked about how visiting neighbors and giving away some “doubled up” oysters helped her gain new, consistent customers.

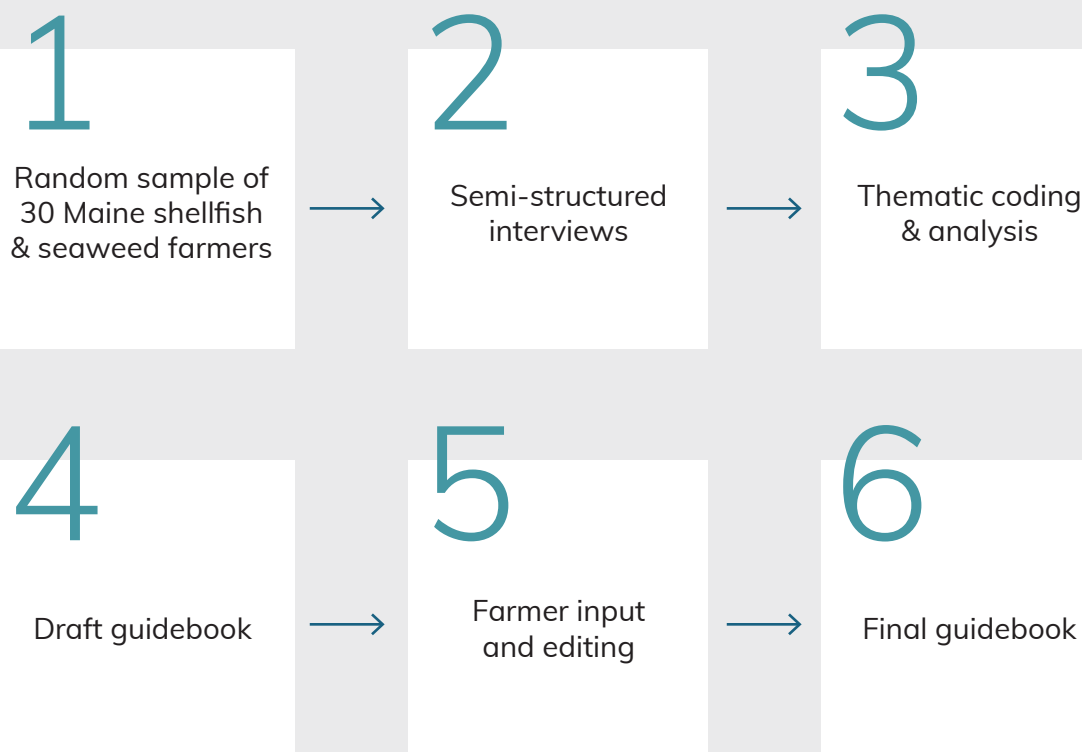
In addition to the direct benefits that farmers experience, farmers emphasized that social license work is important for broader industry growth. Increased knowledge and familiarity of aquaculture—often as a result of farmer engagement—has been consistently linked to support for aquaculture development [2,15,17,16,20]. So social license work, or working “the ground game,” as one farmer called it, is “vital” for development of the broader industry.

## What is social license and why is it important?

The term social license describes community acceptance of a project. For aquaculture, it is the informal, ongoing approval or acceptance of a farm granted by their community [6,18,7,19]. “Community” refers to a farmer’s set of stakeholders, or anyone who could be affected by, or who could affect the farm. There are varying degrees of social license. The highest level of social license is “psychological identification,” or when a community incorporates the activity into its identity (i.e. a fishing community, mill town, etc.) [18]. Tolerance or indifference does not indicate any level of social license—social license describes active support for a farm. Social license is also dynamic and is constantly being re-evaluated by community members. Farmers have to continuously put in social license work to maintain and build support—especially if they anticipate expanding in the future.

Maine farmers discussed a variety of real benefits they experienced from doing social license work. One important benefit is that high community approval can reduce the risk of opposition [5,12,13,14,10,3]. Like Bob, a seaweed farmer from Midcoast Maine, describes, you can get a license from DMR if you meet all of the conditions outlined by 12 M.R.S.A. §6072, but “if you don’t do the outreach responsibly and correctly, you’re gonna have trouble.”

### METHODS



# How are Maine shellfish and seaweed farmers doing social license?

## LEARNING AND INTEGRATING

Getting started can be daunting—especially for those who are looking to start a farm in an unfamiliar community. Earning social license from a community requires learning about what is important to the host community so that farmers can better align with local values and provide meaningful benefits. A great example of this comes from Jodi who runs a seaweed farm with her husband in Midcoast Maine. In their island community, fishing has been central to their way of life for generations. Unfortunately, with the loss of shrimping, many fishermen were struggling to support their families. In response to this, when Jodi and her family started their farm, they hired local fishermen exclusively. They also showed respect to the lobstering community (which they were also part of) by keeping their site open for fishing year-round and worked closely with lobstermen to time the start of their season. Because of this effort, the fishermen were key in securing their lease. When they faced pushback at their public hearing from some seasonal landowners who claimed that their farm was going to displace fishermen, the fishermen “all stood up and said ‘not going to hinder us. We think this is great.’” The way Jodi designed and operated her farm to reflect local values was essential to building social license—and to securing their lease.

It’s important to note that Jodi was aware of what was important locally because she was from the community where she sited her farm. The experience differed for those who were “from away,” as some Mainers say. Farmers outline two ways that farmer who are “from away” could learn and integrate. The first is organic integration where farmers enter the working waterfront slowly. Peter, a seaweed farmer from Midcoast Maine, said to “go down to South Bristol and be a sternman on a lobster boat, and if you’re a good worker...you start getting credibility in that fishing community.” Then, when you want to lease some space, you know who to connect with, and won’t “make stupid mistakes either, like picking a spot where everybody fishes in the middle of shedder season.” The faster route is using *gatekeepers*, or connecting with folks who are already integrated into the community that farmers want to enter. The *gatekeepers* that farmers found most helpful in providing guidance on building local networks were other aquaculture farmers, fishermen, and harbormasters. Like Bob said, being an outsider “doesn’t preclude somebody from getting involved if it’s something they want to pursue, but they’d have to just take some extra steps in the beginning to get to know the community.”

## ENGAGEMENT THROUGH EDUCATION

An integral part of initial outreach—as well as outreach throughout the life of the project—is providing education. Research consistently shows that public knowledge and familiarity with aquaculture practices is low [15,8,9,4,1,11,17,2,20]. Lack of knowledge and uncertainty can feed into fears about development. Joanna, a shellfish farmer from Downeast Maine, compared awareness of aquaculture to fishing, saying “Mainers know fishing, they get that, like it’s kind of in our blood. We can picture it and we romanticize about it, it’s what our grandfathers did, and sea farming is kind of something scary. It’s just different. We don’t know what it looks like.” Farmers demonstrated that SLO work and education go hand in hand. Being clear about how it will look and explaining the impacts and



Photo provided by Krista Rosen and Inga Potter

benefits was key to generating support. Farmers often used visuals for landowners when applying for leases. Once in operation, farmers continued to incorporate education into their practices, whether that be through tours, interviews with media and researchers, involvement in schools, or simply just taking the “five minutes” to talk about their farm informally in their community, as Scott, a seaweed and oyster farmer from Midcoast Maine, said. Uninformed or uninterested community members don’t contribute to social license—social license is about active community support [18,16]. Educating, then, is a way of creating more informed members of the community so they have the power to grant social license if they are in support.

## TRUST GENERATING PRACTICES

Earning social license is a result of ongoing efforts to build trust with your stakeholders [18,7,10]. Farmers identified three main avenues for trust building: communication efforts, operational farm practices, and providing meaningful community benefits. For communication, farmers point out that trust building occurs when farmers are consistently honest and transparent with community members, when they make reasonable changes to their farm based on community feedback, and when they communicate with the community beyond what is legally mandated by the permitting process.

“So we made this arrangement, and we stick to it. And then the next time, we stick to it. And then the next time, you do what you said you’re going to do. And then at the public hearing, they’ll stand up and say, “these guys do what they say they’re going to do.”

-Fiona, Mussel Farmer

Farm practices that helped to build trust were keeping a *tidy farm*, which included being mindful of hazards to others, keeping track of lost gear, and “not being an eyesore,” *being visible in the community*, whether that be through the use of shared access points, being seen working hard on the farm by riparian landowners, or being out in the community at events, and *abiding by regulations*, like properly marking the farm site. Farmers also talked about *trying to reduce impacts* through gear choice, noise reduction strategies, and site layout. They were aware of the consequences

of negative attention, so by taking an upstream approach and anticipating possible concerns, farmers were able to gain stakeholders’ confidence in their ability to farm without excessive impacts, and build trust by demonstrating that they were aware and respectful of other users.

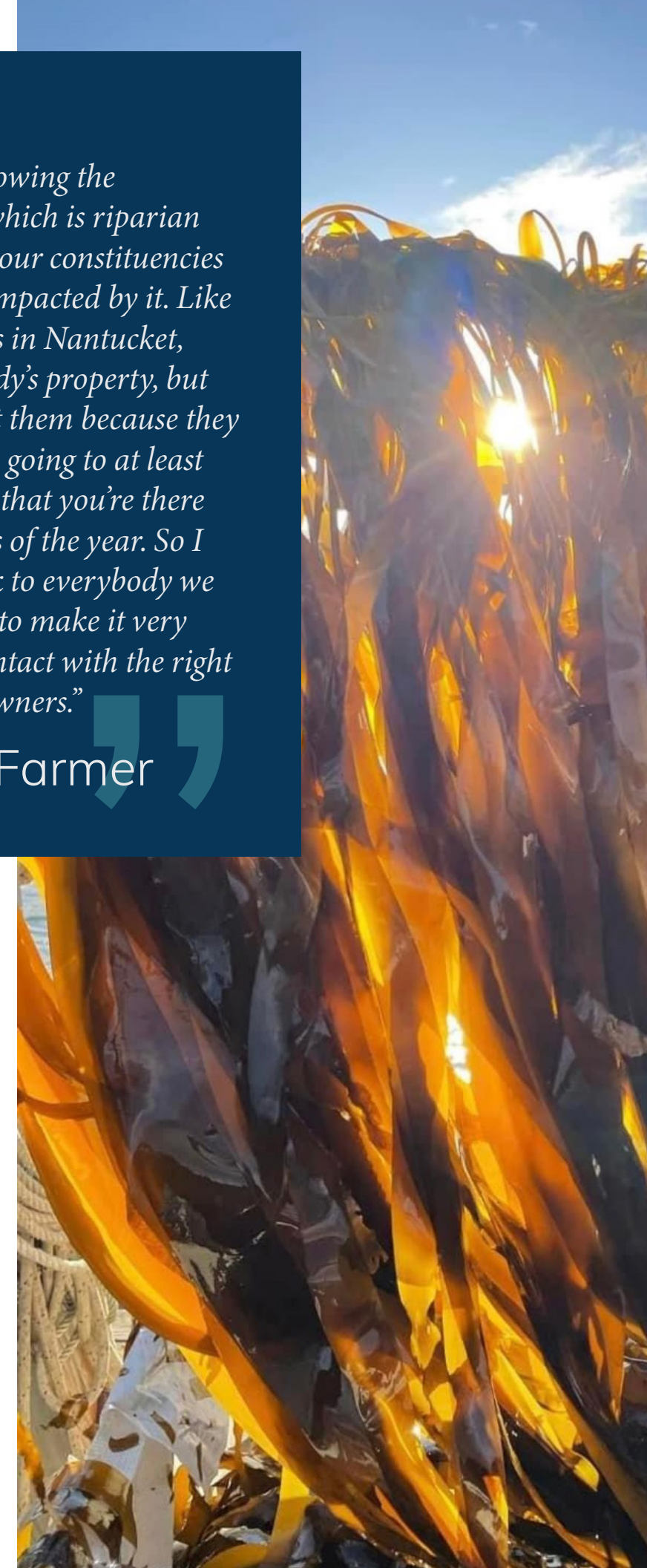
Lastly, farmers discussed how providing meaningful community benefits—in ways that are unique to their community’s needs—is an important trust generating practice. First, farmers provided access to locally produced food, often connecting with stakeholders through the product itself. This included selling locally, selling at events, or providing discounted or free product to neighbors. This practice was particularly helpful in establishing relationships with riparian landowners. These landowners often bear most of the impacts and may not value the benefits often talked about surrounding aquaculture like job creation or increased water quality and biodiversity. Access to

“Well, I think it’s not just following the requirements of the license, which is riparian landowners. It’s thinking of your constituencies and anybody that might be impacted by it. Like the story of the wind turbines in Nantucket, which they weren’t on anybody’s property, but everybody complained about them because they could see them. So people are going to at least notice your farm, and notice that you’re there working during certain times of the year. So I think our strategy was to talk to everybody we could get our hands on. And to make it very public and to do personal contact with the right people, fishermen and landowners.”

-Hugh, Seaweed Farmer

local oysters may actually be a benefit that resonates, which presents an opportunity for connection. For example, David, an oyster farmer from Midcoast Maine, recognized this and set up a pick-up spot at his dock where neighbors would boat in and buy oysters on the honor system. He said that his neighbors enjoy the availability and they “like that whole game of picking their own.”

Other trust generating community benefits included filling community needs, including serving on committees or getting involved in local schools, being willing to help others out on the water, like giving someone a tow or returning lost beach toys to neighbors, and being a good employer.



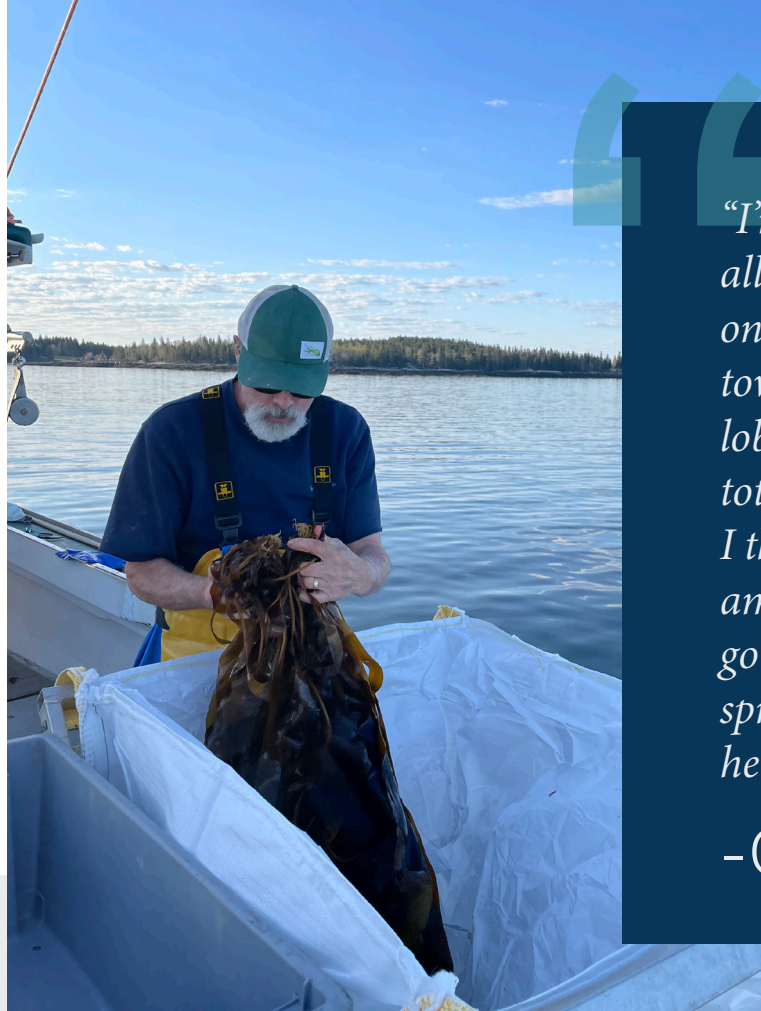


Photo provided by Bob Baines

*“I’m not moving I’m just sitting in one place all day so I notice a lot more stuff, and so on many occasions I’ve given somebody a tow, pulled somebody up the rock, run a lobsterman down and give him back his totes that I saw fly off the back of his boat. I think that definitely has given us a fair amount of cachet at least with the water going people here. And you know, word spreads, people are like ‘hey I heard you helped out what’s his name last week.’”*

**-Graham, Oyster Farmer**

## FARMER IDENTIFIED TRUST GENERATING ACTIONS

TRUST GENERATING ACTION	% OF FARMERS WHO MENTIONED THIS ACTION DURING INTERVIEWS
<b>COMMUNICATION</b>	
Voluntary communication	100%
Consulting & making accommodations	35%
Honesty & transparency	31%
<b>OPERATIONAL PRACTICES</b>	
Keeping a tidy farm	38%
Reducing impacts	35%
Being visible	31%
Abiding by regulations	14%
<b>COMMUNITY BENEFITS</b>	
Providing product	66%
Filling community needs	35%
Helping others	28%
Being a good employer	21%

## FACING OPPOSITION

While social license work can help prevent opposition, even farms who are well established members of the community and have done the work necessary to gain the community’s trust have faced stakeholder pushback at certain points in their growth. Charlie, a shellfish farmer from Southern Maine, experienced this first-hand when she applied for a larger lease. She pointed out that when “you want to make a change, then people will reevaluate that social license.” Farmers agreed on the best way to manage these challenges—to take the high road, be respectful, listen and respond, and when you find yourself facing folks who are not willing to have a respectful dialogue, disengage. Fiona talked about how she refused to engage in “mudslinging,” and instead opted to “rely on the equity I have had historically for the last 17 years in the community.” By continuing to focus on building support, rather than fighting with the opposition, farmers maintained respect and integrity in the face of challenges.

## Key Takeaways

*Generating trust with the community requires:*

- Learning about what is locally meaningful
- Aligning with local values
- Respectfully communicating with all relevant stakeholders
- Being transparent and honest
- Operating responsibly
- Providing tangible community benefits

While working towards social license can be a significant amount of work, it’s important work that will help to create a more socially sustainable industry. Like Graham said, “At the end of the day, we’re sharing waters with everybody else ... So if you’re not doing your job to engage with the community and develop social license with the stakeholders on whatever body of water you’re on, quite frankly I don’t think you should be doing aquaculture. I guess that’s it, we’re all sharing the water. The sharing part is the important part.”

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