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***Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and  
Joint Standing Committee on Environment and Natural Resources***

***RE: LD 258 - Biennial Budget Proposal for the Department of Environmental Protection***

Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs, Senator Brenner, Representative Gramlich, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Environment and Natural Resources, my name is Kaitlyn Nuzzo and I am the Government Relations Director for The Nature Conservancy in Maine. **I appreciate this opportunity to testify in support of the biennial budget proposal for the Department of Environmental Protection.**

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is a nonprofit conservation organization dedicated to conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends. Guided by science, we create innovative, on-the-ground solutions to our world's toughest challenges so that nature and people can thrive together. We use a collaborative approach that engages local communities, governments, the private sector, and other partners. The Nature Conservancy has been leading conservation in Maine for more than 60 years and is the 12th largest landowner in the state, owning and managing roughly 300,000 acres. We also work across Maine to restore rivers and streams, partner with fishermen in the Gulf of Maine to rebuild groundfish populations, and develop innovative solutions to address our changing climate.

The environmental laws administered by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) provide the underpinning for Maine's way of life. In a recent poll conducted by TNC, when voters were asked what they like most about living in Maine, the most frequent response was the outdoors and our environment. At a time when Maine is seeking to attract and retain residents, the environment that the DEP protects is one of our greatest assets.

To successfully carry out its mission, the DEP needs appropriate resources. This is true under normal circumstances, but the Department has taken on increased workload in recent years that will only grow in the next two years. The budget proposal before you is modest but continues investment in DEP's core programs and mission – air and water quality protection.

Specifically, TNC supports the proposal to reclassify 22 land licensing positions. These critical positions work to review and issue licenses. Investments in retaining DEP's existing staff team will ensure continued focus on maintaining the high environmental standards and regulations the team is charged with implementing. Efforts to make open positions more competitive will help with recruitment and result in more efficient license processing while easing some of the burden on existing staff. The Maine State Government as a whole must focus on retaining and recruiting talent through reviewing whether existing and posted positions are competitive. The small change

proposed in the DEP budget is a step in the right direction, though more work must be done on this front across the board.

TNC is also strongly supportive of the proposal to maintain consistent funding for the Eelgrass and Salt Marsh Vegetation Mapping Fund program. This data helps the state understand where these resources are found. Eelgrass and salt marshes provide habitat for hundreds of marine species, prevent coastal erosion, and serve as a bellwether of overall coastal ecosystem health.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written comments in support of the Department of Environmental Protection's budget proposal.