



Natural Resources Council of Maine

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Testimony in Support of LD 1969, *An Act to Expand the Use of Funds to Support Land Conservation* May 22, 2023

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry, I am Melanie Sturm, the Forests and Wildlife Director at the Natural Resources Council of Maine (NRCM). I appreciate the opportunity to testify in support of LD 1969.

The Land for Maine's Future (LMF) program is Maine's most effective and popular land conservation program. Over the past three decades, the program has helped fund more than 300 projects and protect more than 600,000 acres spanning all 16 Maine counties. LMF supports conservation and recreation projects for activities ranging from biking to birding, fly casting to cross-country skiing, and snowmobiling to swimming. LMF provides one of the few funding options available for land conservation of working farmland, working forests, and working waterfronts, often in the form of conservation easements. LMF projects are diverse and benefit Maine people, businesses, and communities, as well as visitors to our state. Maine voters have consistently shown their strong support for land conservation at the ballot box, passing six ballot measures to fund LMF since 1987.

In 2021, the Legislature passed a budget with \$40 million for the LMF program over four years. Those appropriations were badly needed and are already being spent on meaningful projects, large and small, across the state.

This bill would replace the existing LMF fund with a trust fund and transfer all funds over to the new account. While the LMF program would continue operating the same as it has successfully for decades, putting funds in this account has several advantages.

First, deposits made into the trust fund would be protected and no longer run the risk of being redirected to other programs or uses within State government. Second, interest generated on the account would be put toward the program. Third, the trust fund would allow other sources of funds to flow into the program, including from private sources, not just from the State.

Under LD 1969, existing LMF dollars would continue to be allotted and dispersed based on language in the 2021 appropriations bill: At least 5% will go to water access, at least 10% will go to the Working Waterfront Access Protection Program, at least 10% will go to the Working Farmland Access Protection Program, and the remaining will go to conservation and recreation projects.

Because of the new trust fund structure, the bill would create two new subprograms: (1) the Conservation and Recreation Fund, which essentially already exists and has funded working forests and many popular sites for hiking, biking, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, and other activities, and (2) the Conservation Land Management Fund, which is new and, once funds are deposited into it, would support capital improvements to enhance public recreation opportunities and enhance wildlife habitat on any permanently conserved property, not necessarily a property that was acquired using LMF funds.

Since the LMF program was launched more than 35 years ago, it has delivered significant value for Maine people, the environment, and our economy. This bill would restructure how funding for the program is managed, enhancing its ability to receive and utilize diverse funding sources, so that it remains successful well into the future.

I respectfully urge the Committee to vote Ought to Pass on LD 1969. Thank you for your time and consideration, and I would be glad to answer any questions you may have.