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***Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and  
Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry***

***RE: LD 258 - Biennial Budget Proposal for the Department of Agriculture,  
Conservation and Forestry***

Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, 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 supplemental budget proposal for the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry.**

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. TNC has been working in Maine for more than 60 years protecting land, restoring rivers and streams, rebuilding groundfish populations in the Gulf of Maine and developing innovative solutions to address climate change.

Conservation is at our core, and we are proud to be the 12<sup>th</sup> largest landowner in the state, owning and managing over 300,000 acres. We work in tandem with our partners at the Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry (DACF) to both advance our conservation work and support their role in planning, conservation, management, and research. Maine's public lands, state parks, and forests are incredible assets that underpin our quality of life and economic opportunities. The Nature Conservancy supports robust funding for DACF and its many divisions and programs.

Specifically, TNC supports the following budget requests:

**Transfers into the Land for Maine's Future Trust Fund (Z377, page A-15)**

TNC has been committed to a thriving Land for Maine's Future (LMF) program since it was established by voters in 1987. Last year, the Legislature passed LD 1969 which established the Land for Maine's Future Trust Fund as a central account to hold future and current LMF funds. This shift allowed funds to generate investment income and has already resulted in hundreds of thousands of dollars in interest. We fully support the transfer requests in the supplemental budget to consolidate all the associated LMF dollars into this Trust Fund.

**DACF Administration (0401, page A-10)**

This section includes various staff positions that are shifting into permanent positions. These positions carry out critical work including supporting the stateside components

of key federal programs like the Land and Water Conservation Fund, the Recreational Trails Program, and the Community Wildfire Defense Grant. Each of these programs and positions serve the Department and we fully support their inclusion in the supplemental budget.

**Natural Areas Program (Z821, page A-93)**

The Maine Natural Areas Program (MNAP) plays a critical role in supporting landowners and land managers by offering comprehensive data and information. MNAP inventories biological features on lands and monitors invasive plant species. This information is vital to TNC and we regularly collaborate and consult with the MNAP team. We support their funding request to reclassify two staff positions.

**Land Management and Planning (Z239, page A-84)**

This program provides a wide variety of services including managing the state's public lands assets, performing sustainable timber management, overseeing Habitat Management Areas, and providing recreational opportunities for the public. We support their requests across the board, and specifically support their request for funding to invest in capital improvements to bridges, roads, and recreational trails.

**Parks - General Operations (Z221, page A-19)**

Maine State Parks are beloved by both Maine citizens and visitors and have seen a dramatic increase in visitation over the last several years. Investments in staff capacity and infrastructure are necessary to maintain the world class reputation of these resources. The proposed changes in this program include reclassifications of staff positions and shifts to make key positions permanent. TNC also fully supports the \$6M investment of one-time funding to address damage incurred from the December 2023 and January 2024 storms. These events had severe impact across the state and our parks, public lands, and historic sites need this funding to rebuild and recover. We hope DACF focuses on rebuilding efforts that enhance Maine's resiliency to climate change and considers nature-based solutions to protect against future damages. Our organization would be happy to brainstorm ways to incorporate those considerations into BPL's plans if that would be helpful.

Finally, we would like to raise a few priorities that were not included in the biennial budget proposal. DACF is tasked with conservation and management of some of the most important natural resources and lands in our state. This responsibility requires an immense amount of work, and it is clear to us that many of the bureaus and programs could use additional staff capacity. Specifically, we would like to see additional staff positions included in the land conservation teams and the Land for Maine's Future program. Aside from staff investments, DACF needs additional support for various data collection and research functions including a forest inventory of public lands and an examination of solar energy development on agricultural and forested lands. DACF will also have new responsibilities to review solar development proposals on high-value agricultural lands. A short-term position was approved in the biennial budget but we hope to see this role made permanent to accommodate this important workload.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written comments in support of the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry's budget proposal.