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Hello, Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine and other members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee, and Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee.

My name is Rachel Hovel, and I am an associate professor of biology at the University of Maine at Farmington. I live in New Vineyard, Maine. I appreciate the opportunity to testify today, and my position is neither for nor against the proposed budget. Today, I would like to emphasize the importance of adequate funding for a healthy University of Maine System. The small increase in funding in this budget is encouraging, but does not address the years of relatively declining appropriations as other costs increase.

As an environmental scientist, I often reflect on how our inland and coastal landscapes define Maine, through their immense recreational, ecological, and economic values. I have too many examples to list of the excellent work that University of Maine System students, graduate workers, faculty, and staff have contributed to managing the state's valuable natural resources, from forests to commercial fisheries. Today I will give a couple of highlights from the smaller campuses. Former students and faculty from our UMF Biology and Environmental Science programs work on innovative tools for evaluating and protecting water quality in our lakes, which are a natural asset valued at over 14 billion dollars in Maine. Many graduates from our campus are working in the outdoor recreation economy, which is valued at about 3.5 billion dollars, supported by programs like our Outdoor Recreation and Business Administration degree. My colleagues at other small campuses train students in new technologies for the forest products sector, valued at more than 8 billion dollars. Additionally, Maine will continue to face increasing impacts of floods, changing winter conditions, and sea level rise. A strong University of Maine System is a key tool for predicting future change and developing strategies for resilient communities, infrastructure, and natural resources.

I moved across the country in 2017 for this job, and I've come to feel deeply invested in Maine and the mission of the University of Maine System. And every year since I've been here, we have been continually asked to do more with less, as financial constraints increase. I have seen this profoundly limit what opportunities we can offer students, and it is also affecting the ability to retain personnel as salaries do not keep up with cost of living. These effective cuts to the University of Maine System are not consistent with the goals of serving Maine and retaining talented young people in the state.

In closing, I want to emphasize that the University of Maine System is essential infrastructure supporting the vitality of our state. Public education is designed to be publicly funded, for the benefit of all. I urge you to invest in the University of Maine System, to support the excellent work and training that the system produces, and maintain access to education for all who wish to pursue it. Thank you for your time.