Maine Climate Action **NOW!**

To: Maine Legislature Committee on Energy, Utilities, and Technology
From: Ezra Sassaman, Advocacy Coordinator, Maine Climate Action Now
Date: May 6, 2025
Re: LD 1868: An Act to Advance a Clean Energy Economy by Updating Renewable and Clean Resource Procurement Laws

Senator Lawrence, Representative Sachs, and members of the Committee on Energy, Utilities, and Technology, my name is Ezra Sassaman. I live in Bar Harbor and represent Maine Climate Action Now! (MCAN), a coalition of sixteen nonprofit organizations from across Maine united by a desire to progress our state forward and take transformative action in response to the climate crisis.

Maine Climate Action Now! supports a rapid transition away from fossil fuel energy. For this reason, we are closely following conversations in the legislature this session that compare and contrast the advantages and risks of different types of energy. When engaging in these discussions weighing the pros and cons of newer technologies, it is important to recognize that the status quo – with a rapidly warming planet, natural disasters increasing in frequency and force, and 150 or more oil and chemical spills in U.S. waters alone requiring government attention each year[1] – is not sustainable.

We recognize that no one type of energy is a perfect solution. What is clear, however, is that transitioning to renewables will lead to a world with overwhelmingly less pollution, better health outcomes, and fewer harmful greenhouse gas emissions than sticking with business as usual – dependence on coal, oil, and natural gas.[2] For that reason, we are supportive of many goals presented by LD 1868.

One lingering and important question remains: what should count as “clean” or “renewable” energy? At first glance, wind, solar, and nuclear all appear to fulfill the goal of rapid decarbonization, decreasing pollution, and increasing health outcomes for Mainers.

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[1] Office of Response and Restoration. “Largest Oil Spills Affecting U.S. Waters Since 1969”. *NOAA*. Updated May 30, 2024. Accessed March 12, 2025.
[2] Hannah Richie. “What are the safest and cleanest sources of energy?”. *Our World in Data*. February 10, 2020. Accessed March 12, 2025.

However, nuclear power gives us and many other climate justice organizations pause for the following reasons and others:

1. **High costs and long delays**. Some of the most recent planned nuclear plants in the U.S. had to be cancelled or postponed because the originally-estimated costs had doubled or more than doubled.[3] Going "all-in" with the significant resources and materials to begin constructing large nuclear power plants takes important time and energy away from other forms of renewable energy that have already proven successful. For example, rooftop solar offers a more accessible and faster alternative, allowing individual community members to participate in the clean transition at a lower cost and faster implementation. This approach builds on existing successes, enabling a step-by-step decarbonization of the grid. In comparison, nuclear plants offer a more "all or nothing" approach.

2. **Waste management and disaster scenarios**. Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, and Fukushima are all examples of nuclear disasters that have stuck in the public imagination when it comes to the potential risks of nuclear technology. A less known story involves a radioactive disaster at the United Nuclear Corporation's Church Rock Uranium mine in New Mexico, where uranium tailings broke out of the dam that was constructed to hold them, "releasing 1,100 tons of uranium waste and 94 million gallons of radioactive water into the Rio Puerco and through Navajo lands, a toxic flood that had devastating consequences on the surrounding area."[4] This disaster resulted in heavily contaminated water and major health consequences for Navajo people, animals, and environment that linger to this day.

   Church Rock also shows how corporate malfeasance and governmental discrimination based on identity combine to worsen the effects of disasters such as these. An Army Corps of Engineers report found that United Nuclear Corporation knew about the failing dam two years before the disaster and this area saw no serious attempt at remediation or compensation for victims, compared to the Three Mile Island meltdown. This is despite the fact that Church Rock happened only a few months after Three Mile Island and resulted in more total radiation released than the Pennsylvania disaster.

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[3] Brian Potter. "Why does nuclear plant construction cost so much?". *Institute for Progress*. May 1, 2023. Accessed March 12, 2025.
[4] Samuel Gilbert. "Church Rock, America's Forgotten Nuclear Disaster, Is Still Poisoning Navajo Lands 40 Years Later". *Vice*, August 12, 2019. Accessed March 12, 2025.

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While we support efforts to increase the speed through which renewable energy is added to the grid, simply expanding the definition to include “clean and renewable” energy means inadvertently supporting technologies like nuclear whose downsides might outweigh their upsides. We do not have to give up hope on the potential for clean *and renewable* sources like wind and solar that are not as disruptive to the environment as other forms of energy that do not produce carbon emissions when running.

For the above-stated reasons, we recommend you take a closer look at expanding the criteria for what counts as energy that is beneficial to include in Maine’s electrical grid. We support using a cautious, holistic approach that encompasses known and potential ecosystem destruction, waste management planning, and the potential for disaster scenarios, especially in a world with storms and flooding increasing in intensity and devastation. Not all “clean” energy is created equally. Thank you.