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Kaitlyn Nuzzo, Government Relations Director
The Nature Conservancy in Maine
kaitlyn.nuzzo@tnc.org



Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry

RE: LD 2118 - An Act to Eliminate the Natural Areas Program and Reassign Certain Responsibilities Under the Program to the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife and to Amend the Law Governing Administration of the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, Bureau of Resource Management

Senator Talbot Ross, 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 submit written comments in support of LD 2118 - An Act to Eliminate the Natural Areas Program and Reassign Certain Responsibilities Under the Program to the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife and to Amend the Law Governing Administration of the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, Bureau of Resource Management.

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.

Our organization supports the proposed transfer of the Maine Natural Areas Program (MNAP) from the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF) to the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (DIFW). This shift would allow MNAP to continue their important work which includes providing comprehensive information, offering scientific expertise, and supporting decision makers with tools to make informed and responsible land management decisions.

MNAP's focus on at-risk species, natural ecosystems, wildlife habitats, ecological reserves, and invasive plants fits squarely within the mission and ongoing work of DIFW. Bringing both animal and plant experts together within DIFW will support a more efficient and integrated approach to working with landowners, developers, resources managers, towns, and other conservation partners. This move will reduce duplicative work between agencies and create a more coordinated approach to database management, environmental review, species tracking, and leveraging federal funds available for habitat conservation.

We thank Commissioner Beal and Commissioner Camuso for their work coordinating this program transfer. We encourage the Committee to support LD 2118.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment, I'm happy to answer questions at any time.