

TESTIMONY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF INLAND FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE

**BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS AND
FINANCIAL AFFAIRS**

IN SUPPORT OF L.D. 1312

**“AN ACT TO PROVIDE A SOURCE OF REVENUE FOR SCHOOL
CONSTRUCTION AND FOR THE LAND FOR MAINE’S FUTURE TRUST FUND”**

SPONSORED BY: Senator PIERCE of Cumberland.

DATE OF HEARING: February 23, 2026

Good afternoon, Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine and members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee. I am Judy Camuso, Commissioner of the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, speaking on behalf of the Department, in support of the Administration’s amendment to **L.D. 1312**. I am also the current Board Chair of the Land for Maine’s Future Program.

The mission of the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (IFW) is to preserve, protect, and enhance the inland fisheries and wildlife resources of the state as well as to enable and promote the safe enjoyment of Maine’s outdoors. IFW has an active land acquisition program focused on expanding the state’s network of wildlife management areas and water access sites. Additionally, our program works closely with partners to support their conservation projects where those projects are consistent with Department mission and priorities.

The amendment, introduced by Commissioner Beal, directs reliable and ongoing funding to the LMF Program. Traditionally, supported through General Fund bond issues, this proposal would be a more fiscally responsible way of funding the critical work of LMF, using investment income rather than adding to the state’s debt. The new language would direct to the LMF Trust Fund 25% of the investment income generated from the Budget Stabilization Fund, when it is at the 18% cap and when it is below the cap as well.

Land for Maine’s Future has long been the primary state funding source for land conservation in Maine. Grant funds have been used to protect unique ecological areas, well known recreation sites, and important working forests, farms and waterfronts. The program has helped to conserve well-loved places including Mt. Agamenticus, Mt Kineo, and the Camden Hills. The program has also conserved over 10,000 acres of farmland,

large areas of working forest, and 33 working waterfront sites, and it has contributed to the protection of essential points of access to the water. Some of those locations include Seboomook Lake, Attean Pond, Mattawamkeag River, Higgins Beach and ADA accessible sites on both Annabessacook Lake and Togus Pond. Land for Maine's Future has been especially important for supporting Maine's recreational enthusiasts. Unlike many conservation grant programs, LMF specifically requires that conservation and recreation projects are open to the public for hunting, fishing, and trapping, among other outdoor activities.

LMF has given special consideration to Deer Wintering Area acquisition proposals. LMF awards an extra 10 points to projects in priority deer wintering areas and where the IFW will hold the primary interest in the property and manage it with deer conservation as the highest priority. Since this change in its program, LMF has assisted the Department in acquiring over 8,700 acres in three acquisitions. One of these acquisitions, Macwahoc WMA, is the Department's largest ever. The most recent, in Dixmont, will establish a 675-acre conservation area in a part of the state that has little conservation of any kind.

Throughout its history, LMF has been highly successful at leveraging additional funding for conservation. The program requires 1:1 match, meaning for each \$1 of LMF money awarded, at least \$1 must be raised from other sources by grant applicants. However, according to LMF's 2023 Government Evaluation Act Report, between 2015 and 2023 the effective proportion of LMF dollars to match has been greater than 1:2.

To date LMF has benefitted from occasional state bonds and budget appropriations, but it has never had a dedicated source of funds. As a result, the program has not been able to distribute grant dollars for conservation on a regular schedule, making it difficult for the conservation community to ready projects in a timely manner. Securing a dedicated source of funds for the program has been a long-identified need and this bill is timely given Maine's current conservation goals.

I would be glad to answer any questions at this time or during the work session.