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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,
CONSERVATION AND FORESTRY

IN SUPPORT OF LD 25

An Act to Provide Indigenous Peoples Free Access to State Parks

January 25, 2023

Senator Ingwerson, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, my name is Andy Cutko, and I am the Director of the Bureau of Parks and Lands. I am speaking on behalf of the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF) in support of LD 25, *An Act to Provide Indigenous Peoples Free Access to State Parks*. We thank Senator Hickman and his co-sponsors for submitting this bill.

Maine State Parks and Historic Sites currently allow free day-use access to senior citizens, children under five, Maine veterans, gold star families, and military service members on active duty. Maine State Parks allow free camping to Maine Veterans who are 100% disabled. This bill would add free access to Maine State Parks and Historic Sites for members of federally recognized Indian nations, tribes, or bands.

Since September 2020, DACF and the Maine Bureau of Parks and Lands have participated in the First Light Journey, a collaboration between conservation groups, public agencies, and tribal representatives focused on expanding tribal access and stewardship of Maine lands. In conversations with other state and national park systems, I've learned that similar initiatives are occurring across the country. In the last legislative session, the legislature took a step in this direction by allowing Wabanaki collections of traditional materials from the Bureau's Ecological Reserves.

As the legislature considers this bill, I encourage the Committee to weigh a few factors:

- First, as is the case with others who have free State Park access, an efficient implementation will require a form of standardized identification so that entrance booth attendants and staff who handle campground reservations can verify that individuals are part of federally recognized tribes.

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- Second, because fees from State Parks accrue into the state's General Fund, this bill will have a fiscal impact. If we assume tribal members currently use State Parks at the same rate as Maine's population on the whole, we approximate the fiscal impact at 0.6% of overall State Park revenue, or \$39,344. We do not see this impact as being exorbitant, particularly in comparison with the benefit to members of federally recognized Indian nations, tribes, or bands.
- Third, whether the bill intends to allow free day use and camping or just free day use is unclear. The fiscal note above is calculated to assume that camping is included.

Thank you for your time. I would happily answer any questions now or at the work session.