



Testimony of Eliza Townsend, Maine Conservation Policy Director

In support of LD 258

An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2023, June 30, 2024 and June 30, 2025

Good afternoon, Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee; Senator Ingwerson, Representative Pluecker and distinguished members of the Agriculture Conservation and Forestry Committee, I am Eliza Townsend, Maine Conservation Policy Director for the Appalachian Mountain Club.

AMC is the nation's oldest conservation, recreation and education organization, with the mission to foster the protection, enjoyment and understanding of the outdoors. We have 6,600 members in Maine and own 100,000 acres of forestland in Piscataquis County which we manage for multiple use, including sustainable forestry, backcountry recreation, and environmental education.

We are pleased to support the proposed budget for the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, particularly those segments connected to forestry, land use planning, conserving our most special places, and offering outdoor recreation through parks, public lands, and trails.

DACF has a broad and serious charge. The department's work contributes to a forest products sector with an estimated annual impact of \$8.1 billion and a tourism sector with an estimated annual impact of \$7 billion. Maine ranks in the top 5 states for percentage of its GDP derived from outdoor recreation.

This agency's work is central to the most pressing issues of our time. Climate change threatens our safety, property, infrastructure, food systems, our very future. Its twin, biodiversity loss, threatens the fragile ecosystems that are the basis of life on earth. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, interest in outdoor recreation has grown exponentially, placing increased demands on parks, trails, and public lands.

Maine has an outsized role to play in addressing climate change, biodiversity loss, and the demand for outdoor recreation and the solace and refreshment it provides. Our 17.5 million acres of forest not only make ours the most forested state in the union, but sit at the heart of the largest, most intact, temperate forest in the world. That forest, in part because of its size and intact character, harbors more than 139 rare plants and animals, 21 of them globally rare. Maine holds more than half of the largest Globally Important Bird Area in the continental U.S. Our recreational assets attract visitors from across the country and around the world. Over the past few years, attendance at state parks has smashed records again and again.



But for Maine to meet these challenges and the scourge of PFAS, DACF must be adequately funded and staffed. We are keenly aware of the struggle to attract and retain qualified staff. We support the various proposals to retain current staff, including reclassifications, reorganizations, extensions of weeks worked and increased hours from part to full time. We also urge both committees to fully understand and address the scope of vacant positions and their root causes, whether pay structure, limited period or part time status, or other factors.

But we can and must do more than maintain the status quo. We can prioritize our natural assets and the programs that steward them, making them the center of our economy. Our open spaces and ready access to the outdoors attracted new residents in the wake of the pandemic, making Maine the only state to see its population trend younger between 2020 and 2021—and as the oldest state in the nation, we need that demographic shift.

Imagine what Maine could be like if we fully invested in achieving the goal of saving 30% of our land by 2030, if we fully maintained our trails and built new ones, if we decided that our state parks should be the equal of any in the country, if we fully invested in scientists and naturalists, foresters, forest rangers, land use planners, and recreational specialists, and gave them the tools they need to carry out the work we have asked of them.

Maine is already wonderful. It could be astounding.