



# Natural Resources Council of Maine

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## **Testimony 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**

**Pete Didisheim, Advocacy Director**

**February 28, 2023**

Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, Senator Ingwerson, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry. My name is Pete Didisheim. I am the Advocacy Director at the Natural Resources Council of Maine, and I appreciate this opportunity to testify in support of the Governor's proposed budget for the Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry.

At the outset, let me share the view that you have heard from others that the Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry (DACF) includes programs that are critically important to Maine's economy, environment, and wildlife, and to the people of Maine and those from away who visit our forests, farms, state parks, trails, and protected lands.

As the state with the highest percentage (89%) of forested lands in the country, the Maine Forest Service is critically important to our forest industry, the health of our forests, and wildlife habitat in every corner of the state. We support the initiatives proposed in the budget for Forest Resource Management (A-77, A-78).

The Bureau of Agriculture, Food and Rural Resources plays a vital role in working with Maine's farmers and the agricultural sector, and now has the added responsibility of being on the frontlines responding to PFAS contamination and helping address climate change.

NRCM supports the governor's budget for ongoing expenses related to PFAS response across multiple agencies, including funding at DACF for testing and monitoring of soil and groundwater, and abating and mitigating identified contamination. (A-62).

NRCM also strongly supports funding for the Maine Healthy Soils Program which will help expand the use of best practices to protect native biological diversity and increased atmospheric greenhouse gas removals through agricultural soils (A-88, Part BB).

DACF plays a critical role administering the Land for Maine's Future (LMF) program, Maine's most popular and successful land conservation program. We support the initiatives in the budget request for LMF (A-82, A-83, Part Y, Part X).

The Department has a vital role managing the Land Use Planning Commission, responsible for key planning and zoning decisions on Maine's 10.4 million acres of unorganized territories. We support the proposed initiatives for LUPC **(A-89)**.

The Natural Areas Program plays an invaluable role creating an inventory of plants and ecosystems in Maine, which has proven to be essential to assist in decisions that preserve these natural resources for present and future generations. We support the budget proposed for the Natural Areas Program **(A-93)**

The Bureau of Parks and Lands (BPL) plays a critical stewardship and management role for some of Maine's most important and iconic areas, including 48 state parks and historic sites, more than 600,000 acres of Public Reserved Lands, more than 90,000 acres of Ecological Reserves, and the 92-mile Allagash Wilderness Waterway. We strongly support BPL's budget for these responsibilities **(A-98 through A-101)**.

Over the past few years, since the start of the pandemic, Maine State Parks, campsites, and trails have experienced record use and visitation, with close to 3.3 million day visitors and 320,000 campsite reservations annually. We are pleased that \$50 million in American Rescue Plan funds were allocated in 2022 to address overdue infrastructure projects at Maine State Parks, but we understand that these funds will not eliminate the backlog.

One area that NRCM wants to shine a spotlight on that strongly needs attention is Maine's lack of investment in the design, construction, and maintenance of trails.

Maine has a system of trails for hiking, biking, snowmobiling, walking, commuting, skiing, and many other uses that *could* place us in the top tier of trail destination states in the nation. But Maine provides essentially no funding to support recreational and active transportation trails. BPL administers a relatively small amount of federal funding through the Recreational Trails Program, and the Maine Conservation Corps helps build and maintain trails with funding from project sponsors and AmeriCorps.

But the need is so much greater. Trails are a critical part of Maine's \$3 billion outdoor recreation economy. Snowmobiling alone generates \$460 million in direct spending. Maine people love our trails, which help connect us with the natural world, help connect our communities, and enable recreational opportunities that have become increasingly important during our digital age.

Snowmobile and ATV registration fees provide funding for motorized trails, but no such funding is available for non-motorized trails. This is true even as more people than ever are discovering Maine's recreational trails, and when there is a large and growing need for building trails for active transportation and trails that are accessible to people across the full range of abilities.

In this budget, and through other measures that come before you this session, we encourage you to seize the opportunity to support investments in the design, development, and maintenance of trails statewide. We are confident that such investments will be greatly appreciated by the people of Maine.

Thank you for the opportunity to share these comments, and I would be glad to answer any questions you may have.