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

IN OPPOSITON TO LD 993

An Act to Facilitate Stakeholder Input Regarding Forest Policy in Maine

March 20, 2023

Senator Ingwerson, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, I am Patty Cormier, Director of the Maine Forest Service of the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry. I am testifying on behalf of the Department in opposition to LD 993, An Act to Facilitate Stakeholder Input Regarding Forest Policy in Maine.

The bill enumerates seven duties of the board. We would respectfully suggest that six of those duties are already occurring under the umbrella of successful and long-standing programs and initiatives in the public, private, and non-profit sectors, including facilitating dialogue among diverse interests involving forestry matters; promoting cooperation among state agencies involving forestry matters; and ensuring public participation in the development of forestry policy. The seventh duty, submitting a report to the 131st Legislature, is something the Bureau would be happy to provide even in the absence of the formation of a permanent, 21-member advisory board.

In recent weeks proponents of this legislation have released information that emphasizes the global importance of Maine's forests, the many challenges facing our forests, and those individuals and communities that rely on them. Climate change is foremost among these challenges with its attendant drought, storms, flooding, and disruption of ecological systems. Further, related issues include insects and diseases that are not native to Maine; changes in habitat; threats from development and fragmentation of parcels; impacts to forest management and harvesting from changing weather patterns; and significantly, the challenges facing the forest economy, especially workforce issues, global markets for wood products, and impacts to Maine's many forest-dependent communities.

This is a daunting list that the Department agrees is essential to address.

Our opposition to this bill stems not from its intent but rather from our assessment that a large Forest Advisory Board with every possible issue within its purview would be a time-consuming, costly, and ineffective mechanism for moving policy discussions – and implementation of solutions – forward.

Consider that the Natural and Working Lands Group of the Maine Climate Council completed its initial work to produce recommendations for our 4-year climate action plan in June 2020 – after over two dozen meetings with nearly 30 members. The group requested numerous presentations by the

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University of Maine and other scientists and additional research and data analyses by Maine Forest Service staff. The result was a consensus document, and the already wide-ranging recommendations of this working group are being actively implemented, as resources allow with our personnel, and through many ongoing and productive partnerships. This group continues its work of engaging stakeholders broadly concerning the future of Maine's forests.

The Maine Forest Service currently participates in and receives guidance from multiple councils, advisory groups, and boards. We are fortunate in Maine to have a robust infrastructure of forestry associations, conservation-oriented NGOs, academics, agencies, and other interested parties that have a demonstrated track record of working collaboratively on issues of common concern. We value opportunities to consult with and receive feedback from these stakeholders. Still, we do not see the need to construct another advisory body, as we have numerous avenues for soliciting input that we use regularly. It needs to be clarified what new values, protections, or benefits such a board would offer, and how such an investment of staff time and other resources would add value to the numerous pathways for engagement we already support.

One example is how we developed the 2020 Forest Action Plan (FAP). The USDA Forest Service requires State forestry agencies to build a FAP every ten years to maintain eligibility for Cooperative Forestry Assistance programs. The FAP provides an analysis of forest conditions and trends in the state, delineates priority rural and urban forest landscape areas, and suggests long-term strategies for investing state, federal, and other resources to manage priority landscapes, focusing on where federal investment can most effectively stimulate or leverage desired action and engage multiple partners.

To update the 2010 FAP, we convened an advisory committee of interested stakeholders. The plan was updated and sent out for public comment using input from that process. We again revised the plan based on those comments. We then held six virtual sessions to review the plan before it was submitted to the USDA in January 2021. The process worked well, and we received many good suggestions which were incorporated.

Other public MFS-facing partnerships include the Outcome Based Forestry Panel, the State Forest Stewardship Coordination Committee, the Project Canopy Leadership Team, the Cooperative Forestry Research Unit, the Prescribed Fire Council, and the Sustainable Forestry Initiative Implementation Committee, to name a few. There are many more.

The Maine Forest Service and its many partner organizations and advisory groups have successfully addressed multiple issues impacting Maine's forest. The Spruce Budworm Task Force is an excellent example of a serious, complex forestry issue being addressed with a collaborative effort by the private and public sectors outside of a formal structure. This task force was formed to prepare for the impending spruce budworm outbreak. This effort aims to assess risk and report recommended responses to an outbreak for Maine's forest community.

Maine has a comprehensive set of forest practices laws that address clearcutting, shoreland harvesting, harvesting in LUPC protection subdistricts, and liquidation harvesting, which has resulted in an abundant, well-managed forest resource, and it has been remarkably productive for many years. Other indicators of our successful management include the following:

- There is much more standing timber volume now than 30 years ago, and growth continues to exceed harvest.
- Over half of Maine's forest lands are certified to one or more major forest certification standards.
- Landowners effectively implement Best Management Practices on close to 90% of timber harvests monitored annually, a substantial improvement since systematic monitoring began nearly 20 years ago; and,
- Maine now has a forest inventory system that allows us to track the condition of the forest every five years.

In summary, the goal of having Maine forest practices be transparent, informed by experts, and conforming to state-of-the-art procedures is one we share. However, there are better ways to achieve these goals than forming a new board that essentially duplicates existing and ongoing functions as the best way to achieve these goals. This effort must demonstrate what new values, protections, or benefits such a board would offer.

I am happy to answer any questions the Committee may have. Thank you.