



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

2 STATE HOUSE STATION
AUGUSTA, MAINE 04333-0002

(207) 287-1400

TTY: Maine Relay 711

Margaret O'Neil

21 Sheila Circle

Saco, ME 04072

Phone: (207) 590-1679

Margaret.O'Neil@legislature.maine.gov

March 20, 2023

Testimony of Rep. Maggie O'Neil

LD 993, An Act to Facilitate Stakeholder Input Regarding Forest Policy in Maine

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry

Good morning, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry, I am Representative Maggie O'Neil of Saco. I am pleased to present to you **LD 993, An Act to Facilitate Stakeholder Input Regarding Forest Policy in Maine**.

Maine is the most forested state in the country with 17.5 million acres of forest. That forest is an extraordinary asset: (1) it cleans our air and our water; (2) it supports an \$8.1 billion forest products industry, which relies on more than 5,000 loggers; (3) it contributes to our \$7 billion tourism industry, including the \$3 billion outdoor recreation sector; and (4) it protects biodiversity and helps mitigate climate change. Maine forest is critical, and it becomes more important every day.

Mainers have a long history of having access to the forest to recreate and hunt, thanks to the generosity of private landowners. Our north woods is synonymous with remote hunting, fishing, canoeing, and hiking. Perhaps in part because of that access, we might take the forest for granted, forgetting how special it is, and thinking it will always be here.

Despite being largely privately owned, the forest is vitally important to all of us.

Maine's north woods sit at the heart of the Acadian-Northern Appalachian Forest, the largest and most intact temperate forest in the world. It holds at least 139 rare plants and animals, 21 of them globally rare. Maine is home to the only population in the U.S. of endangered Atlantic Salmon—an anadromous fish whose life cycle begins in the cold, clear waters of our forest. That water supports one of only two U.S. populations of native, wild Arctic Charr—the other population is in Alaska. Maine is the last stronghold for native and wild Brook Trout, with 97% of the

remaining lake and pond population. Maine's north woods also make up the largest Globally Important Bird Area in the continental United States.

Because of its size and intact quality, it is critical to addressing the two most threatening issues of our time: climate change and biodiversity loss. You are all well familiar with the impacts of climate change, from drought to storm damage to sea level rise. Our forest helps mitigate climate change and its impacts by absorbing 60% of Maine's carbon pollution each year. Recent studies find that it could have even more of an impact.

An equally important issue is biodiversity loss. Biodiversity is the variety of animals, plants, fungi, and microorganisms that live and work together in ecosystems. It is a delicate balance that maintains and supports life on Earth. Biodiversity is greatly at risk. Thus, our resilience as a species and planet is at risk. Since the 1970s, the North American bird population has plummeted by 3 billion birds. Worldwide, the insect population has dropped 40% in the same time frame. The threat to us all, especially to our food systems, is enormous.

Today, Maine's forest and our industries that depend on it face serious challenges. We lose 10,000 acres a year to development. Wood markets are constantly changing, and numerous factors including changing climate, an aging workforce, and other challenges facing loggers threaten wood supply. Last week, the Jay paper mill closed for good, and Katahdin Forest Products closed one mill, citing lack of supply of cedar. Drought, fire, invasive insects, and disease are all serious threats to the future of the forest, along with the growing demand for second homes in remote places. That's why we need to look at the forest in its entirety—as habitat, as a carbon sink, as a source of forest products, as a recreation destination.

The challenges that threaten the future of our forests are complex and important. It is a time-tested approach to bring people together who have different expertise and points of view to talk about solutions.

This bill creates a public stakeholder group to bring together diverse perspectives and expertise to advise the Maine Forest Service on challenges that threaten the future of our forests. The group would be made up of 21 stakeholders including landowners, loggers, sportspeople, biologists, tribal representatives, and conservationists. The group will meet each year to (a) look at the forest as a whole, (b) monitor trends and conditions, (c) make recommendations to the Maine Forest Service, and (d) shape the state's Forest Action Plan.

This is a time-tested approach, both in Maine and across the country. Similar advisory councils at the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife and the Maine Department of Marine Resources date back to 1929 and 1954, respectively. There are about 90 similar advisory committees scattered across Maine state government, including the Climate Council. Fifteen

other states have forest advisory boards, including neighboring New Hampshire. As the most forested state in the nation, why wouldn't Maine also want a consistent, public stakeholder forum to gather input and discuss solutions?

I'd like to address what the bill does not do. It does not impose solutions. It does not give policymaking authority to the board. It does not seek a staff and budget. It does not replicate an existing effort by the Maine Forest Service. Instead, it creates, for the first time, a consistent public forum to comprehensively discuss Maine forest and its challenges.

I am open to a discussion of exactly which stakeholders should serve on the board, and how they are named. What is important is that we look at and discuss in an open forum all the aspects of the forest: (a) its importance to our economy and working families; (b) its role in providing habitat; (c) its importance to our clean air, clean water, and climate change mitigation; and (d) the very real threats to its future.

You don't know what you've got until it's gone. Maine's forest is too important to take for granted. Passing LD 993 is one small step we can take to ensure the health and well-being of Maine forest before it's too late.

Thank you.