

**Testimony of Behalf of the University of Maine System
Presented by Samantha Warren, Director of Government Relations
In Support of LD 1021, *An Act to Enhance Awareness of Laboratory
Testing of Ticks for Lyme Disease* – March 20, 2023**

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry: My name is Samantha Warren and I am the Director of Government Relations for Maine's public universities.

In 2014, the Legislature and voters statewide generously funded the construction of the University of Maine Extension Diagnostic and Research Laboratory (DRL), which brings together under one roof world-class aquatic animal health research, veterinary diagnostic services, plant disease testing, insect identification, and tick identification and pathogen testing.

Since opening in 2018, each year the tick lab has received an increasing number of samples from Mainers who want to know the type of tick they have encountered and what diseases it may carry. This surge in demand for the lab's services has been driven both by climate change expanding ticks' range and resilience, and people spending more time outdoors. In 2022, 5,274 ticks were submitted to the lab from 380 Maine communities, and more than half tested positive for at least one pathogen, including 43.5% of submissions being positive for the causative agents of Lyme.

As this Committee is aware, an annual appropriation of \$250,000 directly supports the operations of the tick lab (less than the \$500,000 initially proposed by Gov. Mills). This important ongoing State investment enables us to charge just \$15 for the testing of each tick for the causative agents of Lyme disease, anaplasmosis, babesiosis, Rocky Mountain spotted fever, ehrlichiosis, tularemia and hard tick relapsing fever. This nominal fee is significantly less than other public universities charge, including the University of Connecticut (\$87-\$127) and the University of Massachusetts (\$50-\$200).

Starting next month, our lab will raise its tick testing fee to \$20 to cover the increasing cost of materials (reagents, tubes, plates, pipettes, etc.) and to further expand our testing panels to also detect the pathogens for Powassan virus and heartland virus. Cases of Powassan virus have been reported in Maine for more than two decades and have recently resulted in several human fatalities. While no human cases of heartland virus have been reported in Maine, the virus has been detected widely in Maine wildlife and we want to be proactively monitoring for those pathogens which may emerge in humans in the near future.

We appreciate Rep. Smith's recognition that our tick lab is a critical state asset, and her commitment to expanding public awareness and investment. While the University of Maine System did not request a funding increase for the lab in the FY24-25 biennial budget, if the Committee wants to further support the lab as LD 1021 proposes, one option is to increase its annual appropriation by at least \$30,000. Depending on the Legislature's timing, this amount could mitigate our need to increase tick testing fees and help us continue to maintain affordable access to testing so Mainers can take proactive steps to engage their healthcare providers and seek necessary treatment earlier. We welcome other ideas and investment to enhance and expand the essential services our lab provides Maine people.

Thank you for your continued commitment to University of Maine Cooperative Extension and to Maine's public universities.