

April 27, 2023

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Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs

RE: LD 212 - An Act to Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue to Upgrade Municipal Culverts at Stream Crossings

Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs, my name is Kaitlyn Nuzzo and I am the Government Relations Director for The Nature Conservancy in Maine. **I appreciate this opportunity to testify in support of LD 212, An Act to Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue to Upgrade Municipal Culverts at Stream Crossings.** We would like to thank Representative Fay for bringing this important legislation forward.

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is a nonprofit conservation organization dedicated to conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends. Guided by science, we create innovative, on-the-ground solutions to our world's toughest challenges so that nature and people can thrive together. We use a collaborative approach that engages local communities, governments, the private sector, and other partners. The Nature Conservancy has been leading conservation in Maine for more than 60 years and is the 12th largest landowner in the state, owning and managing roughly 300,000 acres. We also work across Maine to restore rivers and streams, partner with fishermen in the Gulf of Maine to rebuild groundfish populations, and develop innovative solutions to address our changing climate.

LD 212 provides funds for a very popular competitive grant program, the Municipal Stream Crossing Upgrade Grant Program. The program matches local funding for the upgrade of municipal culverts at stream crossings in order to improve fish and wildlife habitats, increase community safety, and ensure regional economic vitality.

Under this grant program, eligible project sponsors include local governments, municipal conservation commissions, soil and water conservation districts, and private nonprofit organizations. Culverts are an essential but often overlooked element of Maine's transportation infrastructure. They provide water passage and drainage beneath roads and crossings and serve as connectors for fish and wildlife. Unfortunately, most culverts in Maine were designed to meet standards from 50+ years ago and are not keeping up with the current realities of our storm patterns. As a result, they are rapidly deteriorating, putting fish and wildlife habitats, as well as community safety, at risk. The provisions of the existing Grant Program for "Stream Smart" structures are essential to include in replacement crossings, and the funding provided through this program is the key element allowing communities to upgrade their roadways.

According to TNC data, there are over 3,000 aquatic "barriers" on municipal, paved roads across Maine – culverts that are undersized or "hanging" and therefore limiting fish passage and at high risk for washout and failure. The Municipal Stream Crossing Upgrade Grant Program, managed by the Maine Department of Environmental

Protection since 2015, has demonstrated success in addressing these barriers. Since its inception, the grant program has offered 6 competitive grant rounds, with a 7th round under review as we speak. Each round saw high demand for project support from municipalities across the state. While the track record of 172 funded projects is a tremendous demonstration of success, the demand far exceeds the funding available. It is worth noting that the total number of applications over the life of the grant program is double the number of funded projects.

Maine is home to nearly all of the nation's intact native brook habitat, thanks to our clean, cold waters. These fishing spots draw not only Mainers but visitors from far and wide. Brook trout are particularly put at risk by culverts that block their passage, but many other species, from salmon to turtles to deer, depend on uninterrupted stream corridors to traverse the landscape. By upgrading these culverts, we can ensure that Maine's natural resources remain healthy for generations to come.

LD 212 would provide \$50 million in funding for this grant program over five years. This funding would create and support jobs in the areas of construction, engineering, and design work, while also supporting Maine's tourism economy. Moreover, right-sizing these culverts saves towns (and taxpayers) money in the long-term by mitigating future infrastructure needs.

Access to long-term funding allows communities to plan ahead - either to build the resources they need to apply or have the opportunity to reapply if they haven't been selected in a previous round. Moreover, this funding could be used to match additional federal funds. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law included competitive grant programs designed specifically for projects that would meaningfully improve or restore passage for anadromous fish, making Maine well poised to receive millions of federal dollars to Maine DOT for this work.

We recognize that general fund bond bills face a highly competitive environment in the Legislature. We urge the Committee to ensure there will be some infusion of funding into the existing Municipal Stream Crossing Upgrade Grant Program this year, and hope to work with you on what that may look like before the session concludes. Anecdotally, my staff team has heard repeatedly from the communities and partners they work with in the field - many people rely on this grant and are concerned that existing funding has been exhausted.

In conclusion, I urge you to support LD 212 and to provide the necessary funding for the upgrade of municipal culverts at stream crossings throughout Maine. This bill is critical to ensuring the health of our state's natural resources, protecting our communities from flooding and extreme weather, and creating and supporting jobs in the areas of construction, engineering, and design work. Thank you for your consideration.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of LD 212. I would be happy to answer questions the Committee may have in time for the work session.