

My name is Joe Horn, and I am from Gouldsboro. I am a co-founder and Registered Maine Guide at Maine Outdoor School, L3C, based in Milbridge. Please note that Maine Outdoor School, founded in 2016, is not affiliated with the Maine Outdoor School For All that was organized to support this bill.

This bill is an incredible opportunity for Maine, and I thank those who have worked hard to bring this bill forward. Thank you Senator Ingwersen, Representative Plueker, and esteemed committee members for the opportunity to speak.

I am testifying against the bill LD 1817 as presented and would like to see changes made to the bill to make it more inclusive to the diversity of outdoor education opportunities and needs around the state. **Specifically, we'd like to expand the definition of "outdoor program provider" mentioned in section 5301, Line 14, as well as address the program structure mentioned in section 5303, line 32.**

Outdoor education is critical to the well-being of all Maine children. As a business that has been providing outdoor educational experiences to youth in Downeast Maine for 7 years, Maine Outdoor School has first-hand knowledge of the impact that outdoor experiences have on youth.

I care about this bill because outdoor education is vital in providing real-world, place-based experiences aligned with school curriculum to fuel deeper learning and engagement, build a sense of place to help our students root in this great state, and, as a result, stimulate a Maine economy based on one of our state's greatest assets: the outdoors.

The literature broadly defines outdoor education and environmental education as being provided by overnight and day programs, formal and non-formal programs, institutions that are non-profit, for profit, or public entities. These run the gamut of educational activities in and around schools led by school faculty or an outside organization, field trips to nature centers, hiking trails, hatcheries, natural history museums, and countless others. Outdoor education in delivery is necessarily highly diverse, adaptive, and multi-faceted—in short, as any rural Mainer knows, it takes a village.

Maine Outdoor School is incorporated as an L3C, or low-profit limited liability corporation. We founded our business specifically with the goal of bringing together public, private, and governmental organizations across the state to provide hands-on, standards-aligned outdoor education exactly as our community members, teachers, principals, and superintendents need and request. Our intricate and broad web of collaborations brings together land trusts, hatcheries, non-profits, school districts,

homeschool groups, public libraries, youth groups, and more to provide a diverse suite of educational offerings on public and private lands both on and off school campuses truly for learners of all ages

However, within the definition of outdoor program provider outlined in this bill, Maine Outdoor School would not qualify. **This narrow focus on 501c3's ignores the impact that mission-focused businesses have on Maine's economy, and the ability of such businesses to provide quality outdoor experiences for our youth.**

This is demonstrated by the fact that in 2022 alone we partnered with 15 organizations and 16 public schools where our *two* outdoor educators provided primarily weekly outdoor school experiences to over 1,300 youth in Downeast Maine, while directly receiving no grant support. We often see the same students in our community year after year for these regular outdoor school program series, watching them build positive connections with their communities and getting even more excited to come to school, especially on outdoor school days

In short, considering the small size of our staff and limited funding, Maine Outdoor School, L3C has a disproportionately high impact on the outdoor education sector in the State of Maine and this bill, as presented, would not assist those Hancock and Washington County schools who rely on the intricate community of outdoor education opportunities that we have knit together

We also are concerned about the program structure detailed in section 5303, line 32. We believe that outdoor education should be more inclusive than the exclusive focus of "overnight experiences" this bill promotes. Research shows that *regular*, outdoor learning experiences in a child's home ecosystem—whether that's their backyard or their schoolyard—is what builds a deep and lasting connection to place, builds lasting changes in environmental ethics and behavior, improves test scores, and decreases student absenteeism

A single 3-4-night outdoor learning opportunity in a child's entire K-12 experience is not adequate to make a long-term change in students' attitudes, knowledge, or behaviors. These experiences, while absolutely important, especially from a social-emotional development perspective, must be complemented with regular outdoor learning experiences close to home. Failure to do so has actually been shown to have harmful effects on students' sense of the environmental and cultural significance of their own home area, potentially leading to kids growing up and leaving the area

In an article published by the Harvard Graduate School of Education, environmental psychologist Louise Chawla found that frequent contact with nature can reduce symptoms of attention-deficit disorder and increase memory, and is also associated with lower rates of depression. They found that frequent, close-to-home experiences were one of the best tools to connect kids to nature.

By limiting outdoor experiences to overnight opportunities, this bill would limit the power and impact of outdoor education. Outdoor education becomes an isolated adventure rather than an integrated part of their educational experience, one that connects them to their local ecosystems.

After one of our 10-week program series of just an hour a week in the schoolyard, a Hancock County Kindergarten teacher told us, "As kindergarteners, being outdoors is now permanently in their memory as a positive experience, I know they want to be outdoors more in their yards at home and out and about in their community because of this opportunity they have had. I will continue this weekly outdoor time on my own knowing how much the kiddos look forward to it each week."

By limiting the definition of outdoor education program provider to 501c3's with overnight facilities, this bill is limiting the overall impact that the Outdoor School for All Maine Students program will have. The broad goals of this bill would be better achieved with a more inclusive definition of outdoor education program provider to include the full scope of environmental education programs (not just 501-c3s, and not just ones with overnight facilities which disproportionately benefit the more populated, affluent communities in southern Maine and along the coast where most of these facilities exist). We believe that the funds from a bill like this should be made available to *schools* to use for outdoor education opportunities as fits their school's needs, location, and community interests best—be that day or overnight programs, field trips, teacher professional development, or the funding of an outdoor classroom on the school campus, to name a few possibilities. Thank you.

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