



**Testimony from University of Maine Cooperative Extension
Presented by Ryder Scott, Executive Director of 4-H Camp and Learning Centers
In Support of LD 1817, *An Act to Support Outdoor Education by Establishing
the Outdoor School for All Maine Students Program* – May 10, 2020**

Senator Ingwerson, Representative Plueker and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry My name is Ryder Scott As Executive Director of the University of Maine Cooperative Extension's 4-H Camps and Learning Centers, I am here to speak in support of expanding access to transformational outdoor education and experiences for Maine youth, as proposed by LD 1817, *An Act to Support Outdoor Education by Establishing the Outdoor School for All Maine Students Program*

For more than a century, UMaine Extension has connected Maine youth to the state's outdoors through hands-on learning and leadership development, originally focused on agricultural methods and life skills Our efforts prepare young Mainers for future success, building their self-awareness and confidence, introducing them to exciting careers and service opportunities in important industries like farming, forestry, fisheries, outdoor recreation and tourism, and inspiring a respect and commitment to stewardship of our state's precious natural resources

UMaine Extension's 4-H Youth Development programs are a cornerstone of this important work, serving over 20,000 youth annually through 4-H clubs in every Maine county, and our four 4-H camp and learning centers in St George, Woodstock, Princeton and Lincolnville For more than 40 years, these 4-H Centers have played a critical role providing outdoor and natural resources education for Maine's public schools Together with our peer institutions in the Maine Outdoor School for All network, we currently provide around 20% of Maine public school students with overnight, immersive programming with their classmates at our outdoor school sites

Evidence demonstrates that outdoor school experiences are beneficial for students' academic performance, as well as their physical and social-emotional wellness LD 1817 would make life-changing opportunities like these available to all Maine students, regardless of the socioeconomic status of their family or their school district This week I heard from the superintendent of RSU 56 in Dixfield, where each spring the fifth grade comes to Bryant Pond 4-H for a multi-day program She told me that without this bonding experience her students would struggle with the transition to Dirigo Middle School In the mid-coast, through their experience at Tanglewood, science comes alive as fifth graders at Captain Albert Stevens School connect a classroom vernal pools unit to field science studying amphibians' adaptations for breathing

We are humbled that our fellow organizations in the Maine Outdoor School for All Network have proposed that we lead and administer this new program, and that so many in the Legislature agree with this approach With our expertise, experience and statewide resources and relationships, UMaine Extension is uniquely positioned if LD 1817 moves forward to partner with Maine schools and other outdoor school organizations to develop and further expand high-quality, immersive programs with equitable access for all As many of you know, a similar statewide outdoor school program was implemented in Oregon following passage by the Legislature there in 2015-16 and funding through lottery proceeds Oregon State University Extension Service runs that initiative

However, I must be clear that the appropriations priorities of the University of Maine System and UMaine Extension remain our requests included in Governor Mills' biennial budget, including increased funding that advances affordable access for Maine students to our public universities, sustains our operations amidst tremendous inflationary pressures, expands research and innovation that grows Maine's economy, and improves our aging infrastructure. Any funding for Outdoor School for All must supplement, and not supplant, those mission-critical investments.

UMaine Extension views Outdoor School for All as a strategic next step in our own service to the state, especially as it relates to strengthening and growing our natural resource based economy and dependent rural communities. Through this initiative, we will be able to more equitably educate, engage and empower Maine youth for the future, ensuring they are better prepared for college, career and civic success. There is no better classroom than the Maine outdoors.

Thank you for your continued commitment to UMaineExtension and to Maine's public universities. I look forward to taking your questions.