

Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs
c/o Office of Fiscal and Program Review
5 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333

May 17, 2023

Dear Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit comments on the change package to LD 258, An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2023, June 30, 2024 and June 30, 2025, specifically, Language Part JJJJJ, on behalf of Maine Audubon and our 30,000 members, supporters, and volunteers.

Part JJJJJ would transfer \$10 million from the unappropriated surplus of the General Fund to the Department of Transportation, Infrastructure Adaptation Fund, Other Special Revenue Funds account for “culvert, resilience and adaptation investments through municipal grants and matching funds for federal projects.” Maine Audubon supports this part of the change package because it would continue a successful initiative to enhance and restore rivers, streams, fish and wildlife habitat, and allow communities to better prepare for extreme storms and floods by investing in stream crossing infrastructure like culverts that often pose as a barrier for fish and wildlife movement.

- Water resources are vital to Maine wildlife. 85% of species either live in aquatic habitats throughout their lives or use these aquatic habitats or the habitat adjacent to them throughout the course of a year to find food, water, breed, and travel.
- Surveys of culverts around the state have found that nearly 90% of culverts pose a barrier for fish and wildlife at some part of the year or the animal’s life cycle, and about 40% are severe barriers.
- Barriers are most frequently caused by a culvert that is too small and has concentrated the water flowing through it (like water through a hose), creating a scour pool downstream resulting in a perched culvert. Moving through a culvert like this requires a swimming or leaping ability that not all fish or wildlife have.

Two of Maine's iconic cold water fish species, the Eastern Brook Trout and federally endangered Atlantic Salmon, are particularly at risk – access to much of the high quality habitat for them is limited by undersized culverts. This can have a significant effect on the long-term economy of Maine.

- Fishing is the most popular outdoor sport in Maine with over 260,000 recreational anglers, generating \$100 million in wages and salaries, \$200 million in retail sales, and \$20 million in tax revenue. Stream fishing is an important mainstay in many rural economies throughout the state.
- Replacing undersized culverts can reconnect stream habitat, allowing reoccupation of habitats cut off by poor crossing structures. It also increases survival by allowing fish to reach cold water during the heat of summer, spawning habitat for reproduction, and feeding habitats throughout the year.

For local municipalities, funding would provide an opportunity to protect roadway infrastructure and public safety in the face of likely increases in the severity and frequency of storm events.

- Undersized culverts put roads at increased risk of washout, creating serious safety and financial hazards. Road washouts endanger motorists and can cut areas off from emergency services.
- The cost of fixing a washed out road can be many times greater than the cost of upgrading a culvert to prevent a washout.
- Based on data collected from 1948-2011 at more than 3,000 weather stations, it is estimated that Maine will see a 74% increase in the frequency of extreme storm events and a 23% increase in size in the largest annual storms.

In light of these issues, Maine Audubon, in collaboration with a large group of state, federal, and nongovernmental partners, launched a program called Stream Smart, which organizes workshops to train road professionals on how and why to install and replace culverts with science-based solutions.

- Stream Smart solutions let the stream act like a stream, last longer than undersized crossings, reduce the risk of road washouts, and save money in the long run.
- The concept of creating rightly-sized road/stream crossings is one that is easily understood and strongly supported by workshop attendees.

- The primary difficulty faced in actually implementing culvert upgrades, as expressed at these workshops, is the upfront cost.

Funding for municipal culvert replacement and upgrade would ensure funds for the upfront costs of these needed infrastructure improvements across Maine; help communities prepare for extreme storms and flood events; conserve wildlife and wildlife habitat for future generations of Maine citizens; and allow the state to access federal funds.

We encourage the Committee to include this important initiative in the final change package. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Francesca Gundrum', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Francesca "Ches" Gundrum
Policy Advocate