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***Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations & Financial Affairs***

***RE: LD 256 - Change Package to the Biennial Budget, with attention to Provisions  
Relating to Culvert Infrastructure and Climate Resilience***

Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations & 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 the "Change Package" to LD 258 and this latter part of the Biennial Budget. Specifically, our testimony today relates to Language Part JJJJ and its corresponding initiative in the Highway Fund.** This is the initiative that relates to the funding and transfer of the Municipal Stream Crossing Upgrade Grant Program.

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.

Today we strongly support Language Part JJJJ (found on Page 55), which relates to the Municipal Stream Crossing Upgrade Grant Program, better known as the municipal culvert program. As Commissioner Figueroa outlined earlier this week, this proposal strengthens the culvert program by transferring it from the Department of Environmental Protection to the Department of Transportation's Infrastructure Adaptation Fund with a \$10 million transfer from General Fund unappropriated surplus. This move will ensure the program has the staffing and engineering expertise to be most appropriately and efficiently administered with long-term planning in the future.

The culvert program is a competitive grant program that 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, the vast majority of 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.

Moving the program to the DOT's Infrastructure Adaptation Fund with the proposed \$10 million transfer will ensure it is surrounded by the staffing and attention it needs to thrive on behalf of Maine communities. We urge the Committee to support Part Quadruple J and the corresponding initiative found on Page 4 of the Highway Fund.

I would also like to emphasize TNC's support for other initiatives found within the Change package, particularly those relating to climate and resilience, clean power, and sustainable communities.

The Change Package invests \$400 million in Maine's transportation infrastructure, leveraging \$1.2 billion in federal funding that will support state and local transportation systems. These may include resilient bridge and road programs designed to anticipate future climate impacts, in addition to fulfilling a state/federal match that will support programming around clean transit, rail investment, and electric vehicle charging infrastructure, and other areas that make use of federal dollars to benefit Maine.

Recognizing the critical role of energy independence and renewable power in the future, the Change Package also nurtures Maine's emergent off-shore wind industry with \$12 million to develop a deep-water port and funds that support the Maine Offshore Wind Research Consortium. These are critical steps in animating an industry of the future that Maine can be a national and global leader in.

TNC is also supportive of initiatives found throughout the Change Package that invest in the Resilient Water Infrastructure Program, Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Maine Housing's Low-Income Heat Pump Program, the Community Resilience Partnership Program, and coastal monitoring programs overseen by DEP.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of critical provisions within the Change Package. I would be happy to answer any questions from the Committee, and thank you for your time.