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Testimony of Rep. Tavis Hasenfus introducing

LD 2141, An Act to Enhance Protections for and Better Address Invasive Aquatic Plant Infestations in Inland Waters of the State

Before the Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Committee

Good afternoon, Senator LaFountain, Representative Landry and members of the Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Committee. My name is Tavis Hasenfus, and I represent House District 57, which is the communities of Readfield and Winthrop. I am here before you today to introduce **LD 2141, An Act to Enhance Protections for and Better Address Invasive Aquatic Plant Infestations in Inland Waters of the State.**

Maine lakes have significant importance to me, and I strongly believe that the health of our lakes is paramount to the future of our state. I come from a district with approximately 10 great ponds and lakes. These lakes are cherished by residents and visitors alike. We also have one of the most at-risk lakes in the state for invasive aquatic species; Cobbossee Lake is threatened by an infestation of Eurasian water milfoil, variable leaf milfoil and frog bit.

These infestations, if left untreated, will turn our favorite swimming, paddling and boating areas into floating carpets of unnavigable weeds.

The bill before you today will go a long way toward mitigating the spread of invasive and nuisance species. First, the bill allocates $2 million to the Invasive Aquatic Plant and Nuisance Species Fund. This funding will go towards treatment and prevention programs run by the DEP. Because of years of limited or underfunding, the state has struggled to keep up with currently-identified infestations - let alone monitoring to address or prevent future infestations.

Second, this bill tasks the experts within the department with convening stakeholders to develop a plan of action and then implement said plan. Part of this plan of action must be to identify statutory and regulatory changes which are necessary to prevent future spread of invasive and nuisance species in order to protect our inland waters from further outbreaks. Specifically, this bill directs the Commissioners of DEP and IFW and the Interagency Task Force on Invasive Aquatic Plant and Nuisance Species to address

- Best practices for watercraft inspections. This is paramount as watercraft are the vectors responsible for spreading invasives. It is my hope that these experts will be able to develop and implement a plan to review rules and statute and propose changes.
- Ways to improve the current surface use restrictions (SUR). In order to address the threat of invasives, SURs need to be put in place expeditiously. They must also be conspicuous enough to ensure the public does not enter restricted areas. Current protocols are not enough.

Finally, I would ask this committee and the administration to use this bill to address any minor, technical changes that may have been left out in drafting this bill that are necessary to achieve the intended goal of this proposal.

I feel it is worth mentioning that local lake organizations, nonprofits and private parties have invested countless hours and hundreds of thousands of dollars in addressing the threat that invasive species pose. However, the local communities cannot address this threat on their own. The state must step up to address this, because while the problems are localized for now, it takes just one fragment and these invasive species could take root in other waterbodies with devasting effect.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you have for me, but you may wish to save the technical questions for the stakeholders with us today.

Economic Impact of Invasive Aquatic Plants

- **Lakes generate $3.5 billion for the Maine economy annually including 52,000 jobs**

  From Maine DEP Lakes page on Maine.gov website

- **Tax revenues are significant from shoreline properties in many Maine communities**

  Cobbosseecontee Lake Association is researching the transfer tax on lake properties recently sold to determine the potential impact of lost tax revenue. The municipal assessed valuation for each of the 5 towns surrounding Cobbossee has not been updated for 4 or more years. Using the transfer tax data provides a more current projection.

- **An Invasive Eurasian Water Milfoil (EWM) infestation can result in reduced property valuation by up to 19%**

  https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0110458

  The presence of invasive milfoil in a lake results in an "invisible tax" in the real estate market by substantially reducing property value.

- **Invasive aquatic species are the most recently identified threats to Maine lakes and can alter human and wildlife use of a lake permanently**

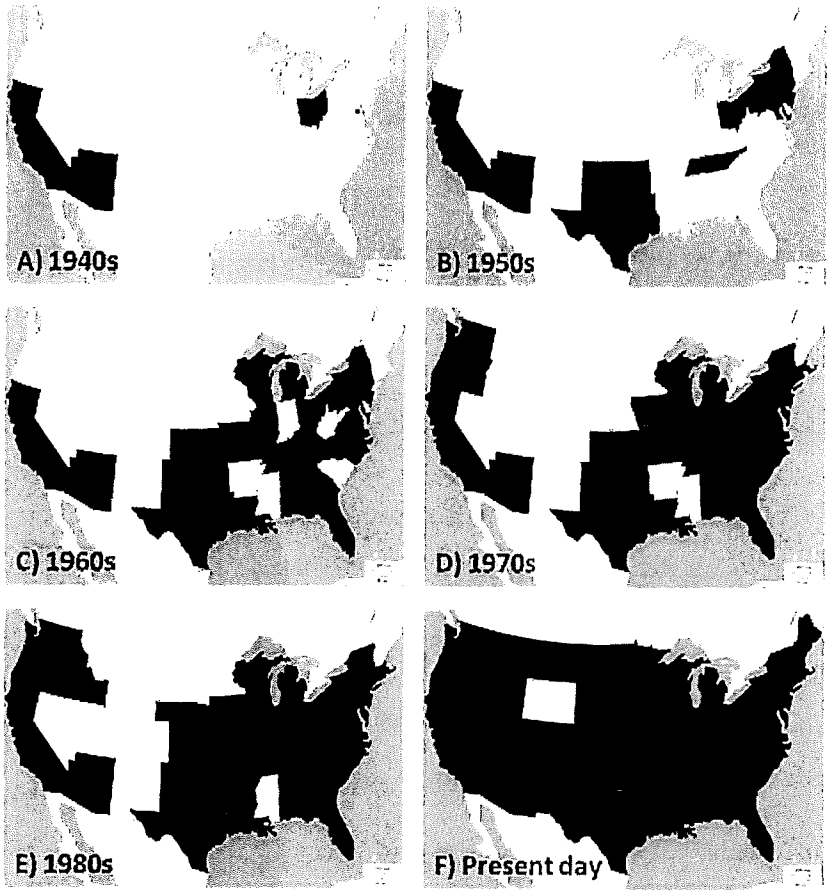
  Invasive plants can lead to the extinction of native plants and animals, destroy biodiversity, and permanently alter habitats.

  In 2000, Eurasian Water Milfoil had been recorded in all states except Maine, Montana, and Wyoming. It is now in Maine, and Cobbosseecontee is ground zero.

Eurasian Water Milfoil (EWM)
The Scary Truth

- Eurasian Water Milfoil, a native plant of Europe and Asia, is a serious threat to lakes and ponds throughout the United States.
- Once it spreads in a large lake, Eurasian Water Milfoil is virtually *impossible to eradicate.*
- It grows rapidly and aggressively, reproducing primarily through fragmentation.
- People accelerate fragmentation. Boats, anchors, fishing lines, paddles, even swimmers can break off pieces of plants which can drift away and re-root elsewhere in the body of water.
- People can also unknowingly transfer Eurasian Water Milfoil from one body of water to another. EWM will "hitchhike" on boats, gear and trailers coming out of one lake and then will re-root when introduced into the next.
- The introduction of one *single* fragment of this plant can result in the infestation of an entire lake.
- The impacts of an infestation have the potential to be devastating.
- EWM grows in extremely dense mats, most often in depths up to 15 feet. These dense mats impair boating, fishing, and swimming.
- In addition to negative impact on recreation, EWM can have negative impact on water quality, native aquatic plants, fish, and shorefront property values.

EURASIAN WATER MILFOIL PROGRESSION



The spread of Eurasian watermilfoil since its first detection in Washington, D.C. in the 1940s to the present, based on herbarium records and literature. EWM has spread from Washington, D.C., California, Ohio, and Arizona in the 1940s to every state except Wyoming in present day. Modified from Couch and Nelson 1985 & USDA Plants database.

2023 # of Lakes Infested with EWM

State	# EWM lakes
Minnesota	>400
New York	>400
Vermont	68
Connecticut	>40
New Hampshire	6
Maine	2

Prevention is The Best Medicine

- Since invasive variable leaf milfoil was first identified in Great Pond, Belgrade, ME, over 2 million dollars have been spent on remediation efforts.
- Variable leaf milfoil (VWM) is the most widely dispersed invasive aquatic plant in the state of Maine, however, Eurasian Milfoil (EWM) is considered to be an even more aggressive competitor. What would happen if EWM became as widely dispersed as VWM?
    - More financial burdens on towns, state agencies, conservation agencies, and private citizens who want to help.
    - Less biodiversity of native plants and all of the wildlife that depend on them.
    - Decreased water quality from large plant patches slowing water flow.
    - Decreased property values.
    - Decreased habitat available for recreation and wildlife.

What can be learned from the Great Pond milfoil story?

- VWM was found in Great Meadow Stream, a popular fishing area, in 2010.
- Right away, we asked Maine-DEP and IFW for a Surface Use Restriction (SUR) to prohibit motorcraft from entering the infested stream.
- While SURs are supposed to be "temporary" the duration is not specified. Therefore, we have applied for an SUR every year since 2012.
- Having the SUR has been crucial in minimizing the spread of VWM within Great Pond and beyond.
- Over 50% of Great Pond is "littoral habitat" i.e. where aquatic plants can grow. Since 2012, only three single rooted plants have been found outside the known infestation.
- While some think of "eradication" as being the only form of success- keeping the infestation to 0.03% of the total area of Great Pond has been a major accomplishment.
- What would happen without the SUR?
    - VWM would spread to new areas within Great Pond and to other waterbodies.
    - VWM reproduces through fragmentation and root division.
    - While fragments are generated naturally, a motorboat chopping up plants increases fragmentation exponentially.
    - Each 1 inch fragment can develop into an entirely new plant!

Paddlecraft only and private launches contribute to spread

- Most boats access lakes and ponds through public boat launches where Courtesy Boat Inspectors are often stationed.
- Our two current infestations in the Belgrade Lakes Watershed were both introduced through small paddlecraft launches and/or private launches.
- Both launches are heavily used by duck hunters and bait fishers.