



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

March 6, 2024

RE: LD 2225, *An Act to Provide Funding to Rebuild Infrastructure Affected by Extreme Inland and Coastal Weather Events*

Dear Sen. Rotundo, Rep. Sachs, and Members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee:

My name is Francesca Gundrum and I am Maine Audubon's Policy Advocate. Maine Audubon is a wildlife conservation non-profit – we fulfill our mission to “conserve Maine’s wildlife and wildlife habitat” by engaging people of all ages in nature through a science-based approach to education, conservation, and advocacy. On behalf of Maine Audubon and our 30,000 members, supporters, and volunteers, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in favor of LD 2225, *An Act to Provide Funding to Rebuild Infrastructure Affected by Extreme Inland and Coastal Weather Events*.

As the climate warms, Maine will continue to endure drastic shifts in temperature, intense drought periods, wildfires, sea level rise, biodiversity decline, catastrophic flooding and storms, and more. All of these consequences of climate change impact human and wildlife communities. Recent and extreme flooding events over this past winter are dangerous and perfect examples of the changes we face. **Thankfully, with Governor Mills’ bold assessment of what is needed at this critical moment, we have an opportunity to help fix what has been broken *and* responsibly plan for what is ahead through LD 2225.**

This bill would authorize the transfer of \$50,000,000 from the Maine Budget Stabilization Fund to the Department of Transportation, Infrastructure Adaptation Fund, Other Special Revenue in order to help address significant public infrastructure damage after this winter’s severe storm events. This funding would help repair existing culverts, upgrade storm water systems, and reduce coastal and inland flooding impacts, among other public infrastructure projects.

This winter’s storms revealed just how important it is for us to build and maintain public infrastructure that works with, not against, free-flowing – *and sometimes fast-moving* – water. When

roads, bridges, stormwater systems, and culverts catastrophically fail – *as we saw too many times in too many places this winter* – it’s bad for fish, wildlife, budgets, and public safety.

Maine Audubon has been aware of these issues for years. In 2011 we joined a large group of state, federal, and nongovernmental partners and launched a program called Stream Smart, which uses science-based solutions to protect road infrastructure and enhance fish and wildlife passage all at the same time. Stream Smart provides data and maps of the status of existing culverts and bridges across the state and organizes workshops to train road professionals on how and why to install and replace undersized road-stream crossings with more effective crossings, and assists towns with financial and technical support to safeguard their crossing. 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.

Investing in Maine’s stream crossing infrastructure like larger, upgraded culverts will have significant benefits for Maine’s wildlife and habitats because surveys show that most existing culverts pose some kind of barrier for fish and wildlife. **It is not enough for us to build back what we had – we must build back *smarter*.**

- Water resources are vital to Maine wildlife. Maine has the best remaining stream habitat for both wild Brook Trout and Atlantic Salmon, and 85% of vertebrate species use the habitat adjacent to aquatic habitats 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. When wildlife habitat is fragmented like this, it can result in population declines and the loss of species.
- Barriers are caused by a culvert that is too small, crushed or blocked, or perched above the streambed. A too small culvert can concentrate the water flowing through it (like water through a hose), creating a scour pool downstream, and often leaving the outfall far above the streambed. Moving through a culvert like this requires a swimming or leaping ability that not all fish or wildlife have.

Thoughtfully repairing existing crossings and building more resilient culverts across the landscape serves Maine people just as much as it does fish and wildlife. The primary difficulty faced in actually implementing culvert upgrades, as expressed at Stream Smart workshops, is the upfront cost. This bill would provide an opportunity to better protect roadway infrastructure and public safety in the face of more severe and frequent 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.

Funding projects to help Maine build back what we've lost and better prepare for what is ahead in *smarter* ways will help communities – wildlife and human – adapt to our changing climate. For all that call Maine home, we encourage the Committee to support this bill. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Francesca "Ches" Gundrum
Policy Advocate