



Maine Coast Heritage Trust

A Statewide Land Conservation Organization

Senator Grohoski, Representative Perry, and members of the Taxation Committee, my name is Jeff Romano. I appreciate this opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of Maine Coast Heritage Trust (MCHT) in support of LD 2251, with an amendment.

Maine Coast Heritage Trust conserves and stewards Maine's coastal lands and islands for their renowned scenic beauty, ecological value, outdoor recreational opportunities, and contribution to community well-being. We provide statewide conservation leadership through our work with land trusts, coastal communities, and other partners. Over the past four decades, we have worked to conserve more than 185,000 acres in Maine.

The bill does a good job of streamlining, simplifying, and updating the existing law. In addition, it calls on the Governor to propose uses for the fund as part of the next biennial budget. Our understanding is that the administration would like to amend the bill, by directing 50% of mining tax revenues to the Land for Maine's Future program (LMF), with other percentages going to address local needs and the General Fund. However, rather than directing money to the General Fund, we recommend the committee increase LMF's percentage accordingly.

When the legislature established the Mining Excise Tax in 1981, they created the Mining Excise Tax Trust Fund, outlined a Board of Directors to oversee the fund, dedicated a significant percentage of the tax revenues to the fund, and specified that the funds needed to "purchase and develop land or other real property interests for park and recreational uses," "purchase wildlife habitats, marine habitats, and unique natural areas," or "restore the quality of marine waters, lakes, rivers, and streams."

Although never implemented due to a lack of mining, the concept of investing in land conservation to offset the environmental impacts of mining made sense in 1981. It continues to make sense today. Fortunately, in 2024 the legislature does not need to rely upon a Mining Excise Tax Trust Fund to achieve these goals. Instead, dedicating those funds to the LMF program would make the most sense. LMF has a long history of accomplishments, strong track record of professionalism, and enjoys broad public support.

Lastly, although land conservation is exceptionally popular, I know that some residents continue to have reservations about property tax impacts. These reservations are often based on the mistaken belief that all conserved lands are off the tax rolls. More than 55% of the state is subject to current use taxation, where commercial forest landowners, private woodlot owners, farmers, and others pay reduced property taxes, as allowed under the Maine Constitution. Nearly 95% of the lands conserved by Maine land trusts have remained on the tax rolls and are enrolled in these same programs, subject to the same tax rates. On most of the state's other conserved lands, the land trust or government landowner makes payments in-lieu taxes that results in similar or greater financial support to the municipality.

We encourage the committee to vote ought to pass as amended. Directing funds to LMF will help this popular program meet the conservation priorities of Maine people.