



**Testimony Presented by Curtis Bohlen, Director of the Casco Bay Estuary Partnership,
on behalf of the University of Maine System, in Support of A-634 in Governor's Proposed
FY26-27 Biennial Budget (LD 210) – Feb. 6, 2025**

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, Senator Tepler and Representative Doudera, and members of the Appropriations Committee and Committee on Environment and Natural Resources:

I am Curtis Bohlen, Director of the Casco Bay Estuary Partnership. I am here today to provide an overview of the essential work we do on behalf of Maine's people, environment and economy, and the critical importance of the ongoing \$35,000 annual appropriation, which the Governor's budget proposal continues in FY26-27 (see A-634).

The Casco Bay Estuary Partnership (CBEP) is a National Estuary Program, one of twenty eight around the country. We are a part of the Catherine Cutler Institute at the University of Southern Maine, and thus part of the University of Maine System. The Legislature has provided funding to CBEP since 1997. The \$35,000 in State funding that CBEP has received annually since 2003 provides a critical portion of the one-to-one non-federal match required for us to continue to receive National Estuary Program funds. Last year, that State investment helped bring in over \$1.6 million in federal funds.

We work on four major priority areas:

1. Habitat protection and restoration;
2. Water quality;
3. Community engagement, climate resilience and local assistance; and
4. Mobilizing knowledge and resources to support regional collaboration.

Like all National Estuary Programs, at heart we are a collaboration. The Partnership includes municipalities, citizen organizations, federal and state agencies, academics, businesses, and individuals. We work together on behalf of Casco Bay, but also on behalf of the communities and the lakes, rivers, and streams in the Casco Bay region. Last year our partnerships leveraged almost \$19 million in local, state, and federal funds to address water-related needs.

We are science based, watershed focused, and collaborative. We offer a foundation of credible information and strategic oversight. We build consensus and facilitate communications. Some recent successes made possible in part by your investment:

- Thanks to the availability of federal infrastructure funds through the National Estuary Programs, we have commissioned a high-resolution coastal ocean model that will extend from Saco Bay to Boothbay. The model will have direct application to protecting water quality but will also benefit commercial and recreational users of Maine's coastal waters and improve resilience to coastal storms.

- In recent years, we have been able to expand our grant programs to fund local initiatives for land conservation, habitat restoration, and community resilience. We fund community outreach and education programs related to water issues.
- Over the past 25 years, CBEP Habitat Protection Fund Grants have assisted land trusts and municipalities with protection of over 10,000 acres in more than 20 towns. Many of the protected areas have become important regional assets and a boon to residents and the tourism economy.
- Since 2011, our Community Engagement Grants have contributed over \$141,000 to support 63 community-based projects, sponsored by 44 different organizations. Funded projects range from high school marine science projects to community events.
- We have been leading a regional effort to address alarming recent declines in eelgrass in Casco Bay (and in other Maine waters). Working closely with Maine DEP, EPA, and three local nonprofits, we are studying causes of eelgrass decline. We also began a test of eelgrass restoration by collecting, processing, and replanting more than 50,000 eelgrass seeds. If the methods are successful, we should see evidence of new plant growth in the next few months.
- Over the past couple of years, we have leveraged federal funding and local partnerships to support removal of three derelict dams on Frost Gully Brook in Freeport, and two dams in Naples (the Edes Falls and Burgess Brook dams). We worked with the town of Windham to remove a collapsed dam just upstream of Haskell Road on Baker Brook, and aided the towns of Casco, Gorham, and Windham with efforts to replace vulnerable, flood-prone culverts with larger structures that will reduce flooding as well as benefit migratory fish.
- CBEP's staff support state and regional priorities, by participating in local, regional and state-level working groups, boards, and commissions. For example, I served on the Coastal and Marine Working Group of the Maine Climate Council, and I have been a member of Maine's Board of Pesticide Control for more than a decade.
- CBEP brought together members of the Portland harbor community –including environmental advocates, wastewater treatment plant operators, town engineers and others – to engage with Maine DEP and EPA's N-STEPS program to consider the scientific basis for marine water quality criteria for nitrogen pollution in Maine waters.
- CBEP Staff participate in state-level working groups on eelgrass, tidal marsh restoration and ocean acidification. We have been actively involved with DEP's efforts to revise the "Chapter 500" Stormwater rules. We assisted state efforts to develop a best practice guide for design of tidal road crossing – and continue to assist with spreading the word about the valuable handbook that was produced.

The \$35,000 the State dedicates to the Casco Bay Estuary Partnership every year brings significant benefits. The total is small in the context of the State budget, yet it leverages substantial funds from federal and other sources and thereby supports the important services CBEP provides not just to the communities of the Casco Bay region, but the entire state.