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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,
CONSERVATION AND FORESTRY

IN OPPOSITION TO LD 183

An Act to Limit Public Land Ownership in Maine

February 6, 2025

Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, my name is Andy Cutko, and I am the Director of the Maine Bureau of Parks and Lands. I am speaking on behalf of the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF) in opposition to LD 183, "*An Act to Limit Public Land Ownership in Maine.*"

First, I'd like to provide some context on public lands in Maine. Together with federal and municipal-owned lands, state parks and public lands are a vital part of Maine's interwoven recreation, forest products, and tourism economies. They form the backbone of a growing Maine outdoor recreation economy, which contributes 32,000 direct jobs and an estimated \$3.4 billion in value-added economic activity, according to the federal Bureau of Economic Analysis. Maine State Parks, which attract more than 3 million visitors each year, generate an estimated \$250 million in value-added benefits to the state. Maine's Public Lands produce, on average, more than 100,000 cords of wood each year, sustaining jobs in forestry, logging, trucking, and wood products. Moreover, State Parks and Public Lands directly support municipalities. Through 12 MRS 1820, 12 MRS 1840, and 12 MRS 1854, the legislature has provided various mechanisms for revenue sharing with local entities. Moreover, conserved land can generally increase the values of nearby properties, as open space is often seen as an amenity that enhances the desirability of a community.

In addition to the many values of public land ownership, thousands of acres of publicly held working forest conservation easements in Maine perpetuate private ownership and forest productivity while providing wildlife habitat and allowing for public access, including fishing and hunting. In particular, the Land for Maine's Future program has been invaluable in safeguarding public access across the state, including the more populated and developed areas of Southern Maine.

As you review the proposed legislation, note that the definition of publicly owned land is exceptionally broad. Public land ownership would appear to include highways, roads, ballfields,

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sidewalks, and Department of Defense installations, among other land uses. Accordingly, this bill could conceivably require two-thirds legislative approval for a variety of worthwhile purposes. A town, for example, could need legislative authorization to purchase a softball field, expand an elementary school, or purchase land for a maintenance shed. The State could require legislative approval to widen a state road.

We believe the most prudent policy is to allow future acquisitions to be evaluated on their individual merits rather than imposing an arbitrary cap on the amount of public land

Thank you for your time, and I would be glad to answer any questions.