

**Testimony in SUPPORT LD 296, An Act to Appropriate Funds to the
Lake Water Quality Restoration and Protection Fund**

Submitted to Environment and Natural Resources Committee

February 12, 2025



Good afternoon, Chair Tepler, Chair Doudera, and Distinguished Members of the Environment and Natural Resources Committee.

My name is Susan Gallo, and I am the Executive Director of Maine Lakes. Our membership organization includes more than 6,000 supporters, followers, and volunteers as well as 95 Lake Associations and their thousands of members. We are dedicated to our mission of promoting, protecting, and enhancing lake water quality and habitat, and of preserving the ecological, economic, recreational, and aesthetic benefits of Maine's lakes for everyone.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to speak in support of LD 296.

This bill directs \$4 million dollars for the next two years to the Lake Water Quality Restoration and Protection Fund at DEP.

The clean lakes we enjoy today will need more protective action in the future to stay clean, clear and blue. We know that climate change impacts are rapidly putting our lake water quality at greater and greater risk. Warmer water grows algae more quickly. More intense storms bring a larger volume of water flowing across the landscape and into our lakes, bringing unwanted nutrients that feed algal blooms. As these impacts grow, so too do risks to lakes. Local lake associations and watershed organizations already raise millions of dollars to match funds generated by department programs for lake protection work. That model is unsustainable and will not meet future needs.

Investing \$4M to restore and protect Maine's lakes is a smart investment. A recent University of Maine study put an annual value of our Great Ponds (lakes over 10 acres in size) at \$14.4 billion. An investment of \$2 million each year is a tiny fraction of this value, just over 1%, that will pay off many times over by improving the resiliency and long-term health of our lakes for all Mainers. This protects that vital \$14.4 billion value that benefits our state, our municipalities, and our lake communities.

Lakes are a complicated public resource. Great Ponds are a public resource, owned by the people of Maine. Lakes provide important wildlife habitat and endless recreational opportunities for the public, from boating to bird watching to fishing to swimming. They provide drinking water for half of all Mainers. They provide scenic views, great picnic spots, and a booming real estate and rental market.

Yet this public resource, especially in central and southern Maine, is surrounded by highly-developed, privately-owned land. Because lake health is highly affected by the land management practices around its shorelines, lakeside residents end up bearing much of the financial responsibility for keeping our lakes clean and healthy. They fund raise, volunteer, and take action to reduce pollution, stormwater runoff, and invasive species spread. Imagine if this management model was applied to

our state parks and people who lived in the area immediately adjacent to each park were given the responsibility of protecting the park's ecosystem and future health.

The timing is right to fund lake restoration and protection now to avoid catastrophic impacts in the future. A few examples of where funds could be invested in water quality restoration and protection:

- **Projects that Reduce Erosion:** Stormwater runoff over lakeside properties is one of the primary sources of excess phosphorus in many of Maine's lakes and ponds. Excess phosphorus reduces water quality by feeding algae blooms that turn lake waters green, smelly and unsafe. Maine Lakes' LakeSmart program supports volunteer teams that visit lakeside properties to evaluate how well the property manages erosion. After a LakeSmart visit, most property owners receive recommendations for conservation practices, or Best Management Practices (BMPs), that can be implemented on the property to reduce excess erosion.

Since 2019, LakeSmart volunteers have visited over 1,400 properties. They have recommended over 6,900 BMPs to homeowners, an average of almost five BMPs per property. If that average is extrapolated across all our lakeside properties, we know the scope of work to reduce excess erosion is massive, likely many hundreds of thousands of BMPs are needed to protect future lake health.

- **Alum Treatments:** When phosphorus pollution has reached such high levels that reducing external sources of phosphorus through BMPs cannot keep up with internal sources, alum treatment may be warranted to restore water quality. Alum treatments are expensive, often running more than a million dollars. Local communities must raise much of this funding themselves, creating a barrier for alum treatment implementation.
- **Watershed Surveys:** Watershed surveys are an essential step to documenting non-point source pollution and qualifying for federal EPA funds to support the installation of BMPs and other efforts to reduce lake pollution. But lake associations and other community groups who are able to provide the volunteer people-power for these surveys often need additional funding to initiate watershed surveys.
- **Septic System Replacements:** Septic systems at older Maine camps may have rudimentary systems that are close to the lake and not adequately treating sewage. Failing systems on poor soil are jeopardizing lake water quality and human health.

We realize that projects must be prioritized. We urge the committee to discuss the highest priorities for lake protection with DEP staff and bill sponsors. We hope the bill language will prioritize small grants and other methods that incorporate and support the many lake conservation partners that DEP works with and that address the types of problems described above. Getting funding out to community lake groups will not only leverage additional funds, they will better meet the growing challenges of managing health lakes in the decades to come.

I am happy to answer any questions or provide additional information and details. Thank you for supporting this important bill.