



Testimony in Support of LD 296, An Act to Appropriate Funds to the Department of Environmental Protection, Lake Water Quality Restoration and Protection Fund

Before the Committee on Environment and Natural Resources

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Senator Tepler, Representative Doudera, and members of the Environment and Natural Resources Committee, my name is Luke Frankel, and I am the Woods, Waters, & Wildlife Director and Staff Scientist at the Natural Resources Council of Maine (NRCM). NRCM is Maine's leading nonprofit, nonpartisan membership organization dedicated to protecting the environment on behalf of our nearly 24,000 supporters statewide and beyond. I am here today to testify in support of LD 296, An Act to Appropriate Funds to the Department of Environmental Protection, Lake Water Quality Restoration and Protection Fund.

For Mainers, lakes are an integral part of our quality of life. In a recent survey of 768 Maine residents on statewide lake use, 77% reported visiting more than 350 different lakes and ponds over a 12-month period in 2022-2023. On average, these residents took 13.3 single-day trips and 2.6 overnight trips during that year.¹ Lakes not only provide opportunities for fishing, boating, and swimming in the summer, but also skating, ice fishing, and snowmobiling in the winter. Simply put, lakes are where Mainers go to vacation and make memories with family and friends.

Lakes and ponds are also key drivers of Maine's economy. A 2024 study conducted by the University of Maine, Maine Lakes, and the Maine Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) estimated the total net economic value of lakes in Maine to be more than \$14 billion.² This figure takes into consideration recreational use, water consumption, summer camp activity, and lakefront properties. The added property value that lakes provide is particularly important for rural communities across the state that rely on tax revenue from these landowners to fund key functions of local government like emergency services and public education. The economic benefits of lakes are inextricably linked to water quality, making water quality protection as much an economic issue as it is an environmental issue.

Today, lakes in Maine face many water quality threats, including sprawling shoreline development, aging septic systems, camp road and shoreline erosion worsened by climate change, and deforestation. All these factors add excess phosphorus to the water that fuels invasive plant growth and algal blooms. Currently there are 123 lakes observed by Maine DEP to be at risk of having an algal bloom, of which 18 bloom often (annually or near-annually), 40 bloom sometimes (every 2-5 years), and 65 bloom rarely (one year on record).³ Additionally, there are 31 lakes listed as impaired under the Clean Water Act according to Maine DEP's Draft

¹ <https://www.lakes.me/valuing-lakes>

² <https://www.mainebiz.biz/article/maine-lakes-add-14b-per-year-to-economy-new-report-says>

³ <https://www.maine.gov/dep/water/lakes/bloomrisk.html>

2024 Integrated Water Quality Monitoring and Assessment Report.⁴ These numbers are likely to continue to increase in the future as the threats facing lakes continue to grow.

A similar effort to allocate resources to the Lake Water Quality Restoration and Protection Fund was put forth last legislative session through LD 164. This bill originally called for \$9 million to be transferred from the General Fund on an annual basis to support the program, although that request was pared back to a one-time allocation of \$200,000 in Fiscal Year 2025. Although LD 164 eventually passed and \$200,000 was taken from the General Fund and placed into the program, this level of funding is not sufficient to meet the challenges facing our lakes.

In my previous job as an environmental consultant specializing in water resource projects, I came to learn what it cost to perform various watershed planning and restoration projects. Today, the cost of a single watershed management plan can range anywhere from \$100,000-\$200,000, and that just covers planning activities such as watershed surveys, water quality data analysis, modeling, mapping, public outreach, and technical writing. The cost to actually implement the structural recommendations from this planning that will improve water quality – activities such as installing stormwater Best Management Practices (BMPs), planting vegetative buffers, or performing in-lake alum treatments – is often substantially higher than \$200,000. As a result, it should be clear that to make meaningful water quality improvements to the ~50 lakes that bloom frequently or the 31 lakes that are currently impaired under the Clean Water Act, a higher level of funding is needed.

Now more than ever, it is crucial to continue funding projects that protect the water quality of our lakes. In Maine, lake protection is as much a cultural and economic issue as it is an environmental issue. For these reasons, we strongly encourage the Committee to vote Ought to Pass on LD 296.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

⁴ https://www.maine.gov/dep/water/monitoring/305b/2024/2024_ME_IntegratedRpt-REPORT-DRAFT.pdf