



Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs  
c/o Office of Fiscal and Program Review  
5 State House Station  
Augusta, ME 04333

February 24, 2025

**RE: LD 210, An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2025, June 30, 2026 and June 30, 2027**

Dear Sen. Rotundo, Rep. Gattine, and Members of the AFA Committee – Sen. Ingwersen, Rep. Meyer, and HHS Members:

My name is Emma Ottenheimer, and I am the Early Childhood Education Manager at Maine Audubon. We are a wildlife conservation non-profit – we fulfill our mission to “conserve Maine wildlife and wildlife habitat” by engaging people of all ages in nature through a science-based approach to education, conservation, and advocacy. On behalf of Maine Audubon and our 30,000 members, supporters, and volunteers, thank you for the opportunity to submit comments on LD 210, specifically, the proposed budget initiatives and language related to the Child Care Wage Supplement Program, the Head Start Funding Program, and the Child Care Employment Award.

At Maine Audubon, we offer developmentally appropriate environmental education for Maine’s youngest learners. Our community preschool programs offer young children opportunities to interact with nature and each other in ways that foster stewardship and empathy, increase science knowledge and cognitive skills, and promote growth and development across learning domains. Throughout these programs and classroom visits we are able to provide hands-on education in a variety of settings including HeadStart programs, Family Childcare Centers, Public PreK classrooms, and Center-based daycares that serve children and families of great diversity in our community.

There is a proposal in LD 210 to cut \$15 million annually from the Child Care Wage Supplement Program. This would significantly reduce the amount that child care educators receive each month to support their wages. We see firsthand the hard work and heart that all early childhood educators place into their jobs and see early learners thrive in a small group environment and with consistent teachers. We’ve observed that teachers who feel supported are more able to take on nature-based learning opportunities, allowing us to continue to foster the next generation of conservation leaders. We encourage the committee to reconsider these cuts.

There is also a proposal to cut \$3.6 million annually from Head Start funding that helps Maine's lowest income families and children access Head Start services and family support. A tenant of place-based environmental education is that all students feel connected to and knowledgeable of their natural surroundings. Maine Audubon has historically partnered with Head Starts and delivered engaging lessons that when paired with the family engagement components of Head Start provides a rich experience for children, teachers and families. Thinking specifically of families who are new to Maine or the United States, having the opportunity to connect with nearby nature is a grounding and community-building experience that all people deserve. We encourage the committee to reconsider this cut.

Finally, there is a proposed cut of \$2.5 million annually to the Child Care Employment Award. This award just started in July 2024 and within three months had a waitlist of child care employees needing to access it. This program was created to help child care employees pay for their own child care and be a unique benefit offered in the child care field to promote recruitment and retention. Throughout Maine Audubon's preschool programs, we've observed that each site is like a small family. When teachers are cared for, they can focus more on environmental enrichment and go deeper with content. We know that young learners are capable, caring and skilled naturalists and conservationists and oppose these cuts that will weaken our impact in the field of early childhood environmental education. Environmental education works best when it starts with our youngest learners.

In order to best support educators and the future generations of Maine, we strongly encourage the committee to reconsider the proposed cuts to the Child Care Wage Supplement Program, the Head Start Funding Program, and the Child Care Employment Award. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Emma Ottenheimer  
*Early Childhood Education Manager*  
Maine Audubon