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Kaitlyn Nuzzo, Government Relations Director
The Nature Conservancy in Maine
kaitlyn.nuzzo@tnc.org



***Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and
Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry***

***RE: LD 210 - Biennial Budget Proposal for the Department of Agriculture,
Conservation and Forestry***

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs, Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, my name is Kaitlyn Nuzzo and I am the Government Relations Director for The Nature Conservancy in Maine. **I appreciate this opportunity to testify in support of the biennial budget proposal for the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry.**

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is a nonprofit conservation organization dedicated to conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends. Guided by science, we create innovative, on-the-ground solutions to our world's toughest challenges so that nature and people can thrive together.

Conservation is at our core, and we are proud to be the 12th largest landowner in the state, owning and managing over 300,000 acres. We work in tandem with our partners at the Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry (DACF) to both advance our conservation work and support their role in planning, conservation, management, and research. Maine's public lands, state parks, and forests are incredible assets that underpin our quality of life and economic opportunities. The Nature Conservancy supports robust funding for DACF and its many divisions and programs.

Specifically, TNC supports the following budget requests:

Bureau of Agriculture – Environmental Licensing Supervisor (0392, page A-59)

This initiative continues and makes permanent a critical position within DACF to implement the recently completed Chapter 575 rules: Permitting Solar Energy Developments on High-Value Agricultural Land. These rules are being finalized and were directed by P.L. 2023, ch.448. The rules establish roles in the permitting and compensation process for DACF and for the Department of Environmental Protection. Our organization has worked carefully on these rules and the program to carefully balance protecting Maine's most valuable natural resources while supporting the rapid deployment of renewable energy. Maintaining and establishing this position as permanent is key to efficiently implementing this program.

Geology and Resource Information (Z237, page A-81)

This section of the budget includes important programs like the Maine Geological Survey (MGS), the Maine Floodplain Management Program (MFMP) and the Municipal Planning Assistance Program (MPAP). TNC fully supports the work of these programs.

We urge the legislature to continue and make permanent two positions within the MPAP program.

Land for Maine's Future (Z162, page A-84)

TNC has been committed to a thriving Land for Maine's Future (LMF) program since it was established by voters in 1987. The program has since conserved more than 610,000 acres of land including working farms, forests, and waterfronts; trails for both motorized and nonmotorized users; water access sites; community parks, and so much more. Four years ago, the legislature approved two limited term positions within the LMF program. This was done to both return the program to its previous level of staffing, after a series of cuts in the 2010s, and to ensure the program had the capacity to effectively implement a 4-year/\$40 million appropriation simultaneously approved by the legislature.

Now, the LMF program has two priority needs. The first is to make permanent these two term limited positions as proposed in this biennial budget. The second is to recapitalize this popular program. LMF has spent or committed nearly all of the \$40M approved by the Legislature in 2021 and needs additional funding to ensure the program continues to deliver for Maine people in 2025 and beyond. Multiple bipartisan legislative proposals will be considered later this session to find and allocate additional funding and we look forward to working with the ACF and AFA Committees to identify the right solution.

Maine Natural Areas Program (Z821, page A-96)

The Maine Natural Areas Program (MNAP) plays a critical role in supporting landowners and land managers by offering comprehensive data and information. MNAP inventories biological features on lands and monitors invasive plant species. This information is vital to TNC and we regularly collaborate and consult with the MNAP team.

This budget proposal initiates a transfer of this program from DACF to the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife. This transfer works in tandem with a bill we anticipate to come before the Legislature soon to shift this program. TNC fully supports this shift and looks forward to continuing to work with MNAP in the future.

Initiatives to make permanent, reclassify and provide range changes for staff positions

The Department of Agriculture, Conservation and forestry is tasked with conservation and management of some of Maine's most important natural resources and lands. We fully support the programs and staff that fall within the Division of Forest Protection (Z232), Forest Resource Management (Z233), Parks (7221), and the Maine Land Use Planning Commission (Z236) and encourage the legislature to approve the various proposals to make key positions permanent, reclassify them or support the range changes requested in this biennial budget.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment in support of the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry's biennial budget proposal. I'm happy to answer questions at any time.