



**Testimony in Support of the Biennial Budget for the Department of Agriculture,
Conservation and Forestry**

**Before the Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs, and the
Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry**

Pete Didisheim, Advocacy Director

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Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, and members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee; Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee. My name is Pete Didisheim. I am the Advocacy Director at the Natural Resources Council of Maine, and I appreciate this opportunity to testify in support of the Governor's proposed budget for the Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry.

At the outset, let me share the view that you have heard from others today that the Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry (DACF) is responsible for programs that are critically important for Maine's economy, environment, and wildlife, and to the people of Maine and those who visit our forests, farms, state parks, trails, and protected lands.

As the state with the highest percentage (89%) of forested lands in the country, the Maine Forest Service is critically important to our forest industry, and the health of Maine's forests and wildlife located in literally every corner of the state. We support the proposed initiatives for the Division of Forest Protection (**A-72 through A-74**).

The Bureau of Agriculture, Food and Rural Resources plays a vital role in working with Maine's farmers and the agricultural sector and also has the important responsibility of being on the frontlines responding to PFAS contamination and helping address climate impacts to agriculture.

NRCM supports the Governor's budget for ongoing expenses related to PFAS response across multiple agencies, including the funding at DACF for abating and mitigating identified contamination and the effects of such contamination, including through testing and monitoring of soil and groundwater, providing access to safe drinking water, and the installation of filter treatment systems (**A-69, A-256, A-341**).

NRCM also strongly supports funding for the Maine Healthy Soils Program, which helps expand the use of best practices to protect native biological diversity and increased atmospheric greenhouse gas removals through agricultural soils (**A-92**).

With the unanimous support of the AFA Committee last year, the Maine Legislature supported and Maine voters overwhelmingly approved a first-ever \$30 million Maine Trails Bond on the November ballot. Those funds will support the design, development, and maintenance of trails for motorized and non-motorized access statewide. The program will be administered by the Bureau of Parks and Lands over the next four years. To assist implementation of the Trails Bond,

the Department has requested continuation of a limited-period Senior Planner position through June 18, 2027. We strongly support this request for a planner who will help design the program, review grant applications, provide technical assistance to trail clubs and grant applicants, and monitor grant implementation **(A-71, A-101)**.

DACF plays a critical role administering the Land for Maine's Future (LMF) program, Maine's most popular and successful land conservation program. We support the request in the budget to continue and make permanent one Office Specialist II position and one Senior Planner position **(A-84)**.

We strongly support the budget request for the Department's Bureau of Parks and Lands (BPL), which is responsible for the stewardship and management of some of Maine's most important and iconic areas, including 48 state parks and historic sites, more than 600,000 acres of Public Reserved Lands, nearly 100,000 acres of Ecological Reserves, and the 92-mile Allagash Wilderness Waterway. We urge your support for BPL's budget, including a request for \$400,000 to improve climate resilience through culvert improvements to protect roads, bridges, fish passage, and recreational access **(A-87)**.

Finally, we urge your support for the budget of the Land Use Planning Commission, which has the important role of serving as the planning and zoning authority for Maine's 10.4 million acres of Unorganized Territories. We support the proposed initiatives for LUPC **(A-93)**.

Thank you for the opportunity to share these comments, and I would be glad to answer any questions you may have.