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**Testimony of Eliza Townsend, Maine Conservation Policy Director  
In support of the biennial budget for Dept. of Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry  
February 27, 2025**

Good morning, Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, and distinguished members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee; Senator Talbot-Ross, Representative Pluecker and distinguished members of the Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee, I am Eliza Townsend, Maine Conservation Policy Director for the Appalachian Mountain Club.

AMC is a people-oriented conservation nonprofit. Our mission is the protection, understanding, and enjoyment of the outdoors. We have 6,200 members in Maine and manage 130,000 acres of forestland in Piscataquis County for multiple use, including sustainable forestry, backcountry recreation, and outdoor education.

We support the budget as it pertains to the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, particularly those initiatives supporting forestry, land use planning, conserving special places, and offering outdoor recreation through parks, public lands, and trails. That said, this is a bare bones budget.

The agencies charged with stewarding our natural resources have rarely seen the funding and staffing that they truly need. We take for granted the services that DACF provides, from protecting our forests to ensuring that Mainers and visitors have access to beautiful places for recreation; from providing reliable scientific information to essential planning and code enforcement for citizens in more than half the state.

Yet the department's work contributes to a forest products sector with an estimated annual impact of \$8.1 billion and a tourism sector with an estimated annual impact of \$7 billion. Maine ranks in the top 5 states for percentage of its GDP derived from outdoor recreation. DACF is central to addressing the most pressing issues of our time: climate change and biodiversity loss.

Since the last biennial budget, the challenges have only grown. Extreme weather events driven by climate change have wrought havoc, and the high cost of housing and the desire to escape busier places have brought increased development pressure. At the same time, bureaus at DACF have struggled to attract and retain qualified staff. At the present moment, the future of the federal funding on which we rely is uncertain.

We applaud the reclassifications, restructurings, and continuations of positions scattered through this budget. We support the creation of the Maine Office of Community Affairs and the transfer of the Maine Natural Areas Program to the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife.

We also urge you to prioritize our natural assets and the people who steward them, making them the center of our economy. Imagine if we fully invested in combatting climate change and

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biodiversity loss by saving 30% of our land by 2030; if we fully invested in scientists, foresters, and forest rangers; if we ensured that the Land Use Planning Commission had the planners and enforcement staff to protect a globally important resource; if we decided that our state parks should be the equal of any in the country.

That might look like increasing salaries, like restructuring positions to allow for flexibility in hiring as well as the daily operations of state parks, like creating career paths for individuals committed to our natural resources, like adding personnel such as Assistant Park Managers at our busiest state parks to ensure the safety and experience of visitors while allowing managers days off in the busiest season, like ongoing investment in our facilities.

We urge support for the baseline budget before you, and we urge you all to think creatively along with department leaders to solve the ongoing challenge of under-investment in this critical agency.