



Natural Resources Council of Maine

3 Wade Street • Augusta, Maine 04330 • (207) 622-3101 • Fax: (207) 622-4343 • www.nrcm.org

Testimony in Support of LD 593, An Act to Extend Funding for the Land for Maine's Future Program

Before the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

Luke Frankel, Woods, Waters, & Wildlife Director

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Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry 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). I am here today to testify in support of LD 593, An Act to Extend Funding for the Land for Maine's Future Program.

A Unique Success Story

The Land for Maine's Future (LMF) program is Maine's most popular and successful land conservation program. Part of what makes LMF so popular is that it is designed to benefit all Mainers regardless of where they live, what they do for work, or how they choose to spend their free time. LMF has funded projects across all 16 counties that conserve land directly in support of local forestry, farming, outdoor recreation, and fishing industries. The program accomplishes this by setting aside specific funds to conserve working forests and waterfronts, farmland, recreational areas, and water access points. Projects funded through LMF's Conservation & Recreation Fund are home to trails that support a variety of uses including hunting, fishing, ATV riding, snowmobiling, hiking, and cross-country skiing.

Since its establishment in 1987, LMF has helped to conserve more than 650,000 acres of land across Maine. This includes more than 330,000 acres of working forests; 9,884 acres of farmland; 158 miles of recreational trails; more than 1,200 miles of shoreline on rivers, lakes, and ponds; and 30 commercial working waterfront properties.¹ Using an approach that begins with applications from local organizations and includes municipal and public engagement, LMF projects are tailored to fit the needs of Maine communities and as a result only occur in places where they are wanted.

A key reason why LMF has been so successful through the years is the one-to-one match requirement where applicants must match every dollar that is provided by the program. This encourages private funding of land conservation in the state, saving taxpayer dollars in land acquisition that will ultimately serve a public benefit. Once acquired, the vast majority of landowners on LMF projects either continue to pay property taxes or make payments in lieu of taxes. These two factors make LMF more economical than other methods of land conservation used in other states.

Tool to Address Current Threats

In recent years, the need for land conservation in Maine has grown. In addition to being a critical component of Maine's climate action plan, land conservation can also serve as a tool to combat other threats facing Maine today. Since the pandemic, Maine has experienced an increase in population that has driven an associated change in land ownership and land use across the state. From 2021 to 2022, Maine's population grew at a rate more than twice the national average,² and this increase is projected to continue

¹ <https://www.maine.gov/dacf/lmf/aboutus.shtml>

² <https://www.pressherald.com/2023/09/14/maines-population-growth-outpaces-national-average/>

in the future.³ This has increased development pressure in rural parts of the state where new homes are being developed on farmland and in working forests and seasonal camps are being converted into year-round residences. Additionally, recent changes in land ownership have caused a rise in the number of parcels and roads that have been posted and gated, threatening Maine's longstanding tradition of public access on private land. In addition to inland parts of the state, this has become an issue for coastal communities as well, where fisherman have lost access to traditional fishing areas. Land conservation programs like LMF can be a part of the solution to address these issues by protecting working lands and public access across the state.

Historical Funding and Current Need

Through the years, funds have been allocated to LMF in a haphazard fashion eight different times, with the program only receiving a fresh set of funding once the prior funding ran out. This included six different bond issues (1987, 1999, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011) and two different general fund appropriations (1998 and 2022). Today, we once again find ourselves in the position of an LMF program in need of a new round of funding.

The bill before you today aims to remedy this through an ongoing \$10 million general fund appropriation. While establishing an ongoing source of funding for LMF is something that needs to be done to provide stability for this popular and critically important program, it is vital that we get money into the program immediately or we run the risk of losing it. For this reason, we support any initiative aimed at providing meaningful funding to LMF over the next few years, including this initiative for a \$10 million budget allocation starting in FY 2025-26. We hope you will do that same by voting Ought to Pass on LD 593. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Table 1. Land for Maine's Future Program Funding History.⁴

Year	LMF Funds (millions of dollars)	Funding Source
1987	35.00	Bond
1998	3.00	General fund approp
1999	50.00	Bond
2005	12.00	Bond
2007	20.00	Bond
2009	9.25	Bond
2011	5.00	Bond
2022	40.00	General fund approp
Total	174.25	

³ https://www.maine.gov/dafs/economist/sites/maine.gov.dafs.economist/files/inline-files/Maine%20Population%20Outlook%20to%202030_0.pdf

⁴ <https://www.maine.gov/dacf/lmf/docs/LMF%20Funds%20In%20Out%20Data%20FY26.pdf>