



**Testimony from University of Maine Cooperative Extension
Presented by Ryder Scott, Executive Director of 4-H Learning Centers
In Support of LD 895, *An Act to Support Immersive Outdoor Education by Establishing
the Outdoor School for All Maine Students Program* – March 13, 2025**

Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker, and distinguished members of the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry: My name is Ryder Scott. As Executive Director of the University of Maine Cooperative Extension's 4-H Camps and Learning Centers, I am here in support of expanding access to transformational outdoor education and experiences for Maine youth, as proposed by LD 895, *An Act to Support Immersive Outdoor Education by Establishing the Outdoor School for All Maine Students Program*.

For more than a century, UMaine Extension has connected Maine youth to the state's outdoors through hands-on learning and leadership development, originally focused on agricultural methods and life skills. Our efforts prepare young Mainers for future success, building their self-awareness and confidence; introducing them to exciting careers and service opportunities in important industries like farming, forestry, fisheries, outdoor recreation, and tourism; and inspiring a respect and commitment to stewardship of our state's precious natural resources.

UMaine Extension's 4-H Youth Development programs are a cornerstone of this important work, serving nearly 30,000 youth annually through 4-H clubs in every Maine county, and our 4-H camp and learning centers in Bryant Pond, Lincolnville, Princeton, and St. George. For more than 40 years, these 4-H centers have also played a critical role in directly delivering outdoor and natural resources education to Maine's public schools. Together with our peer institutions in the Maine Outdoor School for All network, we currently provide around 20% of Maine public school students with overnight, immersive programming with their classmates at our outdoor school sites across the state.

For example, Woodstock Elementary Principal Beth Clarke shared that outdoor school experiences in partnership with UMaine Extension have become an integral part of her school's educational landscape. "Our Outdoor School experiences at Bryant Pond make a meaningful difference in the academic and social-emotional learning for our students," she said. "Whether observing the life cycle of plants, understanding ecosystems, or learning leadership skills, Outdoor School at Bryant Pond deepens our students' understanding of the world and helps them grow into successful young adults."

Evidence demonstrates that outdoor school experiences are beneficial for students' academic performance, as well as their physical and social-emotional wellness. LD 895 would make life-changing opportunities like those benefiting Woodstock Elementary students available to

all Maine students, regardless of the socioeconomic status of their family or their school district.

We are humbled that once again, our fellow organizations in the Maine Outdoor School for All Network have proposed that UMaine Extension lead and administer this new program. With our expertise, experience, and statewide resources and relationships, we are uniquely positioned to partner with Maine schools and other outdoor school organizations to develop and further expand high-quality, immersive programs with equitable access for all if LD 895 moves forward. As many of you know, a similar statewide outdoor school program was implemented in Oregon following passage by the Legislature there in 2015-16 and ongoing funding through lottery proceeds. Oregon State University Extension Service runs that initiative.

I want to be clear that the appropriations priorities of the University of Maine System and UMaine Extension are those in the proposed FY26-27 biennial budget that advance affordable access for Maine students to our public universities and sustain our operations amidst tremendous inflationary pressures, as well as State funding to improve our aging infrastructure. Any funding for Outdoor School for All must supplement, and not supplant, those mission-critical investments.

UMaine Extension views Outdoor School for All as a strategic next step in our own service to the state, especially as it relates to strengthening and growing our natural resource-based economy and dependent rural communities. Through this initiative, we will educate, engage, and empower Maine youth for the future, ensuring they are better prepared for college, career, and civic success. This is entirely consistent with the goals and strategies of the recently released 10-Year Maine Outdoor Recreation Economy Roadmap, which proposes increasing pipelines to rewarding careers in the outdoor industry through “increasing access to outdoor experiences” and “integrating outdoor education and career pathways into K-12 curricula” (see Goal 4, Strategy 4A). There is no better classroom than the Maine outdoors.

Thank you for your continued commitment to UMaine Cooperative Extension and to Maine’s public universities. You are well aware of the considerable uncertainties we currently face, especially as it relates to the federal funding that supports more than 40% of UMaine Cooperative Extension’s annual budget. While it would not be appropriate for me to discuss those matters with you here today, please know your strong support and that from around the state for our research and extension activities, including 4-H youth development, is greatly appreciated and reinforces our programs’ incredible importance and impact.

On behalf of my university colleagues, thank you. I look forward to taking your questions about LD 895 and Outdoor School for All.