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Testimony of Tom Doak

Executive Director

Maine Woodland Owners

In Support of

LD 402

“An Act to Move the Natural Areas Program from the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry to the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife and to Amend the Law Governing Administration of the Bureau of Resource Management Within the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife.”

Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker and distinguished Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, my name is Tom Doak, Executive Director of Maine Woodland Owners speaking today in support of LD 402 “An Act to Move the Natural Areas Program from the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry to the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife and to Amend the Law Governing Administration of the Bureau of Resource Management Within the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife.”

The Natural Areas Program has had a number of different homes over the years, and there may be no perfect fit within any particular department. The Program serves a number of functions as it houses a great deal of information about the natural resources on the landscapes, most of which are on private land and privately owned. Often the existence and locations of these resources, such as rare plants, are shared with the Program by landowners.

Unlike the wildlife in this state, plants belong to the landowner. A focus of the Natural Areas Program is the voluntary, non-regulatory conservation of important natural resources. One concern that has been raised by this bill is that the Program would be moved to a department, namely Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, which has a primary focus on managing and regulating a public resource (wildlife). How will the department handle the voluntary, non-regulatory functions of the Natural Areas Program.

To address this concern, the Committee might consider the following amendment to §12822, paragraph 2, of the bill:

2. Natural heritage database. The commissioner shall maintain a natural heritage database that must contain data from inventories and other data sources and other relevant biological, ecological or other information about natural areas described in subsection 1 and about ecologically significant sites that harbor or otherwise contain these features. Information contained in the natural heritage database may be made available as necessary or appropriate for conservation and land use planning, environmental review, scientific research and inquiry, education or other appropriate use. For the purposes of this subsection, "appropriate use" is one that will not jeopardize endangered species or habitats. The commissioner may not adopt rules to regulate plants and natural areas in the database.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide comments on this legislation.