

**TESTIMONY OF THE
DEPARTMENT OF INLAND FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE
BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,
CONSERVATION AND FORESTRY**

IN SUPPORT OF L.D. 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”**

SPONSORED BY: Representative DILL of OLD TOWN

DATE OF HEARING: March 18, 2025

Good afternoon, Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker and members of the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry. I am Judith Camuso, Commissioner of the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, speaking on behalf of the Department, in support of **L.D. 402**.

This bill repeals the laws governing the Natural Areas Program administered by the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry and reassigns certain responsibilities under the program to the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife. The bill updates relevant definitions in the Maine Revised Statutes, Title 12 and cross-references in Titles 36 and 38 to reflect these changes. The bill also establishes the Natural Areas Conservation Fund, which is administered by the Commissioner of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife.

MNAP was established in 1989 to inventory and conserve rare plants, animals, natural communities, and ecosystems; establish and maintain the list of state endangered and threatened plants; monitor ecological reserves; and provide technical assistance and conservation planning resources. For at least the past 20 years, MNAP staff and collaborators have discussed moving the program to MDIFW. This is a department bill to make that transition a reality.

The MNAP program has multiple areas of overlap and intersection with MDIFW. MNAP's mandate to inform the conservation of plants, natural communities, and ecosystems align well with MDIFW's mission to preserve, protect and enhance the inland fisheries and wildlife resources of the State, which requires conservation of the habitats upon which these species depend. Simply put, it is not possible for MDIFW to be successful at conserving fish and wildlife if we do not also work to conserve their habitats. As a result, MDIFW and MNAP have long worked collaboratively to achieve shared goals, but without the efficiency of being co-located within the same agency.

Maintaining MNAP and MDIFW in separate agencies has resulted in numerous inefficiencies for the State of Maine and its customers, including:

- **Duplication of data entry and database development** and maintenance.
- **Redundant staff effort** to respond to requests for maps, information, and technical assistance.
- **Administrative staff time** to create, oversee and maintain interagency agreements for collaborative work.
- Numerous **interagency meetings and discussions** to develop joint programs, responses to requests for information, and management guidance.
- Municipalities, landowners, consultants, land trusts, state agencies, and the general public **interact with each program separately for information** on co-located and interdependent natural resources (e.g. rare and endangered wildlife and their habitats) often creating confusion, additional costs, and inefficiencies for the regulated public.

Merging MNAP with MDIFW will create numerous staffing and financial efficiencies that will increase the State of Maine's ability to plan for and respond to significant conservation challenges, including:

- Implementation of the **Priority Habitat Conservation** portion of Maine's Statewide Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP), recognizing that habitat-scale conservation is also an efficient and effective strategy for protecting most Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN);
- Integrated approach to lands management within **Wildlife Management Areas** that better addresses long-term diversity and resiliency concerns;
- Management of **terrestrial invasive plants**, which are one of the most significant threats to Maine's at-risk wildlife and habitats as identified in the SWAP;
- Improved ability to provide **comprehensive technical assistance to private landowners** to conserve at-risk wildlife, plants, and natural communities they depend on, and increase climate resiliency;
- Improved **customer service** to municipalities, land trusts, state agencies, consultants, landowners, and the public through one-stop-shop consultations;
- Increased integration and consistency in the review of and recommendations for **siting renewable energy projects**;
- Increased capacity to identify and **acquire strategic parcels for land conservation** to meet SWAP and Maine State Climate Action Plan goals;
- Improved **SGCN species and habitat** database tracking and development; and
- The ability to leverage significant **federal funds** using MNAP general funds as match.

We strongly believe that moving MNAP to MDIFW is in the best interests of Maine's people and natural resources. This merger requires numerous statutory adjustments to portions of Titles 12, 36, and 38 (all of which are contained in this bill), as well as multiple layers of budget initiatives to move positions and financial accounts from DACF to MDIFW. I would be happy to go through these specific changes in more detail during the work session.

I wanted to mention one small discrepancy in the wording of the summary that is inaccurate. The last sentence of the bill summary currently states, "It also replaces the coordinator of the Natural Areas Program with a person appointed by the commissioner who is responsible for monitoring natural areas." The summary should read "It also replaces the coordinator of the

Natural Areas Program with the Commissioner of the Department of Marine Resources on the board of the Maine Outdoor Heritage Fund.” The latter aligns with the bill language.

Finally, in reviewing this bill we found one small drafting error. Section 36 adds MDIFW to the consistency review of Comprehensive plans done by the Municipal Planning Assistance Program in Title 30-A. DIFW and other state agencies already receive requests to provide state comments in Comprehensive Plan consistency reviews. Adding MDIFW to the consistency review process in Title 38 sets up a competing and duplicative process that would be unique to MDIFW and no other state agencies. Therefore, I would recommend striking Section 36 from the bill.

I would be happy to answer any questions you may have at this time or during the work session.