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Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations

RE: LD 836 - An Act to Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue to Upgrade Municipal Culverts at Stream Crossings

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations, my name is Kaitlyn Nuzzo and I am the Government Relations Director for The Nature Conservancy in Maine. **I appreciate this opportunity to testify in support of LD 836 - An Act to Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue to Upgrade Municipal Culverts at Stream Crossings.** This effort is one of our top priority bills this session and we appreciate Senate President Daughtry's efforts to bring this idea forward.

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is a nonprofit conservation organization dedicated to conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends. Guided by science, we create innovative, on-the-ground solutions to our world's toughest challenges so that nature and people can thrive together. We use a collaborative approach that engages local communities, governments, the private sector, and other partners. The Nature Conservancy has been leading conservation in Maine for more than 60 years and is the 12th largest landowner in the state, owning and managing roughly 300,000 acres. We also work across Maine to restore rivers and streams, partner with fishermen in the Gulf of Maine to rebuild groundfish populations, and develop innovative solutions to address our changing climate.

LD 836 recapitalizes the very popular competitive grant program, the Municipal Stream Crossing Upgrade Grants. The program matches local funding for the upgrade of culverts on municipal roads to improve fish and wildlife habitats, increase community safety, and ensure regional economic vitality. The 131st Legislature invested in this program, but the grant funds have all been allocated to projects and there is no additional funding available for future rounds. Over the last several months our staff have heard repeatedly from the communities and partners they work with in the field - many communities rely on these funds and are hopeful additional funding will be identified.

Culverts are an essential but often overlooked element of Maine's transportation infrastructure. They provide water passage and drainage beneath roads crossings and serve as connectors for fish and wildlife. Unfortunately, most culverts in Maine were designed to meet standards from 50+ years ago that not only were not built to truly accommodate streams, but are also not keeping up with the current realities of our storm patterns. As a result, they are rapidly deteriorating, putting fish and wildlife habitats, as well as community safety, at risk. Catastrophic culvert failures have increased statewide, and have hit rural communities especially hard.

On top of these challenges, construction costs continue to rise which makes access to funds and support offered through this program critical to communities around the

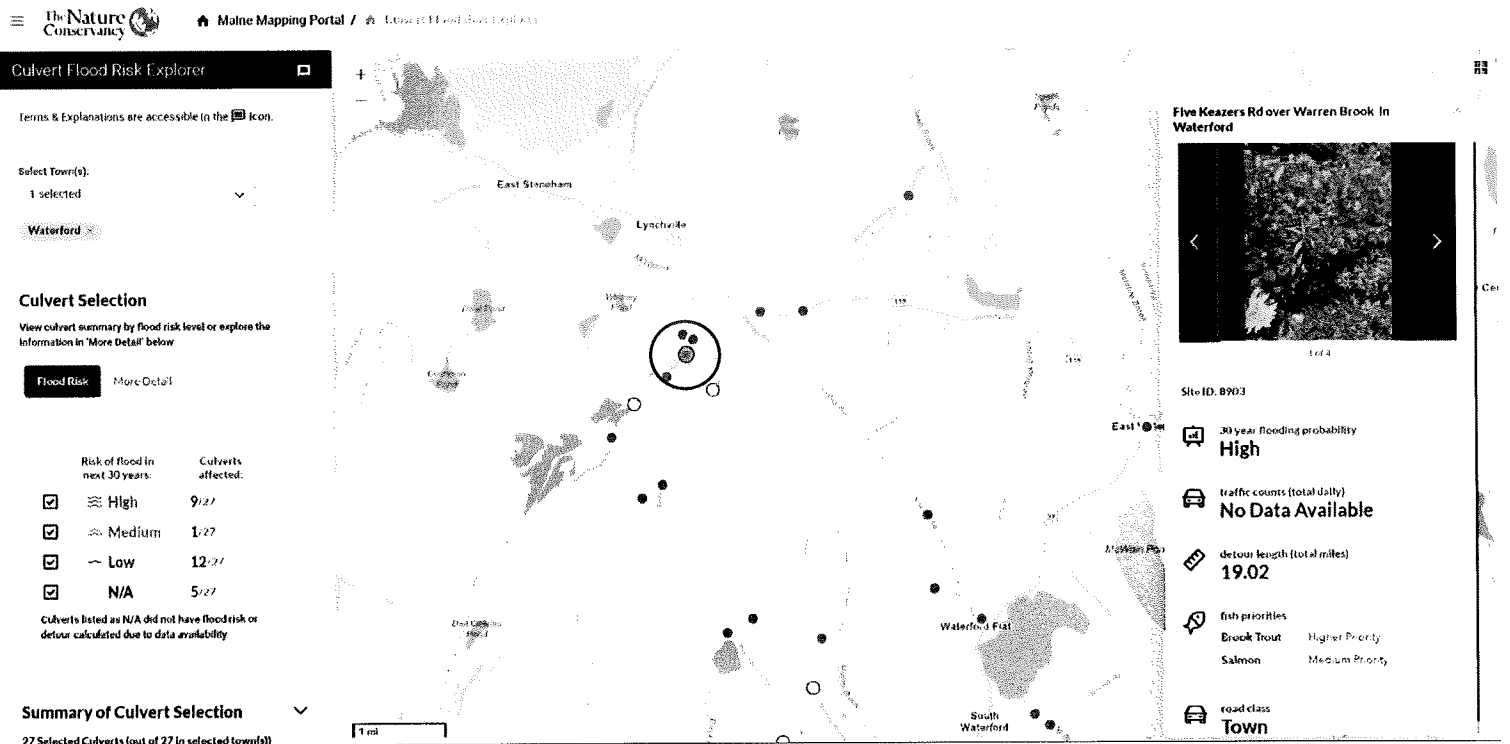
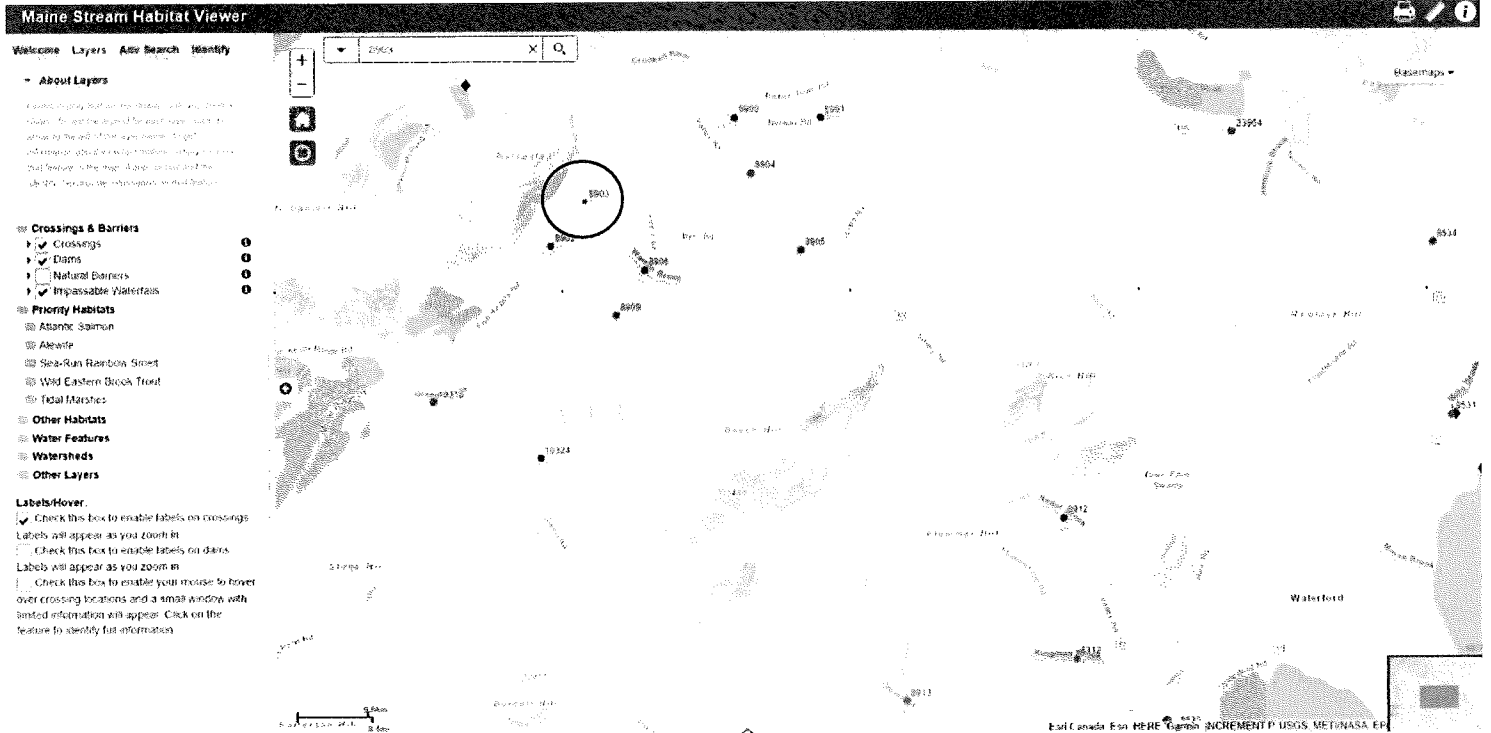
state as they strive to keep their communities safe, their natural resources intact, and their budgets manageable. According to robust TNC data, there are over 4,000 "barrier" culverts on municipal roads across Maine – culverts that are undersized or "hanging" and restrict fish and wildlife passage. LD 836 provides necessary support to meet this prevalent challenge.

The Municipal Stream Crossing Grant Program has demonstrated success in addressing these challenges to stream health and transportation. Since its inception in 2015, the grant program has offered 7 competitive grant rounds. The program has funded nearly 200 upgrades and demand for funding has consistently exceeded the funds available. In the most recent round in 2024, the grant program was only able to award funding to a third of the communities who applied. Access to long-term funding allows communities to plan ahead – either to build the resources they need to apply or have the opportunity to reapply if they haven't been selected in a previous round.

LD 836 works with a companion bill, **LD 1340 - An Act to Establish the Municipal Stream Crossing Fund**. That bill had a public hearing on Friday in the Transportation Committee and seeks to establish this grant program permanently within DOT. TNC strongly supports passage of both LD 836 and LD 1340, which will continue providing critical support for communities trying to proactively address resiliency challenges. The Municipal Stream Crossing Grant program protects our communities from flooding and extreme weather, supports construction and engineering jobs, and ensures the health of our state's natural resources.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment, I'm happy to answer questions at any time.

Waterford Culvert – replaced 2024. Site ID# 8903



Site ID 8903 (Waterford) – Before restoration



After restoration

