

**TESTIMONY OF THE
DEPARTMENT OF INLAND FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE
BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON INLAND
FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE
NIETHER FOR NOR AGAINST L.D. 1532**

**“An Act to Expand the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Outdoor
Education Programs to Schools and Communities”**

Presented by Senator STEWART of Aroostook. Cosponsored by Senator: GUERIN of Penobscot, Representatives: MASON of Lisbon, WOOD of Greene, WOODSOME of Waterboro.

DATE OF HEARING: April 16, 2025

Good morning, Senator Baldacci, Representative Roberts and members of the Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Committee. I am Emily MacCabe, Director of Public Information and Education at Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, speaking on behalf of the Department, neither for nor against L.D. 1532

This bill authorizes the Department to conduct educational programs at third-party-owned locations through leases or partnerships and allows for collaboration with the Department of Education to develop a curriculum that could count toward secondary school instruction. Schools may choose to participate, with flexibility to hold programming at school facilities, third-party sites, or both. The bill also opens participation to homeschoolers and members of the public. It directs the Department to secure at least three geographically diverse sites by January 1, 2026, and to begin offering curriculum-based programs as soon as practicable that same year.

We appreciate the intent behind L.D. 1532 and recognize its alignment with many of our existing initiatives. Much of the work outlined in this bill is already in place or actively underway. While certain components would require additional resources to fully implement, the Department remains committed to expanding outdoor education opportunities through sustainable, community-based approaches.

For decades, the Department has delivered hands-on education programs that provide safe, supportive, and meaningful opportunities to build skills in hunting, trapping, fishing, shooting sports, and wildlife conservation. These efforts are central to our mission to conserve and enhance Maine’s fish and wildlife resources and help participants form lasting connections to the outdoors.

When it comes to public outreach and education, we’re not guessing. We take a data-driven approach, using tools such as license and harvest data, public surveys, user feedback, and research to guide our decisions. We are fully committed to the national R3 movement, focused on Recruitment, Retention, and Reactivation, and have incorporated its principles into a statewide strategic plan. A copy of that plan is included with this testimony. Our efforts are continually

evaluated to ensure they remain effective and responsive to the needs of Maine's outdoor community.

Our hunting, trapping, and shooting sports education, including both required safety courses and advanced programs, is currently supported through a five-year federal grant. Now in its second year, this grant is guided by a strategic plan with clear goals and benchmarks for program growth, accessibility, and improvement. The funding is essential to maintaining the infrastructure needed to deliver high-quality outdoor education in line with national best practices.

Our educational offerings range from mandatory safety courses to multi-day workshops and continuing education opportunities like our Next Step series. These programs promote safe outdoor practices and lifelong learning. A key focus is encouraging adult participants to serve as mentors, one of the most effective ways to grow youth participation by ensuring young people have support from experienced and active adults.

We are also a partner in Maine's 10-Year Outdoor Recreation Economy Roadmap, which emphasizes public engagement, access to the outdoors, and inter-agency collaboration as essential pillars of a strong outdoor economy.

To further strengthen our outreach, the Department recently launched a new brand for our full suite of education programs. These efforts will be highlighted through a redesigned website scheduled to launch within the year.

Current examples of our outdoor programs include:

- Partnerships with schools, Fish and Game clubs, and conservation groups to host public events and workshops;
- Skills-focused programs like Camp North Woods, learn-to-fish events, and outdoor skills weekends;
- Scholarships for youth to attend conservation camps at Pickerel Pond and 4-H Centers across the state;
- Educator training through Project WILD, Project WET, and The Nature of Teaching;
- Community and educator training in fishing and shooting sports through Hooked on Fishing–Not on Drugs, 4-H Shooting Sports, and USA Archery;
- Our Next Step workshops on hunting, conservation, and outdoor skills;
- Resources such as teaching tools, activity sets, and outdoor education guides;
- School and group education programs at Maine Wildlife Park;
- Public shooting opportunities at our Augusta and Fryeburg ranges.

We are currently developing a plan to expand Camp North Woods to offer more family-focused programs statewide, with a phased rollout planned for 2026.

We also maintain a long-standing partnership with the University of Maine Cooperative Extension, supporting year-round outdoor education for youth and adults, including opportunities that align with secondary education.

As noted earlier, much of the work proposed in this bill is already underway. We've seen great success with our leased facility in Augusta, where we host well-attended programs for all ages. Based on that model, we are working to expand our reach by identifying additional regional sites, including one in Brewer through a developing agreement with the Penobscot County Conservation Association. We are also actively seeking a suitable site in southern Maine as well.

While we support the goal of increasing access to outdoor education, implementing regular school-based instruction at satellite sites, within the proposed timeline, would require significant investments in staff, transportation, and equipment. It would exceed our current capacity.

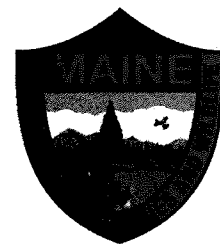
While we see value in offering hunter education in school settings, our priority remains on providing experiences that involve families. Research and experience show that youth are more likely to become active hunters when supported by mentors. When children learn alongside adults - parents, grandparents, or other family members - they are more likely to build the skills and confidence needed to stay engaged. For this reason, the Department prefers to focus on programs that bring families together in outdoor learning environments.

At this time, we are prepared to move forward with our current plan to add two regional facilities that will support consistent, high-quality programming. As these facilities come online, we hope to offer our existing school programs at those locations, modeled after our successful efforts at Maine Wildlife Park, which provides nature-based learning to hundreds of students annually.

In Maine, curriculum decisions are made by local school administrative units (SAUs), not by the Department of Education. This long-standing policy of local control allows schools to tailor programs to their students' needs. While this bill encourages collaboration with the Department of Education, any curriculum alignment would need to be offered as a resource, not a requirement. The Department is open to working with DOE and local educators to offer training or adapt existing programs to align with Maine Learning Standards where appropriate.

As we continue to expand access to outdoor education, we are encouraged by this opportunity to lower barriers and support a strong future for hunting, conservation, and outdoor engagement in Maine. Thank you for your time and consideration.

I would be happy to answer any questions now or during the work session.



R3 Education and Outreach Plan



A Pathway for Protecting Maine's Outdoor Heritage

Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife

Introduction

Hunting, fishing, trapping, shooting sports, and wildlife viewing are deeply rooted outdoor traditions that connect people to nature, foster community, and enrich lives. For many, learning to hunt, fish, or trap is not just a pastime - it's a lifelong journey. Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (MDIFW) is committed to increasing participation in these activities to help preserve our outdoor heritage, protect natural resources, and enhance the quality of life for current and future generations.

This R3 Education and Outreach Plan outlines strategies that combine traditional methods with modern digital tools to engage new and existing audiences. It focuses on building partnerships with like-minded organizations, strengthening our presence on social media, and promoting the many benefits of outdoor recreation. The plan also emphasizes conservation, sustainability, and responsible practices while fostering an environment that is welcoming, respectful, and supportive of individuals from all backgrounds who are interested in participating.

By implementing this plan, MDIFW aims to increase participation in Maine's outdoor traditions, elevate satisfaction among current users, and build greater public support for conservation efforts statewide.

Our Goals

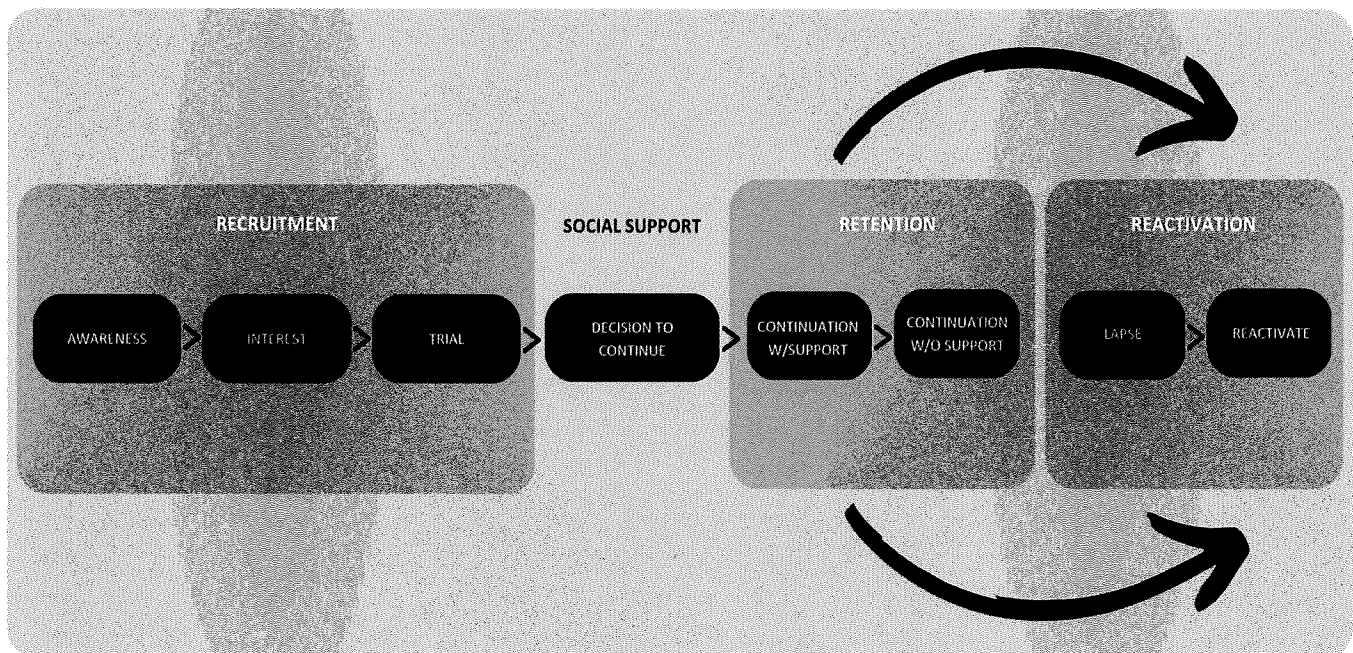
- ✓ **Listen, learn, and lead with data.** We are committed to maintaining and growing participation in outdoor recreation by listening to our audience, learning from their experiences, and using data to guide thoughtful, responsive strategies.
- ✓ **Inspire repeat adventures.** We strive to create meaningful, memorable outdoor opportunities that keep residents and visitors engaged—and eager to share their positive experiences with others.
- ✓ **Be friendly, safe, and have fun.** We want every experience with MDIFW programs and outreach efforts to be enjoyable, safe, and memorable. Our goal is to be a trusted, welcoming, and relatable presence for all.
- ✓ **Ensure everyone feels welcome.** We are dedicated to making the Maine outdoors accessible and welcoming to all and ensuring that everyone feels respected regardless of background, culture, or identity.
- ✓ **Support lifelong learning.** We believe in the power of hands-on learning and are committed to helping people build skills, grow confidence, and deepen their connection to the outdoors through hunting, fishing, trapping, shooting sports, and wildlife viewing.

What is R3?

R3, or Recruitment, Retention and Reactivation, is a national movement within the conservation community that has been widely adopted by states across the country. R3 aims to increase participation in hunting, angling, trapping, shooting sports, and other outdoor recreation activities. Through R3 initiatives, organizations, businesses, and individuals are working to create more opportunities for people of all ages and backgrounds to get involved in traditional outdoor sports.

The Outdoor Recreation Adoption Model

The Outdoor Recreation Adoption Model (ORAM) is a linear illustration of the steps an individual takes as they learn about, try, and then adopt a new behavior or activity. This model can be used to understand the differences between recruitment, retention, and reactivation.



R3 Staff

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 Laura Craver-Rogers, Outreach and Education Supervisor
 Bob Cordes, Wildlife Special Projects Coordinator
 Craig Gerry, Range Program Coordinator

Supporting Roles

Maine Warden Service
 Division of Wildlife
 Division of Fisheries and Hatcheries
 Division of Licensing
 Maine Office of Outdoor Recreation
 Volunteer Instructors
 Volunteers Range Safety Officers
 Non-Government Organizations
 Sporting Clubs

Recruitment of New Participants

Introducing hunting, fishing, and trapping to new audiences can be challenging. These activities require not only time, patience, and skill, but also access to specialized gear and knowledge which factors that can feel intimidating to beginners. To successfully expand participation, it's essential to identify and reduce barriers whether cultural, financial, social, logistical, or informational, that may prevent people from getting started. This includes offering entry-level programs, access to equipment, mentorship opportunities, and clear, beginner-friendly guidance. A strategic mix of outreach methods is key to reaching diverse audiences. Traditional tactics such as print and television advertising, in-person events, and presentations remain effective for engaging specific demographics. Meanwhile, digital strategies like social media, search engine optimization, and email marketing allow us to connect with broader, more diverse populations. Just as vital are engaging, hands-on educational experiences that immerse participants in outdoor activities, building skills, confidence, and lasting enthusiasm for the outdoors.

Retention of New or Existing Participants

Sustaining participation in hunting, fishing, trapping, and shooting sports requires helping individuals overcome the barriers that can prevent long-term engagement. Providing resources such as access to hunting and fishing areas, along with clear, user-friendly guidance on equipment, licensing, and regulations, empowers people to continue these activities with confidence. Hands-on workshops, introductory classes, and mentorship opportunities can further support participants in building their skills and knowledge, increasing their likelihood of long-term involvement. Just as important is fostering a sense of community—creating social networks and peer connections where individuals can share experiences, ask questions, and find encouragement from others who share their interests.

Reactivation of Lapsed Participants

Bringing lapsed hunters, anglers, or trappers back into outdoor activities is a valuable opportunity to boost overall participation. Creating an engaging, welcoming environment is key to encouraging their return. To be effective, reactivation efforts must consider individual motivations, interests, and any real or perceived barriers that may have led them to step away. Strategies such as targeted marketing campaigns, skill-building workshops, and re-engagement events can help rekindle interest. Direct outreach - paired with inspiring, informative messages that highlight the personal and community benefits of participation - can also remind former participants of the enjoyment and value these traditions offer, while pointing them to resources that make returning easier and more accessible.

Areas of Focus

Define Target Audiences

- ✓ Adult-Onset (18+)
- ✓ Youth and Families (Children and Parents/Guardians)
- ✓ Lapsed participants

Improve Access and Opportunity

- ✓ Address opportunity barriers to make hunting, fishing, trapping, shooting sports, and wildlife viewing more accessible
- ✓ Address social barriers to make fishing, trapping, and shooting sports more accessible
- ✓ Address relevancy barriers to make fishing and hunting accessible and relevant for years to come

Develop Mentorship and Social Support Tools

- ✓ Expand access to and support for mentorship programs by investing more time, resources, and tools that are effective, relevant, and welcoming to a wide range of participants.

Improve Education and Outreach Programs

- ✓ Modernize educational tools to increase relevancy, appeal, and accessibility
- ✓ Create tools and resources specific to target audiences

Reactivate Lapsed Users

- ✓ Determine how situational lapsed users can become reactivators
- ✓ Create programs and resources to address the needs of reactivators and assist them in making a return to full participation
- ✓ Create alternative participation options for situational lapsed users who no longer can or want to be active hunters or anglers

Marketing and Public Perception

- ✓ Improve public perception of hunting, fishing, trapping, and shooting sports
- ✓ Update broad-scale content marketing and media strategies
- ✓ Create marketing and outreach strategies that can be applied to the programming and resources developed through the initiatives in this plan

2025-2026 Action Items

Recruitment: Bring in New Participants

Host Outdoor Skills Days for key target audiences

- ✓ Organize low-barrier, hands-on workshops that introduce participants to fishing, hunting, trapping, and wildlife viewing, with gear and equipment provided.
- ✓ Collaborate with partners by offering training, resources, and gear to empower them to host community-based outdoor skills events.
- ✓ Identify underserved regions and designate additional facilities as regional education hubs, supported by dedicated coordinators to lead ongoing public programming.

Identify and Reduce Participation Barriers

- ✓ Conduct listening sessions or surveys with target audiences (e.g., adult-onset hunters, new Mainers, single parents) to understand their specific challenges.
- ✓ Engage partners to better understand barriers faced by their members or constituent groups.
- ✓ Use findings to create beginner-focused resources (gear checklists, licensing guides, “how-to” content).

Build Targeted Digital Campaigns

- ✓ Develop seasonal, audience-specific social media and email marketing campaigns that highlight simple, approachable ways to start (e.g., “First-Time Hunter Starter Kit,” “Fishing with Friends,” or “Family Trap Day”).
- ✓ Launch a comprehensive digital advertising campaign that highlights safe, responsible ways to get involved in hunting, fishing, trapping, and wildlife viewing—focusing on opportunities, beginner resources, and the benefits of participation.

Retention: Keep Participants Engaged

Expand Mentorship Networks

- ✓ Continue to train and support a network of volunteer mentors who can guide newcomers through multiple seasons.
- ✓ Continue to use online platforms to match mentors and mentees based on region and interest.

Create Skill-Building Progression Paths

- ✓ Develop and conduct “Next Step” workshops (e.g., from beginner to intermediate skills).
- ✓ Consider offering certification or recognition for participants who complete multi-level courses.

Develop Community Connections

- ✓ Facilitate and encourage local clubs, social meet-ups, or online forums where participants can build community and share experiences.

Reactivation: Bring Back Lapsed Participants

Send Personalized Outreach

- ✓ Use licensing data to identify and reach out to lapsed participants with custom messages and surveys to learn why they stopped.

Host “Welcome Back” Events

- ✓ Create friendly, low-pressure reintroduction programs for those who haven’t participated in 3–5 years.
- ✓ Offer loaner gear programs, regulation refreshers, and practice opportunities.

Offer Flexible Alternatives

- ✓ Design opportunities for limited-engagement or non-consumptive outdoor involvement (e.g., wildlife photography, scouting hikes, outdoor preparedness, foraging).

Data & Strategy

Build a Centralized R3 Dashboard

- ✓ Track engagement, participation trends, program effectiveness, and campaign ROI in one place.
- ✓ Share metrics regularly with partners to inform adaptive strategies.

Conduct Annual Target Audience Review

- ✓ Assess whether current efforts are reaching and resonating with intended audiences.
- ✓ Update personas and outreach plans based on findings.
- ✓ Utilize findings from various research projects conducted by partners through Multi-State Conservation Grants.

Marketing & Perception

Launch an Outdoor Storytelling Campaign

- ✓ Share real participant stories - especially first-time or returning users - across media channels.
- ✓ Use video, blogs, and social content to showcase authentic, relatable outdoor experiences.

Modernize MDIFW Brand Presence

- ✓ Update imagery, language, and tone of outreach materials to feel fresh, inclusive (in spirit), and welcoming.
- ✓ Develop and launch a new brand for outdoor education programs.
- ✓ Develop branded campaign templates for partners to use in their own outreach.
- ✓ Design and launch a mobile app for outdoor users.
- ✓ Redesign the MDIFW website utilizing user experience data.