

Committee on Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry
% Legislative Information Office
100 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333

April 17, 2025

RE: LD 1529, An Act to Enhance the Protection of High-value Natural Resources Statewide

Dear Sen. Talbot Ross, Rep. Pluecker, and Members of the ACF Committee:

My name is Francesca “Ches” Gundrum and I am Maine Audubon’s Director of Advocacy. Maine Audubon is a wildlife conservation non-profit – we fulfill our mission to “conserve Maine wildlife and wildlife habitat” by engaging people of all ages in nature through a science-based approach to education, conservation, and advocacy. On behalf of Maine Audubon and our 30,000 members, supporters, and volunteers, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of LD 1529, *An Act to Enhance the Protection of High-value Natural Resources Statewide*.

Maine’s North Woods – located primarily within the 10.4 million acres of unorganized territories (UT) – is home to the last stronghold of late-successional, old-growth (LSOG) forests and undeveloped, remote ponds in the Eastern U.S. These places in the UT help support biodiversity, which is unfortunately under great threat. We all hear this a lot – *but what does it really mean?* According to the Maine Climate Council’s Scientific and Technical Subcommittee it means 1 in 4 birds are gone since 1970. It means a quarter of Maine’s at-risk butterflies are threatened by climate change. It looks like eight new species – five birds, one bat, one bee, and one beetle – being added to Maine’s Endangered and Threatened Species list two years ago. **We have the power to do our part to help prevent some of the worst outcomes for native species in Maine.** The number one threat to wildlife in Maine is habitat loss. Conserving more structurally-complex, older – thus more climate resilient – forests is a critical conservation measure that will help us protect our state’s biodiversity.

Roughly 70% of our state was once covered in trees that were hundreds of years old. According to recent reports, we understand that the UT now holds just 3% LSOG forest.¹ These structurally-complex forests are rich with large trees, sizable snags, and downed logs — and, as a result, rich with wildlife. Biologically mature forests (>200 yrs) harbor more biodiversity than “financially mature” forests (50-75 yrs) – especially for mosses, lichens, fungi, vernal plants, and insects. Many species are more abundant in older Northeast forests, especially native woodpeckers, warblers, thrushes, fisher, marten. **Unfortunately, these places are practically extinct in our state. To adequately address climate change and biodiversity loss, we must expand our efforts to conserve and manage forests, especially older and structurally-complex forests – before it is too late.**

¹ John Haggan et al., *Using LiDAR to Map, Quantify, and Conserve Late-successional Forest in Maine* (2024). <https://ourclimatecommon.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/MAINE-LSOG-Report-October-2024b.pdf>

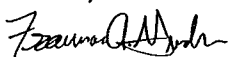
Without concerted, collaborative conservation action, we will likely lose these forests forever. Thankfully, LD 1529 offers several paths to help support the work of protecting our biodiversity by conserving some of our state's rarest natural resources. The bill directs the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF) to develop a comprehensive strategy to enhance conservation of some of the remaining LSOG forests. This non-regulatory process would involve input from "a broad range of experts, stakeholders, landowners, ecologists, forest industry representatives, interested parties and the public," with a final report due back to this committee in late 2026. Additionally, the bill would also increase LSOG conservation by making these stands a priority for consideration as the Land for Maine's Future (LMF) Board considers projects.

LD 1529 also proposes an approach to conserve remote, undeveloped ponds – another incredibly rare resource in the UT. The bill directs the Land Use Planning Commission (LUPC) to assign protective Management Classifications to a discrete set of ponds that are undeveloped and have resources of statewide significance – including fisheries, wildlife, and scenic features. The work to protect these specific lakes (~50 across the UT) was put on hold more than 30 years ago when protective Management Classifications were assigned to about 200 similar lakes as part of the LUPC's Lake Management Program. Of these roughly 50 lakes, 31 are classified as State Heritage Fish Waters. In Maine, State Heritage Fish Waters are special lakes and ponds that support self-sustaining populations of native Brook Trout or Arctic Charr—two of Maine's most iconic and ecologically important cold-water fish. Riparian habitats are particularly important for birds and other wildlife as well. 80% of vertebrates in Maine use riparian habitat at some point during their life cycle. **As habitat loss to development is the leading cause of species endangerment, we are concerned about the future of these remote, undeveloped ponds due to increasing development pressure in the UT among other threats.**

Maine holds invaluable, treasured, dwindling natural resources. LD 1529 addresses a critical fraction of the UT: 3% of the 10.4 million forested acres that remain in an older age class and 3% of the 1,500 lakes that still hold statewide ecological significance and could be conserved as remote, undeveloped waters. **While small in size, they are mighty in their ecological importance and we are in danger of losing them – rapidly. LD 1529 represents our collective opportunity to get this right.**

Maine Audubon believes that the bill offers a thoughtful approach to addressing the conservation of some of the most valuable natural resources in our state. **We encourage the Committee to support LD 1529.** Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,



Francesca "Ches" Gundrum
Director of Advocacy