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**Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry  
on LD 1529, An Act to Enhance the Protection of High-value Natural  
Resources Statewide  
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Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry: I am Senator Rick Bennett of Oxford, and I have the honor of serving 14 communities in Western Maine in the State Senate. I am pleased to sponsor LD 1529, *An Act to Enhance the Protection of High-value Natural Resources Statewide*.

This bill addresses two categories of natural resources – undeveloped lakes and older-growth forests – that are worthy of increased conservation because they are truly unique and will diminish over time without more concerted attention and action.

Let me first speak about the lakes portion of LD 1529.

Within Maine's 10.4 million acres of Unorganized Territories (UT) one can find lakes that provide extraordinary brook trout habitat, that have outstanding scenic beauty, and where the shorelines remain completely intact – with no camp lots or development of any kind.

Such lakes are exceedingly rare east of the Rockies, and they help define what is truly unique about Maine's UT. Many such lakes are free from development because they are surrounded by conserved lands. Others are free of development because they have been placed in a Management Classification category (Class 1 or Class 6) by the Land Use Planning Commission that prohibits shoreline development.

Of the 1,500 lakes in Maine's UT, about 200 were assigned to Management Class 1 or 6 back in the late 1980s, based on the Maine Wildlands Lake Assessment that determined which lakes in the UT had resources of statewide significance, and thus were worthy of the highest levels of protection.

When this process was done, more than 1,100 lakes were placed in a Management Class 7 category, which has served as a catch-all for all lakes "not otherwise classified." The problem, though, is that many lakes that had been identified as having resources of statewide significance, according to the Maine Wildlands Lake Assessment, ended up Management Class 7, instead of Class 1 or Class 6.

Over time, the number of Class 7 lakes that have remained truly remote, with no development and no conservation easement protections, has steadily declined as camps have landed on their shorelines. Today, there remain only about 50 such lakes, and that is the group that I believe is worthy of reclassification and enhanced protection.

LD 1529 directs the LUPC to conduct rulemaking to assign this small group of lakes to either Management Class 1 or Management Class 6 – which should have happened in the late 1980s. It would affect about 3% of the 1,500 lakes in the UT.

Without this rulemaking, camps and developments will land on one of these lakes after another – most of which are State Heritage Fish waters – and the opportunity to have conserved them in their remote state will have been lost forever.

The second part of LD 1529 seeks to promote conservation of another rare and diminishing natural resource within Maine's UT; namely, late-successional and old-growth forests – referred to as LSOG.

This part of the bill builds on the work done by a team of scientists, led by John Hagan, who issued a report last fall about the extent and location of LSOG forest stands in Maine.

Although as much as three-quarters of the UT region once was covered by true old growth forests—with trees more than 300 years old—today we have almost no true old growth. Only about 3% of our forests are still in an older age class, referred to as LSOG. These remaining older forest stands are scattered across Maine, mostly in the UT, and mostly in patches less than 200 acres in size.

If nothing is done to enhance conservation of these older age class forests, they will be harvested over time, and within a few decades drop to only 1.5% of the UT.

The approach proposed in LD 1529 is non-regulatory. It's entirely focused on elevating conversation, incentives, and collaborative approaches aimed at preserving more LSOG stands while Maine has a chance. LSOG forests, once cut, will never return in their current form.

The bill includes three elements. First it directs the Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry to develop a statewide strategy to enhance conservation of LSOG forests. With broad stakeholder interest, the Department would consider the full range of strategies, and report back to this committee by November 2026.

This strategy could identify ways that timberland owners can make more money from LSOG stands through conservation strategies that value these forests for their ecological and carbon values at levels that are higher than their timber value.

The bill also would require the Forest Service to report on the status of LSOG conservation every five years, and it would direct the Land for Maine's Future Board to give "preferential consideration" to projects that conserve LSOG forests. This LMF language is similar to what exists in statute for deer-wintering yards and is meant to encourage entities that are developing proposals for possible LMF funding to consider adding acquisition or the purchase of logging rights, if possible, as an element within a larger project.

Let me wrap up by sharing some personal perspective about Maine's UT.

As many of you know, my father, Dean Bennett, writes and illustrates books about nature, wilderness, and our connections with the natural world. He's written beautiful books about successful efforts to protect wild places, including the Allagash Wilderness Waterway. He's described the power of connecting with woods and waters where there's essentially no evidence of human activities.

Such places are increasingly rare. They are a diminishing resource in our world. Two such categories of such wild places are the two that are addressed in LD 1529. With the passage of time, we know that undeveloped lakes in the UT will receive camps, and more camps, and the rare magic of such places will be gone. And we know that the 3% of older growth forests that remain in the UT is on a path to become 2%, and then 1%, unless we elevate our conversations – across all interested parties – with the goal of preserving some of these older forests.

I hope that the Committee and those in this hearing room will put their guards down just a bit, with the goal of finding common ground on a bill that is quite modest in scope and impact – yet meaningful in what it is trying to accomplish.

I appreciate this opportunity and would be glad to answer any questions you may have.