



Senator Grohoski, Representative Cloutier, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Taxation, my name is Kaitlyn Nuzzo and I am the Government Relations Director for The Nature Conservancy in Maine. I'm providing joint testimony with Jeff Romano of Maine Coast Heritage Trust **in support of LD 1630, An Act to Amend the Open Space Tax Law**. We want to especially thank Representative Sayre for working with us to bring this bill forward.

Discussions around updating the Open Space Current Use Tax Program (Open Space) have been happening for several years, beginning in January 2021, when Governor Mills created a Forest Carbon Task Force as part of Maine's initial four-year climate action plan.

The Task Force set out to explore issues related to carbon storage for small to medium size woodland owners. They met regularly for 10 months, solicited public input along the way, and ultimately produced a consensus report containing recommendations to enhance the ways in which Maine's forests will continue to contribute toward achieving our climate goals<sup>1</sup>. Mark Berry, TNC Maine's Forest Program Director, served as a member of the Task Force and worked specifically with a subset of the group to shape the recommendation related to the Open Space Current Use Taxation program.

Following on the heels of that report, the Maine Climate Council started working on an update to Maine's Climate Action Plan. The Natural and Working Lands Working Group picked up on the Open Space language from the Forest Carbon Task Force and included it as a recommendation in Maine Won't Wait 2024. The Climate Plan calls for "expanding Maine's Open Space Current Use taxation program to include incentives for climate-friendly land management<sup>2</sup>."

LD 1630 seeks to build on the work of both the Task Force and the Climate Council by incorporating the suggested recommendations into law. Our organizations have worked closely with a variety of stakeholders over the last several years including state agencies, conservation and landowner organizations that utilize the Open Space program, forest industry leaders, and municipal advocates. Many of these groups were represented on either the Task Force or the Natural and Working Lands Working group. Last year, these

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<sup>1</sup> Governor's Task Force on the Creation of a Forest Carbon Program – Final Report, October 2021 (pg. 21)

<sup>2</sup> Maine Won't Wait – A Four-Year Plan for Climate Action, Maine Climate Council, November 2024 (pg. 112)

productive conversations led to the passage of a bill in the 131<sup>st</sup> Legislative Session (LD 1648) that ultimately died on the special appropriations table.

Our common goals and priority concepts throughout our discussions included:

- Streamlining the program to make the program more attractive to private landowners
- Supporting the program's ability to contribute to maintaining forestland and reducing forestland loss in Maine in the face of increasing development pressure
- Increasing program efficiency by making it easier to administer by municipalities
- Ensuring any changes would not significantly increase responsibilities for state agencies

Maine is a special place. People choose to live here and visit our state because of its unique character. The balance between supporting our traditional industries, maintaining our rural character, and identifying areas to grow our communities is critical to maintain. Landowners across the state take this responsibility seriously and aim to steward their properties with the future in mind. LD 1630 aims to add an additional tool to their toolbox by refreshing a program that offers them a variety of options for their lands. Whether they want to simply maintain their property as undeveloped open space, allow public access, or actively manage for either habitat or silvicultural benefits – this program can serve a variety of needs and complements the other available current use tax programs.

We believe LD 1630 achieves many of the concepts discussed during the productive, ongoing conversations among stakeholders. However, we remain open to additional suggestions and discussion. Thank you for your consideration, and we are happy to answer questions at any time.

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*Maine Coast Heritage Trust seeks to advance the conservation of lands and waters in Maine to ensure ecological wellbeing and foster thriving communities. Over the past five decades, we have conserved more than 185,000 acres, including over 160 places open for traditional outdoor recreation.*

*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.*