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Testimony in Support of LD 1441, Resolve, to Establish the Commission to Study the Future of Recreational Access in Maine

Before the Committee on Inland Fisheries and Wildlife

Luke Frankel, Woods, Waters, & Wildlife Director

April 28, 2025

Senator Baldacci, Representative Roberts, and distinguished members of the Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Committee, my name is Luke Frankel, and I am the Woods, Waters, & Wildlife Director at the Natural Resources Council of Maine (NRCM). NRCM is Maine's leading nonprofit, nonpartisan membership organization dedicated to protecting the environment on behalf of our nearly 20,000 supporters statewide and beyond. I am here today to testify in support of LD 1441, Resolve, to Establish the Commission to Study the Future of Recreational Access in Maine.

This Committee already held a public hearing back on April 2nd for a similar bill (LD 1308) that would establish a working group to explore opportunities to maintain public access for outdoor recreation. We testified in support of that bill, which received no opposition. Rather than repeat key points from that testimony, I will use my opportunity today to reinforce the need for a study like this and discuss some differences between LD 1308 and LD 1441.

As others have highlighted in prior public hearings before this Committee, Maine's longstanding tradition of public access to private land faces many challenges today. These include high occurrences of landowner relations issues (e.g., trespassing, littering, and property damage), increased maintenance costs for trails, posted lands that disrupt access to trails and areas for traditional recreation, including hunting and fishing, and shifts in landownership. These challenges are complex and require creative solutions crafted with input from a comprehensive set of stakeholders.

LD 1308 seeks to gather this input by directing the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (DIFW) to create a working group aimed at establishing public-private partnerships with commercial landowners. While commercial landowners do represent the largest landownership class in Maine, we agree with many of the other organizations that also testified on LD 1308 that this topic would be best served by expanding the study to include all landowner classes.

LD 1441 represents a more comprehensive approach to this issue by establishing a study commission with diverse membership including a large landowner (parcels greater than 100,000 acres), a representative of small woodlot owners, a representative of conservation organizations, and representatives of various outdoor recreation groups including the Maine Professional Guides Association, outdoor recreation businesses in the Unorganized Territory, snowmobile and ATV clubs, and a statewide organization that represents hunters and anglers.

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In addition to these private entities, the study commission also would include membership from key state offices and departments, including the Maine Office of Outdoor Recreation, the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF), and DIFW.

We support this diverse membership group and the duties outlined for the study commission within LD 1441. These duties include exploring financial incentives to reward landowners for the work they are already doing to promote access and encourage others to expand or improve access on their properties. As written, this study is focused on finding common ground among stakeholders to develop mutually beneficial solutions.

Due to DIFW's existing work within their Landowner Relations Program, we recommend that they oversee the study outlined in this bill instead of DACF. With this change, we believe LD 1441 would cover the intent of LD 1308 and could therefore serve as the vehicle for both bills.

To conclude, I will mention that the date of this public hearing is timely as one of the three annual meetings of DIFW's Landowner and Land Users Relations Advisory Board is this coming Wednesday (April 30th). I will be attending that meeting as a recent appointee to the Board, so if anyone from this Committee has any questions that they would like asked during that meeting, I would be happy to forward them along and can report back any answers at the Work Session.

Thank you for your time and consideration.