

**TESTIMONY OF THE  
DEPARTMENT OF INLAND FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE**

**BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON  
AGRICULTURE, CONSERVATION AND FORESTRY  
IN SUPPORT OF L.D. 2118**

**“An Act to Eliminate the Natural Areas Program and Reassign Certain Responsibilities Under the Program to the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife and to Amend the Law Governing Administration of the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, Bureau of Resource Management”**

**SPONSORED BY:** Presented by Representative Dill of Old Town.

**DATE OF HEARING: January 27, 2026**

Good afternoon, Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker and members of the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry. I am Judy Camuso, Commissioner of the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, speaking on behalf of the Department, in support of L.D. 2118.

This bill repeals the laws governing the Natural Areas Program (MNAP) administered by the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry and reassigns certain responsibilities under the program to the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife. The bill updates relevant definitions in the Maine Revised Statutes, Title 12 and cross references in Titles 36 and 38 to reflect these changes. The bill also reestablishes the Natural Areas Conservation Fund, which is administered by the Commissioner of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife.

MNAP was established in 1989 to inventory and conserve rare plants, animals, natural communities, and ecosystems; establish and maintain the list of state endangered and threatened plants and monitor ecological reserves. The program is nonregulatory and focuses on providing technical assistance and conservation planning resources. For at least the past 20 years, MNAP staff and partners have discussed relocating the program to MDIFW. This department bill would finally make that long-discussed transition a reality.

As you know, this Committee considered a similar bill (L.D. 402) during the First Session. That bill died in nonconcurrence due to concerns about the implications of transferring MNAP with respect to rulemaking authority. Over the past several months we have discussed this issue extensively with the Attorney General’s Office, which confirmed that MNAP does not currently possess rulemaking authority; however, moving the program to the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (MDIFW) would unintentionally expand IFW’s rulemaking authority.

Our intent is to transfer the functions of the MNAP program to MDIFW without altering the existing rulemaking authority of either the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF) or MDIFW. Accordingly, this bill includes the same language on rulemaking that was adopted in the committee amendment to L.D. 402 last year. Otherwise, the bill is essentially identical to last year's bill, with only minor drafting differences by the Revisor's Office that do not affect the substance of the legislation.

We anticipate numerous benefits from transferring MNAP to MDIFW, and this move is widely supported by Maine's conservation community. As part of my testimony, I will provide brief background on MNAP and summarize the benefits of relocating the program to MDIFW.

MNAP's work has substantial overlap with IFW's mission and programs. MNAP's mandate to monitor and inform the conservation of plants, natural communities, and ecosystems closely aligns with MDIFW's responsibility to preserve, protect, and enhance the State's inland fisheries and wildlife resources—work that necessarily depends on the conservation of habitat. Simply put, MDIFW cannot be successful in conserving fish and wildlife without also conserving the habitats upon which those species depend. For this reason, MDIFW and MNAP have long worked collaboratively to achieve shared goals, but without the efficiencies that would result from being housed within the same agency.

Maintaining MNAP and MDIFW in separate agencies has resulted in multiple inefficiencies for the State of Maine and its customers, including:

- Duplication of data entry and database development, management, and maintenance
- Redundant staff effort to respond to requests for maps, information, and technical assistance
- Administrative time required to oversee and maintain interagency agreements
- Numerous interagency meetings to coordinate programs, responses, and management guidance
- Fragmented interactions for municipalities, landowners, consultants, land trusts, state agencies, and the public seeking information on closely related natural resources (such as rare wildlife and their habitats), resulting in potential confusion, added costs, and inefficiencies

Merging MNAP with MDIFW would create significant staffing efficiencies and enhance the State's ability to plan for and respond to pressing conservation challenges, including:

- More effective implementation of the Priority Habitat Conservation component of Maine's Statewide Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP), recognizing that habitat-scale conservation is a cost-effective strategy for protecting most Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN)
- A more integrated approach to land management within Wildlife Management Areas that addresses long-term ecological diversity and resiliency

- Improved management of terrestrial invasive plants, one of the most significant threats to at-risk wildlife and habitats identified in the SWAP
- Enhanced capacity to provide comprehensive technical assistance to private landowners to conserve at-risk wildlife, plants, and natural communities, while improving climate resilience
- Improved customer service through a “one-stop-shop” for municipalities, land trusts, consultants, state agencies, landowners, and the public
- Greater consistency and integration in the review of and recommendations for siting renewable energy projects
- Increased capacity to identify and acquire strategic conservation lands that advance SWAP and Maine Climate Action Plan goals
- Improved tracking, integration, and development of SGCN species and habitat databases
- An increased ability to leverage federal funding by using MNAP General Fund resources as match

We believe that moving MNAP to MDIFW is in the best interests of Maine’s people and natural resources. This merger requires numerous statutory adjustments to portions of Titles 12, 36, and 38 (all of which are contained in this bill), as well as multiple layers of budget initiatives to move positions and financial accounts from DACF to MDIFW. I would be happy to go through these specific changes in more detail during the work session.

Finally, in reviewing this bill we found one small drafting error. Section 41 adds MDIFW to the consistency review of Comprehensive plans done by the Municipal Planning Assistance Program in Title 30-A. DIFW and other state agencies already receive requests to provide state comments in Comprehensive Plan consistency reviews. Adding MDIFW to the consistency review process in Title 38 sets up a competing and duplicative process that would be unique to MDIFW and no other state agencies. Therefore, I would recommend striking Section 41 from the bill.