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Senate of
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Senate District 30

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Testimony of Senator Stacy Brenner introducing
LD 2141, An Act to Invest in Maine's Natural Resource Economy
before the Joint Standing Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
February 4, 2026

Senator Tepler, Representative Doudera, and favored colleagues of the Environment and Natural Resources Committee, I am Senator Stacy Brenner. I represent Senate District 30, I'm a farmer and, in full transparency, I also work for Maine Farmland Trust. I am here today as the sponsor of this bill.

This is my sixth year serving on this committee, and for four of those six years, I have worked directly on issues related to the bottle deposit program — its effectiveness, its stability, and its future. I say that to be clear: this bill comes from deep familiarity with the system, not from a desire to disrupt it.

Maine's bottle bill is one of the most successful environmental laws in the country. It reduced waste, shifted consumer behavior, and protected our land and water. It was never intended to become a corporate revenue stream. Yet today, that is exactly what happens when deposits go unclaimed.

Each year, **an estimated \$10 to \$16 million in bottle deposits go unclaimed in Maine**, based on analyses of beverage sales and redemption rates.¹ Because Maine does not require public reporting of these funds, they never enter state accounts and are instead retained by beverage distributors. These are public dollars that, with no public tracking and to no public benefit, feed private gains.

That is not an environmental outcome. That is a policy failure.

This bill confronts that failure head-on. It redirects **just \$4 million** — a fraction of those unclaimed deposits — to two urgent natural resource needs: protecting farmland and restoring lakes.

The urgency is well documented. According to the 2022 U.S. Department of Agriculture Census of Agriculture, **Maine lost 82,567 acres of farmland between 2017 and 2022.**² That land has fallen out of agricultural production largely due to development pressure and rising land values — and once it's gone, it does not come back.

¹ Estimates of unclaimed bottle deposits derived from analyses of Maine beverage sales and redemption rates cited in legislative and policy briefings; Maine does not require public reporting of unclaimed deposits.

² U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service. *2022 Census of Agriculture: Maine State Profile*.

At the same time, the Maine Department of Environmental Protection reports **ongoing declines in lake water quality statewide**, driven by nutrient runoff, warming temperatures, and harmful algal blooms — with real consequences for public health, fisheries, tourism, property values, and local economies.³

After six years on this committee, I can say this with confidence: **we do not lack statutory tools to mitigate these threats**. The Legislature has already authorized the Working Farmland Access and Protection Program and the Lakes Restoration and Protection Fund. What we lack is funding aligned with the environmental outcomes we say we value.

I also want to be very clear about how farmland protection dollars are used, because this matters. Funds from this bill would be used to purchase conservation easements. These are voluntary, market-based transactions. Landowners are paid fair market value to permanently relinquish development rights, while keeping their land in private ownership and active agricultural use.

No land is taken. No one is forced. Landowners are compensated. And, property taxes are paid on farms with conservation easements.

In return, the public gains permanently protected farmland. You only get good farmland soils once. They are an essential piece of public infrastructure for our food system and our rural economies. The public also gains cleaner water, a vibrant lake ecosystem and related economy.

This bill does not raise taxes. It does not increase the deposit. It does not change redemption behavior. It does not undermine the bottle bill. It simply restores accountability, putting public dollars towards critically important public uses to relieve pressure on Maine taxpayers.

I'll close with this: when a Mainer pays a deposit and never gets it back, that money should not quietly pad a corporate balance sheet. It should work for the public good. **If the deposit doesn't come home to the person, it should come home to Maine — to its farms, its lakes, and its future.**

Thank you. I urge the committee to support and advance this bill.

I also want to note that I've had the opportunity to review the Department's testimony in advance, and I appreciate the technical clarity it brings. I look forward to working closely with the Department and the committee on a potential amendment at the work session. In particular, I agree that the State's spirits program should be explicitly exempted, as those unclaimed deposits already flow to the Highway Fund and are supporting a clear public purpose.

I also agree with the Department that increased redemption success could reduce available escheats over time — and that would be a positive outcome for the bottle bill. That reality underscores the importance of including clear prioritization and allocation language in the bill to address years when available funds fall below the proposed amounts. I'm eager to work with the Department and the committee to ensure the bill is technically sound, flexible, and fully aligned with existing redemption goals in statute.

³ Maine Department of Environmental Protection. *Integrated Water Quality Monitoring and Assessment Report; Maine Lakes Report*.