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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, CONSERVATION
AND FORESTRY

IN SUPPORT OF LD 268

An Act To Eliminate Online Burn Permit Fees for All Areas of the State

February 16, 2021

Senator Dill, Representative O'Neil, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, my name is Jeffrey Currier. I am a Regional Forest Ranger with the Maine Forest Service. I am here to testify on behalf of the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry in support of LD 268.

Maine Forest Rangers and our municipal fire department are partners. We work hard together every day to ensure that Maine is safe from the devastating effects of wildfires. This partnership has served our state well, and we use a series of tools to make certain that Mainers and visitors to our state use safe practices when burning out-of-doors.

One of those tools is requiring people who wish to conduct an open burn to obtain a permit. When people seek and are issued a permit, it provides a great deal of important information to us and our fire-fighting partners. Forest rangers use our online permit system to regulate open burning, to identify "friendly" smokes, and to promote general awareness with our municipal fire partners on where out-of-door burning is occurring. The system is directly tied to our automated fire weather and fire danger prediction system, and it works very well. We believe this requirement has contributed to our success in limiting the number of wildfires and thereby protecting life, property, and our state's valuable natural resources.

Because burn permits enhance *our* fire safety efforts, we want to present as few barriers as we can to people seeking them. LD 268 seeks to strengthen our efforts by eliminating the transaction fee for our state's highly successful online open burning permit system. Currently, we charge a \$7.00 fee for each permit issued. Citizens can still obtain a hand-written permit from town fire officials or forest rangers for free. It is our experience in today's technology-driven society that people appreciate being able to acquire open burning permits more efficiently using their computer or smartphone.

It is our view that the cost of a permit should not be a limiting factor for Mainers to use such a highly successful system when the end goal for all of us should be the prevention of wildfires. We believe that the elimination of the fee will only increase the use of the system and, therefore, result in an even higher level of wildfire prevention success in Maine. It is also critical that an online permit system be equally available for all citizens in all areas of our state. After changes in public law in 2017, certain municipalities were afforded the use of an online permit

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system at no cost. Adoption of this legislation will ensure that Mainers in all areas have that same ability. Our system is stable, well maintained by the professionals at InforME, and easy to use for citizens. Most importantly, it is extremely effective for our mission. We are confident that the passage of this bill will only increase the effectiveness of our efforts to prevent potentially devastating wildfires.

Adopting this measure would not interfere with private systems charging a fee for the permits that they provide, and we have no objection to that. We simply want to eliminate as many barriers as possible to people using the state's online system.

We ask for your support on this bill. I, as well as other members of our agency, are happy to answer any questions.