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Written Testimony - 130th Maine Legislature, LD No.657

March 18, 2021

Honorable members of the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee, thank you for your time and attention to this important bill. My name is Owen Blease. I am a resident of Naples, Maine and currently serving the Maine Bureau of Parks and Lands as a park manager IV at Sebago Lake State Park. I share my testimony with you today to express my personal opinions on LD No. 657 and my testimony does not, in any capacity, represent the position of the Maine Bureau of Parks and Lands or the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry.

I support LD No. 657 as it was presented to the Clerk of the House on March 1, 2021.

As written “The bill authorises the Director of the Bureau to appoint park rangers with law enforcement powers” (Line 35, LD No. 657). I strongly believe that this selective needs-based approach to appointing specific park rangers with law enforcement powers is the best approach to increasing law enforcement capability of the Bureau in locations where the need exists.

In my opinion, the majority of parks in the Maine State Park system do not have a need for law enforcement park rangers. While park rule, civil and criminal violations occur at all parks, most situations can be resolved using the Bureau’s traditional approach to rule enforcement of 1. Educate and Inform; 2. Enforce and Warn; and 3. Evict. In the case of significant criminal violations or individuals trespassing after an eviction, outside law enforcement can often be on scene to assist park staff in less than 15 minutes. To the best of my knowledge, the Bureau would be within its authority to develop an exclusionary rule to address instances when specific individuals repeatedly violate park rules over the course of multiple visits to a park. If the Bureau developed an exclusionary rule and paired it with the traditional rule enforcement approach, the Bureau would have an enforcement plan that works for most parks, but even at its best, this would not work in some locations.

In my opinion, the need for law enforcement park rangers exists in remote settings where the response time of state and local law enforcement is more than twenty minutes. Prime examples of these locations include the Allagash Wilderness Waterway, island state parks and the Penobscot River Corridor. In these locations, responding law enforcement may not arrive for more than an hour from the time they are requested. In these locations, park rangers are

enforcing rules in remote settings, often alone and without reliable cell phone reception. In these locations, the Bureau's traditional approach to rule enforcement is limited.

In my opinion, evicting an entire group from the Allagash Wilderness Waterway or Penobscot River Corridor is far more inflammatory than issuing a summons. More importantly, I feel that placing park rangers in enforcement situations in rural areas without law enforcement authority, training and resources poses a great deal of risk to their safety. If it comes time to evict someone from these areas who do you call if you need help? What do you do and where do you go if a situation quickly deteriorates? With the proper training and authority made possible by LD No. 657, park rangers could generate compliance in remote areas more effectively with a lighter hand and less risk.

If park rangers can be authorized to issue summonses why aren't more park rangers doing this? With authorization from the Director of the Bureau, select bureau staff may issue summonses on a case-by-case basis. In my opinion, there are multiple aspects of the current procedure that make this process impractical and unsafe for park rangers to engage in.

1. The Bureau Director must first approve a park ranger, on a case-by-case basis, in order for the park ranger to write a summons. If the Director is not readily available, or you do not have cell phone reception, this process is not feasible for issuing a summons at the scene of a crime. Once a violator has left the scene, tracking them down to deliver a summons days after the violation occurred, would be time consuming and cumbersome.
2. To the best of my knowledge, park rangers are not trained sufficiently in the process of issuing a summons, distinguishing probable cause or how to properly represent the Bureau in a court hearing.
3. To the best of my knowledge, park rangers do not have the authority to require a violator to present a form of identification upon request. Park rangers also don't have the ability to verify an individual's identity using police dispatch. As a result, park rangers have no way to know if a violator has warrants, a history of assault or if they are providing a false name.
4. To the best of my knowledge, if an individual refuses to sign a summons being issued to them, they may then be arrested. Currently, park rangers do not have the authority to make arrests. If an individual becomes a threat and the park ranger can not make an arrest they have created a hazardous situation that may not be mitigated without the support of outside law enforcement. In my opinion, park rangers should not be

authorized to issue a summons without proper training and the authority to make arrests.

In summary, I support LD No. 657 and its goal to authorize the Director of the Bureau to appoint park rangers with law enforcement powers. This bill as written would improve the training and functionality of park rangers, particularly in remote areas, by empowering them with the knowledge, skills and abilities to issue summons in the field. I see this bill, not as an avenue to arm all park rangers or deviate from the Bureau's education and customer service focus; I see this bill as an opportunity to increase the capability of the Bureau to better protect its visitors and resources where unique and specific needs for enhanced enforcement strategies exist.

Maine State Parks and Public Lands are experiencing record use by the public and park rangers are at the tip of the spear to ensure that each visitor has a safe and enriching experience. I believe that this bill would enhance the capability of the Maine Bureau of Parks and Lands at a time when the need is greater than ever before. Thank you very much for your time and for this opportunity to testify. I hope that you consider my position in your deliberations on LD No. 657.