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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,
CONSERVATION AND FORESTRY

IN SUPPORT OF LD 700

*An Act to Promote Economic Development and Outdoor Recreation
through Investment in State Parks*

March 25, 2021

Senator Dill, Representative O'Neil, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, my name is Andy Cutko, and I am the Director of the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry's Bureau of Parks and Lands. I am speaking in support of LD 700 on behalf of the Department, and I want to thank Representatives O'Neil and Skolfield for sponsoring the bill.

This bill would create a dedicated, non-lapsing account to be used for capital improvements and maintenance for Maine State Parks. Currently, State Parks receive a biennial allocation from the General Fund. While that amount covers basic annual operations, it does not begin to address the estimated \$50 million backlog in maintenance and infrastructure needs. The Department has submitted to the committee a document that provides additional detail on both the value and needs of the State Park system, including the estimated \$100 million contribution of the State Park system to Maine's economy.

The proposed legislation is particularly timely for a few reasons. First, as you know, Maine's State Parks set an all-time attendance record last year, exceeding the 3 million visitation mark for the first time ever. (My own family contributed to those numbers -- we camped at four State Park campgrounds last summer.) All indications point to another banner year in 2021. On the opening day of State Park campground reservations this year, the Bureau of Parks and Lands and InforME processed 3,234 transactions in the first hour, which represents a 75% increase since last year. These opening day transactions included an astonishing 149 transactions in one minute! Through March 16 of this year, the Bureau had booked more than 10,300 campground reservations, 66% more than at this time last year.

In addition to our record year in 2020, another significant development last year was the passage of the Great American Outdoors Act. This federal legislation will result in a significant increase -- a potential doubling -- of the federal funds available for State Parks through the Land and

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Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). LWCF funding requires a 50% state or local match, and LD 700 could generate important State Park funding that could serve as LWCF match.

This dedicated account created by the LD 700 would allocate any annual revenue over \$4.5 million to that account; \$4.5 million is the average annual State Park revenue over the last decade. The fiscal impact of this bill will depend on the amount of revenue generated. However, as the Committee considers the fiscal impact, recognize that these dedicated funds would be directed to restoring fundamental state-owned infrastructure.

In short, LD 700 would create a most welcome vehicle to support the ongoing maintenance and improvement of Maine State Parks, as we have seen a progressive growth in visitation through the years, and also at this moment when interest in and use of our parks is surging. Thanks for your thoughtful consideration of these issues, and I would be glad to answer any questions.