



**Testimony of Eliza Townsend, Maine Conservation Policy Director
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 distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, I am Eliza Townsend, Maine Conservation Policy Director for the Appalachian Mountain Club. I am pleased to address you today in support of LD 700.

AMC is the nation’s oldest conservation, recreation, and education organization, with the mission to foster the protection, enjoyment and understanding of the outdoors. We have 6,500 members in Maine, and own 75,000 acres of forestland in the 100-Mile Wilderness region of Piscataquis County, managed for multiple use including sustainable forestry, backcountry recreation, and environmental education. We have had a strong interest in outdoor recreation since our founding in 1876 as a group dedicated to adventuring and exploring.

Everyone needs to get outside--to enjoy fresh air, to relax, to clear our heads, to enjoy scenery and connect with nature, to cool off, to be physically active, or just to sit and read or think. Located throughout the state, our state parks make that opportunity available to everyone at a low cost. Truly, they are special places.

More people know that today than just a year ago. In 2020, a record 3 million people turned to them as they sought to relieve stress, to connect safely with friends and family, and to vacation in a budget-conscious way. Camping in particular surged across the system: by 20% at Lamoine State Park, 31% at Mt. Blue, 37% at Cobscook, and a whopping 45% at Aroostook State Park!

This rediscovery of the benefits of outdoor recreation is wonderful. It has sparked unprecedented sales of outdoor equipment and brought more money into the state coffers in the form of park entrance fees and sales taxes. We can hope that it has fundamentally changed life habits for many, reconnecting them to nature and spurring increased physical activity. In a February article, several new residents told the Bangor Daily News that access to outdoor activities was a factor in their decision to relocate here.

At the same time, the surge of use has put new pressures on infrastructure that has been sorely in need of repair or replacement for a long time. The last sizable investment in the parks was more than a decade ago, and a backlog of about \$50 million of needed repairs has accumulated. Challenges range from facilities that are out of date, to unsightly damaged and leaking buildings, to major safety concerns.

We can and must do better. Investing in our state parks is first and foremost a matter of public safety and is our responsibility. In addition, it will improve visitor experience, make the parks more welcoming to people of all ages and abilities, and provide for better working conditions for staff. Investing in our state parks will demonstrate self-respect and regard for all users.



The considerable resources Maine will see from the American Rescue Plan Act could be invested in the parks, which is exciting. Nevertheless, we should take steps to ensure that they are never so neglected again. By passing LD 700 we can create an ongoing source of funding for maintenance. A model exists in the non-lapsing account established to assist the Maine Forest Service to replace its aging fleet of aircraft.

I urge the committee to pass LD 700 and I would be happy to answer any questions.