



Testimony before the

Joint Standing Committee on Environment and Natural Resources

By Rob Wood, Director of Government Relations and Climate Policy

March 15, 2021

Re: LD 593, An Act To Restore Regular Eelgrass Mapping in the State

Senator Brenner, Representative Tucker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Environment and Natural Resources, my name is Rob Wood and I am the Director of Government Relations and Climate Policy for The Nature Conservancy in Maine. I appreciate this opportunity to testify **in support of LD 593**, An Act To Restore Regular Eelgrass Mapping in the State.

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is an international conservation organization dedicated to conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends. Guided by science, we create innovative, on-the-ground solutions to our world's toughest challenges so that nature and people can thrive together. Working in more than 70 countries, we use a collaborative approach that engages local communities, governments, the private sector, and other partners. The Nature Conservancy has been working in Maine for more than 60 years and is the 12th largest landowner in the state, owning and managing roughly 275,000 acres. We work across the state to restore the rivers and streams that support healthy fish populations, partner with fishermen to rebuild groundfish populations to benefit coastal communities across the Gulf of Maine, and develop innovative solutions to address the causes and impacts of climate change.

LD 593 directs the Department of Environmental Protection, in consultation with the Department of Marine Resources, to establish and administer a program to regularly produce and update maps regarding the distribution of eelgrass beds in the State. The sponsor's amendment would add salt marsh vegetation to the scope of the mapping program.

Salt marshes and eelgrass provide shelter and foraging areas for hundreds of marine and estuarine species in Maine, including many that are important to commercial fisheries. These keystone habitats form the foundation of the food web along Maine's coast. Many sea-run fish that the State and The Nature Conservancy are working to protect use eelgrass beds to aid their transition between fresh and salt water. Salt marshes and eelgrass also stabilize coastal soils and nearshore substrate, reducing coastal erosion.

In addition to serving these critical ecosystem functions, salt marshes and eelgrass are a good bellwether of overall coastal ecosystem health. Mapping changes over time can alert the State to important environmental changes, such as nitrogen loading.

Furthermore, as noted in Maine's new Climate Action Plan, salt marshes and eelgrass absorb and store substantial amounts of carbon in their soils. Understanding where these "blue carbon" resources are located and how they are changing over time will inform the State's climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies into the future.

For these reasons, eelgrass mapping and monitoring is one of The Nature Conservancy's top research priorities in Maine. We participated in the Department's recent mapping of eelgrass in Casco Bay (an image of the GIS data resulting from this project is attached to my testimony), and we look forward to continuing this partnership with the Department in the future. LD 593 would ensure more regular and consistent mapping of salt marsh and eelgrass resources and extend mapping beyond Casco Bay to all coastal regions of the State.

In general, we believe it is important for state agencies to take a leadership role in documenting the status and trends of key natural resources, particularly when those resources, like salt marshes and eelgrass, are essential to food chains that support sustainable ecosystems and jobs. The State's fiscal resources must be considered, of course, but we believe this is a worthwhile place to allocate State resources should they become available.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I am happy to answer any questions now or in the future.

Attachment A: Partial results of 2018 eelgrass mapping in Casco Bay



(Credit: Seth Barker)