MAINE AUDUBON

Joint Standing Committee on Environment and Natural Resources
c/o Legislative Information Office
100 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333

May 3, 2021

RE: LD 1488, Resolve, To Study and Recommend Improvements to Maine's Dam Safety

Dear Senator Brenner, Representative Tucker, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of LD 1488, Resolve, To Study and Recommend Improvements to Maine's Dam Safety, on behalf of Maine Audubon and our 30,000 members and supporters.

Maine's landscape, with its 30,000 miles of rivers and streams, contains over 1,000 dams. It's an aging system: it is estimated that the average age of these dams is 104 years. The Maine Dam Safety Program (MDSP) is charged with inspecting existing dams and reservoirs, reviewing the design and construction of new dams, and working with dam owners to avoid and respond to emergencies such as dam failures. This work is done admirably with limited budgets and staffing.

LD 1488 presents an opportunity to support the MDSP with data and recommendations for improvement that are critical to its operation and that would bring in additional support from key stakeholders. The American Society of Civil Engineers gives Maine's dam infrastructure a D+ in its annual Maine Infrastructure Report Card. The MDSP needs the support offered through this bill to be able to improve that ranking and improve the safety of Mainers.

Maine Audubon supports LD 1488 because the potential for dam failure is an extreme public safety risk, and because dam failure would devastate Maine's aquatic natural landscape and the wildlife living there. Maine is already seeing the effects of climate change that make this concern even greater: between 1948 and 2011 Maine's large annual storms have increased in frequency by 74% and in size by 23%, and that trend is expected to continue into the future. These larger, more frequent storms put additional pressure on Maine's infrastructure, particularly dams and culverts.

Whether constructed for power generation, flood control, or recreational opportunities, dams are significant features on Maine's landscape and the failure of any one of these dams could wreak havoc in the public, as well as fish and wildlife populations. Dam failure would send water into the terrestrial landscape, damaging anything in its path and bringing higher flows into the streams and rivers. Sediment held behind dams for decades or centuries would be released into the waterways,

affecting fish, macroinvertebrates, and other aquatic organisms.

Maine Audubon coordinates the Stream Smart program, working with partners to protect and conserve Maine's aquatic habitats by improving road/stream crossings to protect fish and wildlife habitat and to protect road infrastructure and public safety. Dam safety has a natural connection to this work. While we are concerned about the negative impact a road washout from an undersized culvert would have on the habitats downstream, the potential harm from a dam breach is significantly more serious to public safety and environmental health.

Maine Audubon recommends the committee support LD 1488 in order to provide the Maine Dam Safety Program with much needed support and data in order to make this invaluable program even more effective. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of LD 1488.

Sincerely,

Sarah A. Haggerty
Conservation Biologist

Citations

American Society of Civil Engineers. 2020. 2020 Maine Infrastructure Report Card. https://infrastructurereportcard.org/state-item/maine/

Environment America Research & Policy Center. 2012. When It Rains, It Pours: Global Warming and the Increase in Extreme Precipitation from 1948 to 2011.

https://environmentamerica.org/sites/environment/files/reports/When%20It%20Rains,%20It%20Pours%20vUS.pdf