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Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government

RE: LD 590 – An Act Regarding the Inclusion of Racial and Other Demographic Data from State Agencies in the Legislative Process

Senator Baldacci, Representative Salisbury, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government, my name is Karen Blakelock, and I work for The Nature Conservancy in Maine. I appreciate this opportunity testify in support of LD 590 – An Act Regarding the Inclusion of Racial and Other Demographic Data from State Agencies in the Legislative Process.

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is a nonprofit 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. We use a collaborative approach that engages local communities, governments, the private sector, and other partners. The Nature Conservancy has been leading conservation in Maine for more than 60 years and is the 12th largest landowner in the state, owning and managing roughly 300,000 acres. We also work across Maine to restore rivers and streams, partner with fishermen in the Gulf of Maine to rebuild groundfish populations and develop innovative solutions to address our changing climate.

TNC is especially grateful for the leadership of Senator Talbot Ross on this bill, as a science-based organization, The Nature Conservancy is of the opinion that more data will help us make more informed decisions.

Our organization has come to understand that centering equity in our work is critical to achieving TNC's vision of a world where "the diversity of life thrives". Conservation does not happen in a vacuum. The work of conserving natural places inevitably intersects with and affects human communities in ways that create both benefits and burdens. As conservationists and as people, it is our responsibility to understand the full range of these impacts—especially the burdens they impose on communities that have historically experienced oppression and marginalization and still do today.

TNC supports this bill, and we see it as a step towards more future action on environmental justice in Maine. We are committed to pursuing measures to ensure the equitable distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, addressing cumulative impacts to environmental justice populations, and exploring how Maine agencies might develop specific community engagement plans in all decision making. Incorporating demographic data in instances where the state already has access to it into legislative decision making will help ensure that environmental justice and equity work takes place across all branches of government.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment in support of LD 590. I am happy to answer questions now or in the future.