



State House from Capitol Park by Beth Comeau

MAINE Environment

2023 Report Card for Maine's Environment

From the Desk of Our CEO



This year's legislative session was my first opportunity to experience our work together at the State House. The power of NRCM lies in the deep expertise of our team in Augusta and with NRCM supporters like you, located in every legislative district in the state.

The results of this legislative session demonstrated once again that good environmental policy not only protects our woods, waters, and climate, but also supports Maine's workers. The connection

between NRCM's work and Maine jobs was evident this year in our priority issues: modernizing the Bottle Bill—including shoring up redemption centers—and taking the first steps to establish a new offshore wind industry in Maine that will bring 30,000 jobs to our state.

Common-sense policies are nothing new to Maine. They go back decades to include legislation such as the e-waste bill to ensure safe recycling of computer monitors and TVs. And stopping polluting projects from spoiling iconic places like Acadia National Park and the Downeast coast. And is there a better example than the Bottle Bill itself, first passed in 1976? Our work to transform it this year was successful thanks to the collaborative approach of legislators, Maine businesses, and caring people like you.

We're fortunate to have a Legislature that truly works for the people in their districts. Prioritizing solutions and issues important to your community, these elected officials passed an impressive suite of bills that protect our waters and wildlife, ensure the sustainability of communities long into the future, and have made enormous strides in our transition to clean, renewable energy. We still have work ahead of us on important issues, such as restoring sovereignty for tribes in Maine, and we remain committed to working with you to create a just and sustainable future for everyone in Maine.

—Rebecca Sanders, CEO

Summary of the Session

Lawmakers passed dozens of bills and spending measures this year that will help protect Maine's environment and wildlife, accelerate responsible clean energy development, expand our collective efforts to address climate change, create good-paying jobs as we transition away from fossil fuels, and improve the lives of Maine people and communities.

We are particularly excited that the Legislature passed, and the Governor signed into law, bills to boost offshore wind power and modernize Maine's Bottle Bill. Both were heavy lifts through the legislative process, and each faced moments of drama right up to the final hours of the session—which adjourned at 3:00 a.m. on July 26, the latest adjournment date in decades.

The Offshore Wind Procurement bill holds the potential of launching an entirely new clean energy industry in Maine and helping Maine reach its goal of 100% clean energy by 2040 and creating thousands of good-paying jobs in the process. The legislation includes extensive measures to protect wildlife and support Maine's commercial fishing industry.

Goal	Outcome
Boost Offshore Wind Power	++
Strengthen Maine's Bottle Bill	++
Funding for Climate Action	+
Protect Wildlife	+
Defeat Rollback Bills	++
Recognize Tribal Sovereignty	TBD
Invest in Maine Trails	TBD

Lawmakers passed an emergency bill (which means it became law immediately) early in the year to help protect jobs at local redemption centers, which play a key role in receiving and processing millions of beverage containers. The Legislature also passed a much-needed bill to simplify and modernize the Bottle Bill, which remains Maine's most important litter prevention and recycling program.

We also were pleased that lawmakers invested in multiple programs to advance our collective response to climate change. This includes \$3 million annually for two years for the Community Resilience Partnership Program that supports projects to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels and enhance community resilience.

Lawmakers did a good job this year defeating bills that would have weakened Maine's environmental safeguards and blocked efforts to develop clean energy and climate solutions. Unfortunately, legislation to ensure equity and justice for tribes in Maine once again faltered. Although the House and Senate passed a bill to enable the tribes to access federal laws that apply to the nation's other 570 federally recognized tribes, Governor Mills vetoed the bill, and the Legislature was not able to override the veto. Separately, a bill to recognize full sovereignty for tribes in Maine was carried over to next year. We remain a steadfast supporter of the Wabanaki people's quest for full sovereignty so they can be treated as fairly and equitably as every other tribe in the nation.

Lawmakers decided to carry over to next year the Maine Trails Bond legislation, which would provide \$30 million in grants over 4 years for the design, development, and maintenance of all types of trails statewide. More than 300 businesses, organizations, and towns endorsed the Maine Trails Bond. We will be working hard to pass the measure next year, with the goal of getting it on the November 2024 ballot.

As in the past, NRCM worked closely this year with our colleagues in the Environmental Priorities Coalition, comprised of 34 environmental, conservation, and public health organizations, and with many other partners and allies as well.

Thank you for your support and engagement throughout the session. Your letters, emails, and testimony on priority bills were invaluable and helped deliver another very successful year at the State House. Together, we helped protect the Maine we all love.

—Pete Didisheim, Senior Director of Advocacy



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Building a Clean Energy Future for All

Big Win for Offshore Wind In one of the most consequential actions of the session, the Legislature passed a bill to launch a new clean energy industry for Maine by directing the Public Utilities Commission (PUC) to procure 3,000 MW of responsibly developed offshore wind in the Gulf of Maine by 2040. NRCM's expertise was tapped extensively for this bill, which comes with strong standards for good-paying jobs, protecting wildlife, increasing equity, and supporting Maine's commercial fishing industry. The bill also supports development of deep-water port infrastructure necessary for offshore wind. Separately, lawmakers approved \$15 million as an initial investment in development of a port for assembly of offshore wind parts.

Northern Maine Renewable Energy Lawmakers authorized a transmission line project to deliver up to 1,200 MW of wind power generated in Aroostook County into the New England electrical grid. Although the final route still needs to be finalized and the project needs to receive development permits, this was an important step forward in delivering real reductions in climate pollution to help meet Maine's goal of 100% clean energy by 2040. NRCM will not take a final position on the project until we can carefully review the proposed route of the project. However, we are encouraged by the possibility that this project will move forward, creating clean power and jobs as we reduce our dependence on fossil fuels.

Community-based Climate Action As part of the State's two-year budget, legislators appropriated \$3 million annually for the Community Resilience Partnership Program, which provides grants and technical support to Maine communities planning for climate resilience and emission reduction projects. More than 140 cities, towns, and tribal governments currently participate.

Preparing for Climate Impacts Lawmakers approved \$7.5 million in the State Infrastructure Adaptation Fund to support municipal culvert grants. These upgrades are critically important to enhance fish passage and to avoid road damage from extreme weather events.

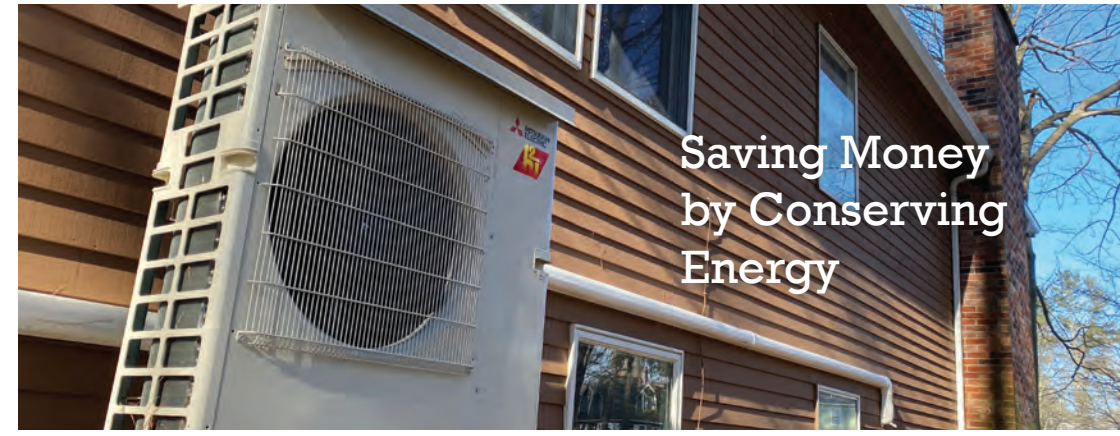
Solar Project Siting A new law will encourage developers to locate large-scale solar energy farms on land that is no longer usable for traditional agriculture, including farmland impacted by PFAS ("forever chemicals") contamination. The PUC is directed to pursue a competitive procurement process for large-scale solar energy projects on such lands, which could add hundreds of additional megawatts of clean energy to the grid.

Reformed Net Energy Billing Lawmakers passed a bill to continue Maine's momentum on small and medium-sized solar projects that lower costs for local schools, towns, businesses, and homeowners. The law directs the State to seek support from federal grant programs that could reduce energy costs for low- and moderate-income residents.

Collaboration on Offshore Wind Research The budget includes funding to continue the Maine Offshore Wind Research Consortium, ensuring that scientists, state regulators, fishermen, and other stakeholders continue working together on strategies for responsible offshore wind power development in Maine.

Battery Storage Boost A new law will encourage advanced energy storage by directing the Governor's Energy Office to develop a Maine Energy Storage Program to procure up to 200 MW toward a state goal of 400 MW of energy storage capacity by 2030.

Grid Access for Renewable Energy A new law requires the PUC to appoint an expert ombudsman to improve electric grid access for distributed energy resources. This point person will provide information to anyone seeking to interconnect with the grid, help track and mediate disputes with the utilities, and convene working groups as needed to streamline the integration of solar and storage across Maine's distribution grid.



Colin Durrant

Saving Money by Conserving Energy

Green Schools Program The Legislature created a Green Schools Program and directed the Department of Education to provide staff leadership to support schools that want to invest in clean energy technology and energy efficiency projects. The funding will help schools leverage significant new federal funding opportunities, from clean school buses to new clean energy opportunities.

Investing in Heat Pumps As part of the budget, lawmakers transferred \$2.8 million to continue the Maine Housing Authority's low-income heat pump program, which was slated to run out of funding due to record energy costs and LIHEAP funding needs last winter. This additional funding boost comes as Maine has surpassed its goal of 100,000 installed heat pumps, and now is shooting for 175,000 by 2026.



JSmulski/NRCM

Improving Recycling and Reducing Toxics

New and Improved Bottle Bill Legislators passed a critically important bill to modernize Maine's Bottle Redemption Program (Bottle Bill) by simplifying the program and making it more efficient, while incorporating technology advances and investments to expand the use of refillable containers. This was a top priority bill for NRCM, with our sustainability expertise providing insight critical to extensive negotiations that ultimately secured unanimous bipartisan support for the bill.

Relief for Redemption Centers Lawmakers helped save jobs and businesses that are critical to the Bottle Bill by passing emergency legislation that immediately increased the handling fee to 5.5 cents. This is up a penny from when the fee was last increased in 2020, with an additional increase to 6 cents per container that became law on September 1.

Reduced Mercury Pollution Lawmakers passed a bill to reduce mercury pollution and save energy for consumers by prohibiting the sale and distribution of new mercury-containing light bulbs starting in January 2026. Maine joins Vermont, which has also enacted such legislation.



Caille Wronker

Protecting Land, Wildlife, and Clean Water

Safeguards for Loons Lawmakers provided additional protection for Common Loons from lead poisoning from fishing gear by banning certain painted lead jigs that put them especially at risk. The law goes into effect starting in September 2024.

Protecting Endangered and Threatened Species

The Legislature added eight species to Maine's Endangered and Threatened Species Lists, providing more protection to the Bank Swallow, Cliff Swallow, Bicknell's Thrush, Blackpoll Warbler, Saltmarsh Sparrow, tricolored bat, Ashton's cuckoo bumble bee, and margined tiger beetle. All of these species have experienced significant declines that put their populations at risk.



David Small

Blackpoll Warbler

Additional Habitat Protection A new law will provide additional habitat protection for threatened and endangered species located near proposed development projects. The law expands the circumstances under which the Maine Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and Department of Inland Fisheries & Wildlife must provide consultation and strategies to developers to avoid and minimize habitat impacts for endangered and threatened species by development projects.

Lake Water Quality Funding Lawmakers provided initial funding of \$200,000 for the Lake Water Quality Restoration and Protection Fund. This will help protect lakes that are at risk from algae blooms. They also authorized the Fund to receive money from other public and private sources.

Protecting Water Quality at Possible Mining Sites Lawmakers approved changes to Maine's mining law in response to interest in new minerals that had not been accounted for in the existing law. The DEP will develop rules to protect water quality by requiring extensive sampling and analysis of certain types of ore, such as lithium-containing minerals, in advance of any possible mining activities to prove that the ore is inert. The draft rules, which will need legislative approval, also will require water quality monitoring at such mining sites to ensure that the sampling accurately determined that extraction would not pose a risk to water quality or human health.

Land for Maine's Future Trust Fund The Governor signed into law a bill to create a new Land for Maine's Future (LMF) Trust Fund, which would hold all sources of funding for the LMF program, from bonds and appropriations, and also from interest earned on such funds. This will help protect LMF funding from being diverted to other uses and ensures that multiple sources of funding can be aggregated to help conserve land through the LMF program.



J.Caldwell/NRCM

Expanding Healthier Transportation Options

Electric Bike Incentives A new law will add electric bikes (e-bikes) to the Efficiency Maine rebate program to provide Mainers with an affordable transportation option for reducing carbon pollution and avoiding use of cars for short trips.

Public Transit Boost A new law will expand the Public Transit Advisory Council to include a broader array of rural and urban stakeholders and requires biennial reporting on transit needs and solutions. Also, lawmakers provided a substantial increase in transit operating funds in the biennial budget, increasing from about \$1.2 million per year to \$5 million per year.

Mountain Division Trail In a big win for trails, legislators directed the Department of Transportation to develop 31 miles of the Mountain Division Trail between Standish and Fryeburg by removing State-owned inactive railroad track and building a 10-foot-wide multi-use trail, subject to funding and permitting. Funding for this project will need to be secured through state, federal, and private sources.



Courtesy John Anders, Sidecountry Trails

Looking Ahead to 2024

Maine Trails Bond We were disappointed that the Appropriations Committee decided to carry over the Maine Trails Bond to next year, along with all the other bonds under consideration. More than 300 organizations, businesses, and towns have endorsed this investment of \$30 million in Maine trails. We will be working hard with this coalition to pass the measure next year, with the goal of getting it on the November 2024 ballot so Maine voters can decide whether they want to invest in Maine trails.

Tribal Sovereignty Although a historic bill to recognize the sovereignty of the Wabanaki appeared to have strong bipartisan support, the legislative session ended without the bill being enacted into law. Separately, a bill to help the tribes in Maine gain access to federal laws beneficial to the tribes passed the House and Senate but died following a veto by the Governor. We share the disappointment of so many that Maine is failing to enact a tribal sovereignty bill. We remain committed to working with the Wabanaki Alliance and other allies to advance this goal next year.

Forest Advisory Board A bill to help facilitate broader stakeholder input into Maine's forest management policies passed the House and Senate but did not receive funding in the appropriations process. It has been carried over to next year, and we will continue to support it.

Nuclear Power Promotion Bill NRCM worked to defeat a bill promoted by the nuclear power industry that would require the Maine PUC to seek industry proposals for the possible pursuit of so-called "small, modular nuclear reactors" in Maine. Nuclear power remains the most expensive energy source on the planet. The bill was carried over to the next session.



J.Caldwell/NRCM

Wabanaki Lobby Day

"For me, as a legislator, what's really important about citizen engagement is I want to know what the people think about the policy work we're doing...it's most impactful when I understand how it affects the people of Maine – not just the businesses and the profit but the people."



Senator Stacy Brenner, Chair of the Joint Committee on Environment & Natural Resources

"At the top of my list is drastically cutting fossil fuel use and mitigating climate change effects. NRCM is right there."

—NRCM member Denis Thoet of Augusta, Maine



Shandra Rubchinsky, co-owner of Jansen Bottle Redemption in Winthrop

"I had no idea how easily accessible your representatives are...you get a chance to talk to people that are going to make a difference. It was surprisingly moving. It's great to have you guys on our side."

2023 Report Card for Maine's Environment

Environmental Rollbacks Defeated

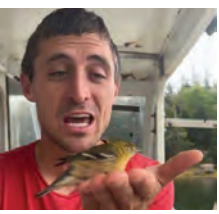
Lawmakers defeated bills this year that would have:

- ⊗ terminated the ban on single-use plastic bags
- ⊗ terminated Maine's net-energy billing program for solar energy
- ⊗ banned the development of offshore wind power
- ⊗ weakened the PUC's role in helping address climate change, and
- ⊗ terminated the Northern Maine renewable energy project.

NRCM tracked these bills and worked with our supporters across Maine to defeat them. Keeping Maine's safeguards in place is a key part of the work we do.

Check Out Our New Blog Posts

→ **Your Questions Answered: Wolfden's Proposed Pickett Mountain Mine** Forests & Wildlife Director Melanie Sturm shares more about why we're opposing the proposal for a zinc mine in the Katahdin region and answers some of the common questions we've been asked.

→  **The Day the Lobsterman Saw Birds Fall from the Sky** In their latest Birding with Jeff and Allison blog, NRCM's birding experts delve into the mystery of an amazing fallout of birds migrating during Hurricane Lee.

→ **Nahmakanta: A Glimpse into Maine's Ecological Reserve System** In honor of the 50th anniversary of the Endangered Species Act, we have partnered with Maine photographer Nathaniel Child on a blog and photography series to bring awareness to some of Maine's threatened and endangered species and their habitat. In addition to Nahmakanta, Nathaniel has also written about Big Reed Forest Reserve and the rare Black Terns of Messalonskee Lake.

→ **Critter Chatter: Do Foxes Swim?** Blogger Jayne Winter says, "I wasn't sure what this month's column would be about, but I needn't have worried. Don Cote always has a story or two (or more) to tell about the critters and experiences at the Duck Pond Wildlife Care Center!"



Jayne Winter

→ **Electric Trucks at Work in Maine Communities** Outreach Coordinator Josh Caldwell writes about how the Curtis Memorial Library in Brunswick went electric earlier this year when it launched the Bookmobile, an electric transit van designed to extend library services beyond the central library location.

→ **Behind the Scenes: How Maine Modernized the Bottle Bill** Maine's most effective recycling and litter reduction program just got a major upgrade! Sustainable Maine Director Sarah Nichols describes how two laws passed this year make improvements to the Bottle Bill that will help local redemption centers and make sure Mainers are able to redeem their "returnables" well into the future.

See new blogs by NRCM staff and special guests at nrcm.org/blog.

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"After I retired, I thought about what skills I had and how I could use them to call attention to climate change. I have been concerned about the environment since I was a child growing up on a farm in Benton. In eighth grade I wrote an essay about my concerns for the loss of farmland to housing development. Attending NRCM's State House Action Day was the beginning of my understanding that my voice could make a difference. I began writing, speaking, and organizing around issues of concern. Some issues I have been most passionate about include opposing the CMP corridor, supporting Wabanaki sovereignty, anything to do with reducing waste, Bottle Bill protection, protecting wildlife habitat, and ensuring strong mining protections for Maine."



—NRCM member Linda Woods of Waterville, Maine



"We have been long-time supporters of NRCM because it is a solid organization with a passionate, informed staff advocating for strong environmental legislation that benefits all Mainers. It is easy to take action and sign petitions because the staff gives us excellent information on which to base our comments. Any efforts to reduce air pollution, support sustainable energy, cut down on fossil fuel use, ensure better recycling practices and reduction of plastic, and protecting our lakes, rivers, ocean, and forests are all vital concerns to us."

— NRCM members Howard and Nancy Bliss of Brunswick, Maine

Thank You for Your Support

Special thanks to everyone who took action this legislative session. Speaking up on issues that matter to you—contacting your elected officials, writing letters to the editor, and other actions—take time but make a difference. Our work is also made possible thanks to the support of our dues-paying members. You help provide the resources we need to do our work every day and to keep you informed. If you are not yet a member, please consider joining us. We invite you to check our website for a giving level that is right for you at nrcm.org. Thank you!



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