



Testimony in Support of LD 1308, Resolve, Directing the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife to Establish a Working Group to Explore Opportunities to Maintain Public Access of Land

Before the Committee on Inland Fisheries and Wildlife

Sarah Nichols, on behalf of NRCM

April 2, 2025

Senator Baldacci, Representative Roberts, and distinguished members of the Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Committee, my name is Sarah Nichols and I'm testifying in support of LD 1308 on behalf of the Natural Resources Council of Maine (NRCM). NRCM is Maine's leading nonprofit, nonpartisan membership organization dedicated to protecting the environment on behalf of our nearly 24,000 supporters statewide and beyond.

Maine has a unique tradition of private landowners allowing public access on their lands for hunting, fishing, and recreation. Since most of Maine's land is private, this tradition is a pillar of the state's outdoor recreation economy, which supported nearly 30,000 jobs and contributed \$3.6 billion to our economy in 2023.¹ Hunting and fishing guides, snowmobile and ATV clubs, hikers, and cross-country skiers all depend on trail systems and access points on private land.

A key economic advantage of Maine's public-access model is its ability to support multiple land uses simultaneously. Privately owned working forests, for example, can continue operating while allowing recreational activities. These two heritage industries—forestry and outdoor recreation—are cornerstones of Inland Maine's local economies.

However, Maine's tradition of public access to private land is currently under threat. Since the pandemic, shifts in landownership and a rise in improper use have led to more private roads and forestlands being gated and posted, restricting public access. Many landowners cite legitimate concerns such as trespassing, land misuse, littering, and property damage. In 2024, the Maine Warden Service recorded over 593 landowner relations calls, most related to trespassing.²

For years, the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (DIFW) has worked to address these concerns through its Landowner Relations Program. This program has successfully raised awareness, increased enforcement, distributed signage, and created the Outdoor Partners Fund to support landowner relations. While these efforts should continue, the growing scale of the issue calls for further action.

LD 1308 addresses this need by requiring DIFW to convene a working group to explore potential public-private partnerships with commercial landowners to protect public access. This group would submit a report to this Committee by December 3, 2025, with recommendations and

¹ <https://maineoutdoorbrands.com/maines-outdoor-recreation-economy-surges-with-9-growth-contributing-3-4-billion-to-states-gdp-u-s-bureau-of-economic-analysis-reports/>

² <https://www1.maine.gov/ifw/docs/2025%20Landowner%20Relations%20Legislative%20Report%20Final.pdf>

potential legislation for the 2026 Second Regular Session. While the bill does not specify what such partnerships would entail, there is a strong need to bring key stakeholders together to develop creative solutions to address this issue.

To further underscore this need, there are two other bills that will be introduced this session that have similar goals to LD 1308. These are LR 1007, *An Act to Study the Future of Outdoor Recreational Access in Maine* introduced by Senator Black and LR 1366, *An Act to Protect Trails from Future Development* introduced by Representative Blier. Although the overall goals of these three bills are similar, the focus on recreational trails in LR 1007 and LR 1366 will likely require the involvement of several bureaus and programs within the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF).

To ensure that the full scope of the public access issue is addressed and to avoid any duplicative effort, we recommend that LD 1308 be evaluated alongside LR 1007 and LR 1366 to see if the concepts in these bills can be combined into a single piece of legislation. Given the economic and cultural significance of Maine's tradition of public access to private land, we would support any effort by this Committee to study its decline and develop legislative solutions.

For this reason, we urge the Committee to support this bill after considering its potential integration with similar legislation. Thank you for your time and consideration.