

**Testimony on LD 1762, An Act to Protect Recreational Trails
by Establishing the Trails for the Future Program**

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May 6, 2025

Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker, and distinguished members of the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry. My name is Pete Didisheim. I am the Advocacy Director for the Natural Resources Council of Maine, and I appreciate the opportunity to testify on LD 1762, *An Act to Protect Recreational Trails by Establishing the Trails for the Future Program*.

NRCM strongly supports measures to protect public access to trails for non-motorized and motorized uses, including snowmobiling and all-terrain vehicles. Maine has extraordinary trails, which contribute enormously to our economy and our way of life.

Development pressures across Maine are putting trails at risk. This bill is designed to help protect such trails through a program that would use public and private funding to protect public access to established recreational trails.

As demonstrated at the ballot box last November, Maine people strongly support investing in Maine trails of all types. The \$30 million Maine Trails Bond (Question 4) passed with 55% of the vote – the highest margin of the three bonds on the ballot. The Bureau of Parks and Lands has already opened the process for awarding the first \$7.5 million in Maine Trails Bond grants and is conducting workshops statewide describing the program for potential applicants.

Although it is not intended to be the primary purpose of the program, the Maine Trails Bond will allow organizations to request funding “to ensure public access through acquisition of easements or fee simple title.” However, because individual grants from the Maine Trails Bond will likely be no larger than \$200,000, this source of funding would not be sufficient for significant acquisitions of property or easements.

The Land for Maine’s Future (LMF) program also provides important support for protecting access to trails, and LMF projects have protected hundreds of miles of trails for non-motorized and motorized access.

But the LMF program has run out of money, so it will not be able to support new trail access acquisitions, as prioritized by LD 1762, unless the Legislature provides funding in this year's budget (such as through LD 593), or by placing an LMF bond on the ballot (as called for by LD 362).

In considering LD 1762, the Committee also should be aware of two bills under consideration in the IF&W Committee. LD 1308 (sponsored by Sen. Baldacci), and LD 1441 (sponsored by Sen. Black) would create working groups to study the future of public access to recreational trails and to identify strategies and solutions.

From our conversations with ATV and snowmobile groups, it's clear to us that the state does need to do more, and quickly, to protect public access to existing trails before access is lost forever. For many trails, it's already too late.

LD 1762 helps elevate the conversation about the risks Maine faces if public access to recreational trails is not addressed. The question for the Committee, and perhaps for any study process that may be established, will be whether creating a new program is the right next step, or existing or modified programs could accomplish these goals.

I appreciate the opportunity to share these comments and would be glad to answer any questions you may have.