

**TESTIMONY OF THE
DEPARTMENT OF INLAND FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE
BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON INLAND
FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE
NIETHER FOR NOR AGAINST L.D. 1532**

**“An Act to Expand the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Outdoor
Education Programs to Schools and Communities”**

Presented by Senator STEWART of Aroostook. Cosponsored by Senator: GUERIN of Penobscot, Representatives: MASON of Lisbon, WOOD of Greene, WOODSOME of Waterboro.

DATE OF HEARING: April 16, 2025

Good morning, Senator Baldacci, Representative Roberts and members of the Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Committee. I am Emily MacCabe, Director of Public Information and Education at Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, speaking on behalf of the Department, neither for nor against L.D. 1532

This bill authorizes the Department to conduct educational programs at third-party-owned locations through leases or partnerships and allows for collaboration with the Department of Education to develop a curriculum that could count toward secondary school instruction. Schools may choose to participate, with flexibility to hold programming at school facilities, third-party sites, or both. The bill also opens participation to homeschoolers and members of the public. It directs the Department to secure at least three geographically diverse sites by January 1, 2026, and to begin offering curriculum-based programs as soon as practicable that same year.

We appreciate the intent behind L.D. 1532 and recognize its alignment with many of our existing initiatives. Much of the work outlined in this bill is already in place or actively underway. While certain components would require additional resources to fully implement, the Department remains committed to expanding outdoor education opportunities through sustainable, community-based approaches.

For decades, the Department has delivered hands-on education programs that provide safe, supportive, and meaningful opportunities to build skills in hunting, trapping, fishing, shooting sports, and wildlife conservation. These efforts are central to our mission to conserve and enhance Maine’s fish and wildlife resources and help participants form lasting connections to the outdoors.

When it comes to public outreach and education, we’re not guessing. We take a data-driven approach, using tools such as license and harvest data, public surveys, user feedback, and research to guide our decisions. We are fully committed to the national R3 movement, focused on Recruitment, Retention, and Reactivation, and have incorporated its principles into a statewide strategic plan. A copy of that plan is included with this testimony. Our efforts are continually

evaluated to ensure they remain effective and responsive to the needs of Maine's outdoor community.

Our hunting, trapping, and shooting sports education, including both required safety courses and advanced programs, is currently supported through a five-year federal grant. Now in its second year, this grant is guided by a strategic plan with clear goals and benchmarks for program growth, accessibility, and improvement. The funding is essential to maintaining the infrastructure needed to deliver high-quality outdoor education in line with national best practices.

Our educational offerings range from mandatory safety courses to multi-day workshops and continuing education opportunities like our Next Step series. These programs promote safe outdoor practices and lifelong learning. A key focus is encouraging adult participants to serve as mentors, one of the most effective ways to grow youth participation by ensuring young people have support from experienced and active adults.

We are also a partner in Maine's 10-Year Outdoor Recreation Economy Roadmap, which emphasizes public engagement, access to the outdoors, and inter-agency collaboration as essential pillars of a strong outdoor economy.

To further strengthen our outreach, the Department recently launched a new brand for our full suite of education programs. These efforts will be highlighted through a redesigned website scheduled to launch within the year.

Current examples of our outdoor programs include:

- Partnerships with schools, Fish and Game clubs, and conservation groups to host public events and workshops;
- Skills-focused programs like Camp North Woods, learn-to-fish events, and outdoor skills weekends;
- Scholarships for youth to attend conservation camps at Pickerel Pond and 4-H Centers across the state;
- Educator training through Project WILD, Project WET, and The Nature of Teaching;
- Community and educator training in fishing and shooting sports through Hooked on Fishing—Not on Drugs, 4-H Shooting Sports, and USA Archery;
- Our Next Step workshops on hunting, conservation, and outdoor skills;
- Resources such as teaching tools, activity sets, and outdoor education guides;
- School and group education programs at Maine Wildlife Park;
- Public shooting opportunities at our Augusta and Fryeburg ranges.

We are currently developing a plan to expand Camp North Woods to offer more family-focused programs statewide, with a phased rollout planned for 2026.

We also maintain a long-standing partnership with the University of Maine Cooperative Extension, supporting year-round outdoor education for youth and adults, including opportunities that align with secondary education.

As noted earlier, much of the work proposed in this bill is already underway. We've seen great success with our leased facility in Augusta, where we host well-attended programs for all ages. Based on that model, we are working to expand our reach by identifying additional regional sites, including one in Brewer through a developing agreement with the Penobscot County Conservation Association. We are also actively seeking a suitable site in southern Maine as well.

While we support the goal of increasing access to outdoor education, implementing regular school-based instruction at satellite sites, within the proposed timeline, would require significant investments in staff, transportation, and equipment. It would exceed our current capacity.

While we see value in offering hunter education in school settings, our priority remains on providing experiences that involve families. Research and experience show that youth are more likely to become active hunters when supported by mentors. When children learn alongside adults - parents, grandparents, or other family members - they are more likely to build the skills and confidence needed to stay engaged. For this reason, the Department prefers to focus on programs that bring families together in outdoor learning environments.

At this time, we are prepared to move forward with our current plan to add two regional facilities that will support consistent, high-quality programming. As these facilities come online, we hope to offer our existing school programs at those locations, modeled after our successful efforts at Maine Wildlife Park, which provides nature-based learning to hundreds of students annually.

In Maine, curriculum decisions are made by local school administrative units (SAUs), not by the Department of Education. This long-standing policy of local control allows schools to tailor programs to their students' needs. While this bill encourages collaboration with the Department of Education, any curriculum alignment would need to be offered as a resource, not a requirement. The Department is open to working with DOE and local educators to offer training or adapt existing programs to align with Maine Learning Standards where appropriate.

As we continue to expand access to outdoor education, we are encouraged by this opportunity to lower barriers and support a strong future for hunting, conservation, and outdoor engagement in Maine. Thank you for your time and consideration.

I would be happy to answer any questions now or during the work session.