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Testimony in Support of LD 758, Resolve, To Update Flood Hazard Data in the Sandy River Watershed

Before the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

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Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee, my name is Luke Frankel, and I am the Woods, Waters, & Wildlife Director and Staff Scientist at 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. I am here today to testify in support of LD 758, Resolve, To Update Flood Hazard Data in the Sandy River Watershed.

The Sandy River is home to some of the best spawning habitat for federally endangered Atlantic salmon in the US. The Sandy is a dynamic system, with a gravel bottom that shifts over time to form smaller braided channels that are ideal locations for salmon to lay their eggs. Due to the presence of four dams along the mainstem of the Kennebec River downstream of the Sandy River, every year during the spawning season the Maine Department of Marine Resources (DMR) trucks salmon from below the dams to the Sandy in an effort to restore their numbers. NRCM, along with a coalition of several other nonprofit organizations including the Atlantic Salmon Federation, Maine Rivers, Trout Unlimited, and the Conservation Law Foundation, have been working for decades to improve fish passage on the Kennebec to help the recovery of Atlantic salmon and other sea-run fish in the river. Ensuring that the salmon habitat in the Sandy River remains exceptional is vital to this effort.

As many of you know, the fierce storms in December 2023 brought devastating flooding across the state. Western Maine in particular was hit hard, where rivers washed out bridges and roads and caused millions of dollars in damage. Due to the dynamic nature of the South Branch of the Sandy, the river completely changed course during the storm and meandered onto a local road in the town of Phillips. This resulted in flooding that threatened public safety and homes. To alleviate these concerns, the Town of Phillips received emergency permission from the Maine Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to restore the river to its natural flow path without receiving applicable permits. Instead of simply removing the obstructions that caused the river to change course, the contractors hired by the town dredged nearly a mile of the river, creating artificial berms on the banks that straightened the channel. Although these actions temporarily alleviated the flooding concern, it destroyed a large portion of the salmon habitat that the Sandy River is known for.

To prevent a situation like this from occurring again, it is clear that a greater understanding of the underlying erosion and sedimentation dynamics in the river that caused the flooding are needed. LD 758 would accomplish this by directing the Maine Office of Community Affairs to implement an erosion sedimentation study in the Sandy River watershed. As climate change continues to increase the intensity of storms in the northeastern US, it is all but certain that an extreme flooding event similar to the one in December 2023 will occur again on the Sandy. Rather than simply waiting for that to happen, we can be proactive and manage flood hazard in a comprehensive and scientific manner. The study outlined in this bill would accomplish this, and in doing so, would help prevent future conflicts between the river and human infrastructure that result in the destruction of salmon habitat. The salmon cannot afford another blow like the one they received in December 2023 that jeopardized decades of restoration work.

For these reasons, we strongly urge the Committee to vote Ought to Pass on LD 758. Thank you for your time and consideration.