Enhancing the Protections of High-Value Natural Resources

Maine is home to the last stronghold of remote, undeveloped ponds and scattered older growth forest stands in the Eastern United States. Located primarily in Maine's 10.4 million acres of unorganized territories (UT), these high-value natural resources are important components of Maine's North Woods. Remote ponds support cold-water fisheries and remote outdoor recreational experiences that are increasingly rare. Older growth forests sequester vast amounts of carbon and support plant and wildlife species that depend on the unique conditions of these older ecosystems to survive.

Recent research using LIDAR technology shows that older growth stands now comprise only 3% of the forest in Maine's UT. This compares to an estimate of 6% in 2003 and 70% in pre-colonial times. If current trends continue, most of Maine's remaining older forests will disappear within 35 years. Unless action is taken soon, undeveloped ponds will be developed, and older growth forests will be cut. And once they're gone, they will be gone forever.

An Act to Enhance Protection of High-Value Natural Resources in the Unorganized Territories will help protect remote, undeveloped ponds of statewide significance and older growth forest stands as follows:

- **Additional protection for high-value remote ponds –** The bill directs the Land Use Planning Commission (LUPC) to assign protective Management Classifications to a discrete set of ponds that are undeveloped and have resources of statewide significance – including fisheries, wildlife, and scenic features. The specific lakes that would be protected – about 50 across the UT – were overlooked 30 years ago when protective Management Classifications were assigned to about 200 similar lakes as part of the LUPC's Lake Management Program. Of these roughly 50 lakes, 31 are classified as State Heritage Fish waters.

- **Strategy for conserving older growth forests –** The bill directs the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF) to develop a strategy to enhance the conservation of older growth forest stands, with input from a broad range of experts, stakeholders, landowners, ecologists, forest industry representatives, and interested parties. In developing the strategy, the Department must review and consider approaches such as land conservation, incentives for landowners, and voluntary carbon markets, among others. The strategy, to be developed within existing resources or using external funding, would be due to the Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee by November 2026.

- **Report on older growth forest conservation** – The bill directs the DACF to track and report progress toward conserving older growth forests. This information needs to be included in the State of Maine's Forest report, which is provided to the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry every five years.

- **Elevating older growth forests for state conservation projects** – The bill directs the Land for Maine's Future program, as it evaluates grant proposals, to give preferential consideration to projects that include the conservation of older growth forest stands that are at least five acres in size.

Remote Pond Values and Risks

- **Brook Trout habitat** – Maine is the last stronghold for wild, self-reproducing brook trout in lakes and ponds. Maine's lake and pond brook trout resources are considered the jewel of the eastern range, vastly larger than what remains in 16 other states combined.

- **Remote recreation** – Undeveloped lakes in Maine's UT provide remote recreational experiences that are exceptionally rare in the Eastern U.S. Most of these ponds are critical habitat for Maine's coldwater game fishery, which includes brook trout, lake trout, Arctic charr, and lake whitefish.

- **Development pressures** – The number of building permits in the UT accelerated from 2009 through 2024, with nearly 30 percent of new development of camps and homes occurring on lakes – including many that previously were undeveloped. As this trend of scattered development continues, Maine's rare resource of undeveloped lakes will steadily decline.

Older Growth Forest Values and Risks

- **Necessary habitat for many species** – Some plant, lichen, moss, fungi, and invertebrate species are dependent on old-growth characteristics that are currently lacking or less abundant in younger forests. Also, many species—particularly native birds, including some woodpeckers, warblers, and thrushes, as well as certain mammals, such as fishers and martens—have been shown to reach greater abundance in forests with old-growth characteristics. These abundant populations, called "source populations," are crucial for populating or repopulating surrounding habitats and are therefore central to the long-term viability of biodiversity. [1]

- **Carbon storage –** Although older growth forests do not sequester carbon as quickly as younger forests, they store considerably more carbon. As such, mitigating climate change requires increasing the representation of forests with old-growth characteristics and functions on some parts of the landscape, while encouraging a diversity of other forest age classes elsewhere.

- **Older growth forests in decline** – Older growth forests were once 70% of the UT, and are now are only 3%. Based on the current rates of loss, if nothing is done to change current trends, then half of the existing older growth forest stands in Maine will be gone in 35 years.[2]

[1] https://masswoods.org/sites/default/files/pdf-doc-ppt/Restoring-Old-Growth-Characteristics.pdf
[2] https://ourclimatecommon.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/MAINE-LSOG-Report-October-2024b.pdf

Prepared by NRCM