



Testimony of the Maine Office of Community Affairs

Director Samantha Horn

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Before the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

Neither For Nor Against LD 758 Resolve, to Update Flood Mapping in the Sandy River Watershed to Federal Emergency Management Agency Standards

Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker, and Members of the joint standing committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, my name is Samantha Horn, Director of the Maine Office of Community Affairs. I am submitting written testimony neither for nor against, but to provide information related to LD 758, Resolve, to Update Flood Mapping in the Sandy River Watershed to Federal Emergency Management Agency Standards. I understand that an amendment has been presented by the sponsor, and my testimony today will address the bill as it is proposed to be amended.

The Maine Office of Community Affairs, or MOCA, was created in 2024 to foster communication and partnerships between the State and communities in this State. Our charge is to engage with municipalities, tribal governments and regional councils to provide coordinated and efficient planning, technical assistance and financial support to better plan for challenges, pursue solutions and create stronger, more resilient communities.

The Sandy River Watershed coalition has been discussing how to address flooding and erosion impacts that landowners and local residents are experiencing, as Senator Black has already explained. We admire and appreciate the efforts of the group to tackle some very difficult challenges and wish to be supportive of this local effort to learn about and mitigate the hazards that they face due, in part, to increasing storm intensity.

The coalition originally requested a flood mapping project to better understand the risks to property owners, and in particular, farmers, in the watershed. Fortunately, it has come to light that FEMA is conducting a re-mapping exercise that will be sufficient for the group's purposes. The coalition is also interested in understanding how the change in the course of the river over time is causing erosion of the banks in some places, and extensive sedimentation on some properties during high water events. As a result, the amendment directs that MOCA conduct a geomorphic study of the river.

The Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife indicates that the recent extreme flood event of December 2023 once again highlighted the need for a watershed scale geomorphic assessment for the Sandy River. During this, as well as past similar events, critical instream habitat for wild Brook Trout and Atlantic Salmon become severely degraded and compromised. The Sandy River is prone to these occurrences due to its natural geology, topography and land use history. Conducting a watershed scale geomorphic assessment is a critical step toward developing appropriate aquatic habitat restoration plans and guiding natural resource stewardship for this dynamic river system.

The Maine Geological Survey, which is housed under the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF), is the best suited unit of state government to oversee such a study, which is different from flood mapping. In discussing the matter between MOCA and DACF, we believe that if DACF is tasked with overseeing such a study, it would be important to include the development of transferable information and lessons learned and conduct outreach to property owners and residents near this river system, and also to property owners and residents near other braided river systems. While such a study would be valuable to people in the area of the Sandy River, the real statewide benefit would be in how we can use the information that is generated in this study to help people in proximity to many similar river systems understand, and manage, the risks of living and working near a powerful and ever-changing river in an era of increased storm severity.

There are a few language changes we recommend be implemented if the resolve moves forward.

- Substitute DACF for MOCA as the responsible entity, and add MOCA as a coordinating agency;
- Instead of “conduct” the study, the Department would “contract for” the study;
- After “...on flood risk and river health.” Add “and include outreach to residents of this and similar river systems with information about risks and options to manage that risk.”; and
- Change “The office shall request or otherwise acquire federal or other nonstate funding...” to “The Department, in collaboration with the agencies named above, shall seek funding” The wording change is intended to allow the Department to consider state sources of funding, and so that MOCA and others will help with the task of finding funding.

Thank you for your time. I am happy to answer any questions you may have and to provide information for the work session.