Maine Audubon - Legislative Summary - 2017

Maine Audubon

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Assaults on Shoreland and Natural Area Protection of Habitat

Maine’s Shoreland Zoning (SLZ) law prevents and controls coastal zone pollution, protect fish spawning grounds, aquatic life, bird and wildlife habitat, and freshwater and coastal wetlands. The Natural Resources Protection Act (NRPA) protects our most important and vulnerable natural resources, including clean water, wetlands, and significant wildlife habitat. With stalwart legislative allies and advocacy partners, we were successful at stopping many attempts to weaken SLZ and NRPA, and other environmental regulations, including bills that would have allowed more building in the shoreland zone, required another impact assessment of environmental protection regulations, and allowed large amounts of beach nourishment to be taken off Maine beaches, damaging bird and wildlife habitat. In addition, we worked with allies on the Transportation Committee to defeat yet another attempt to repeal the Chickadee Income Tax Checkoff that provides core funding for Maine’s non-game and endangered species programs.

Pesticide Ordinance Opt-Out (LD1505)

A bill (“An Act to Create Consistency in the Regulation of Pesticides”) promoted by the out-of-state pesticides industry would have curtailed town and county ordinances that regulate the use of pesticides, removing an essential tool for communities grappling with decisions about the local use of pesticides. Because state law does little to restrict the local use of pesticides in Maine, such use has increased eight-fold since 1995. Twenty-three municipalities have already passed local ordinances that regulate the local use of pesticides. Because state law does little to restrict the use of pesticides in Maine, such use has increased eight-fold since 1995. Twenty-three municipalities have already passed local ordinances that regulate the local use of pesticides. Because state law does little to restrict the use of pesticides in Maine, such use has increased eight-fold since 1995. Twenty-three municipalities have already passed local ordinances that regulate the local use of pesticides.

Legislative Summary

The November 2016 elections brought new faces to the Maine Legislature and to the committees that analyze environmental issues, all within a political climate in which vetoes from the Governor have come to be expected. The session was extended beyond its June adjournment date because of stalled state budget negotiations, and the last days of the session included protracted debates on key conservation issues like solar power, public lands management, and bond money for culvert upgrades to aid town and wildlife habitat connectivity.

Maine Audubon worked with advocacy partners and legislators to ensure our natural resources are protected as much as possible. The biggest disappointment came in the last hours of the session, when the House failed to override the Governor’s veto of the “solar bill” by only three votes. This bill would have fixed the worst of the problems created by the harmful solar rules adopted by the Public Utilities Commission earlier in the year. Though we didn’t expect huge strides forward this session, there were a number of key victories.

- A landmark mineral mining law that ends many years of uncertain regulatory and legislative oversight and protects Maine’s water, land, and wildlife from the potential damage wreaked by mineral mining operations.
- A bill to ensure responsible management of our public reserved lands.
- A transportation bond (slated for the November 2017 ballot) that includes $5 million earmarked to enable municipalities to upgrade culverts, improve stream crossings, and reconnect fish and wildlife habitat.
- A key addition to Maine’s long-lived Bottle Bill (which Maine Audubon helped pass many years ago): Small wine and spirits beverage bottles (called “nips”) will now be returnable for not more than five cents in order to clean up our roadsides.
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- A landmark water management bill that allows greater flexibility and efficiency in how we manage our water resources.
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Many bills that would have allowed various kinds of damage to the environment were stopped in their tracks, thanks to our allies and the energetic efforts of our members and supporters who responded to many action alerts during the session, calling and emailing legislators to help build support for and against key environmental bills.

Thank you for your support and participation in this important work!
Clean Water and Protection for Wildlife

Solar Policy (LDs 1373, 1444, 1504)

In 2016, the Public Utilities Commission (PUC) released harmful net metering rules that would turn the state’s back on solar development. This session, multiple solar bills were brought to the Energy Utilities and Technology Committee. After much discussion, one modest amended bill was sent out of Committee.

“As we regard Solar Power for Farms and Businesses” would have fixed one of the worst items in the harmful PUC solar rate by removing the cap on solar sales to a person's home or business; dramatically increasing the limit on community solar projects from 10 to 100; and delaying the phase-out of net metering until the PUC does a fact-based analysis of interconnection and impacts. Despite strong votes in both the House and Senate, the Governor vetoed this bill. On the last day of the session (August 2nd), the Sun was hardly outside the House, but the House failed to do so by 3 votes. In the end, a handful of legislation would fail.

Support for Efficiency Energy/Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI) (LDs 1313, 1515)

The Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI), through its market-based cap and trade program, helps to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by reducing carbon emissions from power plants. LD 1515 origi- nally proposed a solution for rebalancing the allocation of RGGI funds in order to continue to support both home and small business energy efficiency programs. Unfortunately, the amended version which passed provided less funding for these programs than needed and jeopardizes the home energy efficiency programs. LD 1313 proposed to reduce funding for energy efficiency under RGGI through provisions such as an energy efficiency spending ceiling and negative changes to allocations. This bill was carried out to next session.

North Woods Conservation

Management of Public Reserved Lands (LD 586)

This bill — “An Act to Implement the Recommendations of the Commission to Study the Public Re- served Lands Management Fund” — carries out the recommendations of a legislative commission to study management of Maine’s Public Reserved Lands. The Legislature’s Agriculture Conservation and Forestry (ACF) Committee strongly recommended the legislation, which includes improving forest planning, increasing the limit on forest growth for each unit, a logger education program (ultimately key to protecting the environment), and delaying the phase-out of the PUC solar rate by removing the cap on net sales to a person’s home or business, dramatically increasing the limit on community solar projects from 10 to 100; and delaying the phase-out of net metering until the PUC does a fact-based analysis of interconnection and impacts. Despite strong votes in both the House and Senate, the Governor vetoed this bill. On the last day of the session (August 2nd), the Sun was hardly outside the House, but the House failed to do so by 3 votes. In the end, a handful of legisla-

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Funding Investments for Wildlife

Collective/Stream Restoration (LD 964)

A $10 million bond was proposed to fund towns’ culvert upgrades. Such upgrades – called StreamSmart cross- ings – would improve public safety by protecting roadways during extreme flood events and benefit wildlife by restoring natural habitats. Funding for restoration of rivers and streams and fish passage. As we are counting on Maine policymakers to take the important steps needed to make wise use of Maine’s extraordinary environment, we need to ensure additional funding for culvert upgrades.