Testimony in SUPPORT of LD 1550, Resolve, Directing the Department of Health and Human Services to Amend Its Rules to Protect Water Quality by Reducing Nutrient Pollution from Septic System Pollution

Submitted to the Health and Human Services Committee

April 22, 2025

Good afternoon, Chair Ingwersen, Chair Meyer, and distinguished members of the Committee on Health and Human Services,

My name is Susan Gallo, and I am the Executive Director of Maine Lakes. Our membership organization includes more than 6,000 supporters, followers, and volunteers, including thousands of members who belong to our 95 member Lake Associations. We are dedicated to our mission of promoting, protecting, and enhancing lake water quality and habitat, and of preserving the ecological, economic, recreational, and aesthetic benefits of Maine's lakes for everyone.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to speak in support of LD 1550.

LD 1550 will improve design standards for septic systems in specific sandy soil types in the shoreland zone, protecting Maine's lakes and ponds by ensuring that future systems are constructed to reduce nutrient flow into lake water.

Excess nutrients in Maine's freshwater systems, especially phosphorus, contribute to declines in water quality and clarity, degradation of lake habitat for fish and wildlife, and excessive algae growth or "blooms." Algal blooms turn lake water thick, green, and smelly. They are exacerbated by warmer water and air temperatures, and are detrimental to lake communities, local economies, the outdoor recreation and boating industries, and anglers, and can post potential health risks for people and pets.

Maine Lakes flagship program, LakeSmart, works steadfastly with an incredible team of staff, volunteers, and shoreland homeowners to reduce phosphorus pollution into Maine's lakes. Our staff and volunteer teams evaluate properties for areas of overland erosion, often a primary source of excess phosphorus. The hard work of LakeSmart teams and the hundreds of homeowners who invest time and money each year in reducing sources of erosion can be undermined by other sources of phosphorus pollution. Some, like phosphorus-rich soils along the lake bottom, cannot be easily managed. But others, like "short-circuiting" septic systems in sandy and gravelly soils, can be managed to reduce nutrient pollution and better protect lake health. **The goal of LD 1550 is to manage this source of nutrient pollution into our water systems.**

Septic system design and regulation focus on the protection of public health, eliminating the pathogens from human wastewater that can make people sick. This is generally accomplished by getting the wastewater to quickly infiltrate into the ground and with setback distances from drinking water wells and waterbodies. Pathogens live for a relatively short amount of time in a

septic system environment, so this general design in a functional system adequately protects human health.

However, septic system design and regulations generally do not consider the fate of nutrients in domestic wastewater. Unlike pathogens, nutrients do not die. Fortunately, in most soil types, septic systems offer some nutrient attenuation. However, in certain types of sand and gravel soils in the shoreland zone, septic systems will "short-circuit", allowing phosphorus pollution to flow back into groundwater and impact surface waterbodies.

As development pressure continues to intensify in Maine's lake communities, and as climate change creates better conditions for algae growth, the impact from septic "short-circuits" will contribute to a growing lake health problem that wreaks havoc on Maine's lake economy (valued at over $14.3 billion annually), affects local community budgets, harms the tourism and recreation industries, and places greater risks to public health from harmful algae blooms.

LD 1550 will direct DHHS to amend septic design standards so that systems installed in sandy soils in the shoreland zone will not be a source of additional nutrient pollution into our water systems.

I urge you to support LD 1550 and am happy to answer any questions you might have.