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Environment and Natural Resources Committee

Government Oversight Committee

Testimony of Senator Richard A. Bennett

In Support of

LD 1847, An Act To Prohibit a Public Utility from Terminating or Disconnecting Service to a
Public Safety Facility without Advance Notice and Approval

Committee on Energy, Utilities and Technology

January 25, 2022

Senator Lawrence, Representative Berry and members of the Committee on Energy, Utilities, and Technology. I am Senator Rick Bennett of Oxford, and I have the honoring of serving 13 towns in Oxford and Cumberland Counties in the Maine Senate. I am pleased to be a cosponsor of LD 1847, “An Act To Prohibit a Public Utility from Terminating or Disconnecting Service to a Public Safety Facility without Advance Notice and Approval.”

This proposal is before you today because of the experiences of the Buckfield Fire Department. You may remember that in June of last year, multiple news outlets reported that Central Maine Power threatened to disconnect Buckfield’s fire station after the town allegedly had not paid its bill. CMP has said that power was never at risk of being shut off, and that the employee was sent to the fire station to discuss the situation. The Town of Buckfield, it turned out, had sent payment to CMP, but the payment was rejected because the check lacked a proper account number. In the end, the Town was able to pay the bill and power was never shut off. This bill seeks to put measures in place so that this confusion never happens again.

LD 1847 would require a public utility, before it terminates or disconnects a public safety facility's utility service, to provide 60 days' advance written notice. The utility must also obtain written authorization from the Public Utilities Commission and the Department of Public Safety to terminate or disconnect the utility service.

The fact that this episode happened at all is yet more sad testimony to the extraordinary ineptitude of our foreign-owned utility in managing our critical, local electricity infrastructure. CMP’s captive customers are less than 2 percent of a massive, multinational monopoly. You will recall that last summer the Liberty Consulting Group in its independent audit of CMP, funded by the company’s customers, concluded that management’s “overemphasizing of cuts and limits on resources as a means for closing gaps in meeting the earnings expectations of the equity investment community has sacrificed effectiveness in providing service.”

In response to this report, your House Chair Representative Berry then concluded, “Management at CMP and at Avangrid is in a shambles. Greed is baked in. Their boards are stacked with lawyers and former politicians demanding profits – not qualified engineers improving

performance. The minute we look away, they'll be back to their old ways. This is not a system we can count on for all our future energy needs."

I agree with him entirely. We cannot look away. In a monopoly owned and run to benefit foreign governments and foreign shareholders, we must realize that the market's invisible hand inevitably becomes an invisible fist. That is why the reasonable steps called for in this bill are unhappily necessary to ensure power to vital town services does not get shut off. Thank you for your consideration, I would be happy to answer any questions.