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Testimony of Rep. Hepler presenting

LD 1929, An Act To Provide Assistance to Areas Severely Infested with Browntail Moths **Before the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry,**

Good morning Sen Dill, Rep. O’Neil, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry. I am Representative Allison Hepler, representing the towns of Arrowsic, Dresden, Georgetown, Phippsburg, part of Richmond, and my own town of Woolwich and I’m pleased to be presenting **LD 1929, An Act To Provide Assistance to Areas Severely Infested with Browntail Moths.**

The story of this bill began in the Bath Maine YMCA locker room several years ago. I mentioned to a friend that I knew someone who had gotten a rash and she said it was from something called “browntail moth.” The next thing I knew, others were sharing their experiences having similar rashes and the home remedies they had found to take the edge off.

Browntail moth (BTM) is an invasive pest that has created both a serious human health and a forest health problem. The toxic hairs of BTM caterpillars cause skin rashes and can also lead to serious respiratory distress. These caterpillars are voracious defoliators of many of our hardwood trees. The Maine Forest Service mapped about 198,000 acres of defoliation this year due to pests, while last year showed around 154,000 acres.

So, here I am three years later, before your committee, presenting a bill that would help to address this problem in two ways. First, this bill would provide funding for a municipality or non-profit entity, such as a land trust, to reduce BTM in their community. Currently, there is no state funding to help municipalities. As a selectperson, I know one size doesn’t fit all, and that what one town needs is going to differ from the next. The City of Bath, for instance, has a Forestry Committee and an arborist and together have produced videos on how to combat the pest. The City of Waterville has budgeted \$100,000 to address BTM through the use of insecticide treatments of trees, and spraying.

On a smaller scale, Blue Hill’s local library purchased pruning pole saws that it lends out to residents so they can clip nests on their personal property.

Towns like the ones I represent have no funds or resources to do this kind of work, and I know we are not the only communities in this position. This bill would make available a variety of methods that are easily accessible and fairly simple to implement. Some examples include: the purchase or rental of pole saws so residents can clip nests out of trees, rental of cherry pickers so that nests that are higher up in trees can be clipped, hiring a licensed pesticide applicator to target specific trees, and hiring an arborist to conduct workshops for residents and municipalities. It would allow communities to determine for themselves which methods would work best for them.

As we know, BTM damage isn't limited to humans. It also affects the health of our trees. Forests play a critical role in capturing carbon in the atmosphere and has been identified as a key element of Maine's Climate Action Plan. The continued defoliation caused by these pests puts this at risk.

A key focus for the Governor's Carbon Task Force is forest resiliency through the management of invasive pests. The second part of this bill provides for additional staffing for the Maine Forest Service, not only to help administer the municipal BTM program, but also to address and monitor other invasive pests, which may well pose a bigger risk to our forests than anything else. The Governor's Office has also issued a Resolution designating February as "Browntail Moth Awareness Month," and is coordinating local outreach and education.

In sum, this is a growing problem that will not be reduced until action is taken. I am not an alarmist, but the consequences of tree damage across the state affect the forest's ability to sequester carbon, and the impact of pests like browntail moth on people stress our health care system.

Others who have expertise in these fields can each speak about specific forestry practices and the need to keep BTM out of our trees. I decided to submit this bill after reviewing previous efforts to address BTM, the testimony that was submitted, both for and against, and after speaking with a number of people in the field, in order to extract what I hope are the best ideas from all of the previous work that this committee has done on this issue. I think this problem can be effectively tackled locally and also at the state level, as this bill aims to do.

Thanks for doing the work you all do. I am happy to answer questions as I can.