Testimony of Nancy Smith, Executive Director of GrowSmart Maine

in support of LD 2021, “An Act To Provide Funding for Broadband Internet Infrastructure in Unserved and Underserved Areas”

January 28, 2020

Senator Lawrence, Representative Berry and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Energy, Utilities and Technology, my name is Nancy Smith and I am the Executive Director of GrowSmart Maine. We are a statewide non-partisan organization working to create lasting prosperity without sacrificing the quality of life that defines Maine. We support policies, programs and projects that define and protect the value of our unique built and natural places while supporting long term economic opportunity.

GrowSmart Maine serves on the steering committee for the Maine Broadband Coalition (MBC), and we are representing the coalition with this testimony. MBC is an informal federation of about 230 public policy professionals, educational institutions, businesses, towns, internet service providers, non-profit organizations and individuals who care deeply about Maine’s economic future. We give voice to internet users across the state to secure universal, affordable and equitable access to broadband connectivity that serves both current and future needs.

GrowSmart Maine speaks for the MBC in strongly supporting the proposal to provide $15 million from the General Fund to the ConnectME Fund (per an expected amendment with this correction) for desperately needed broadband infrastructure in both unserved and underserved areas of the state. The $15 million proposal represents a significant down payment on the work ahead to ensure Mainers have access to high-speed internet regardless of their geographic location and helps to fulfill the current statutory goals for broadband service across the state (35-A MRSA, § 9202-A):

• Broadband service be universally available in this State, including to all residential and business locations and community anchor institutions.
• There be secure, reliable, competitive and sustainable forward-looking infrastructure that can meet future broadband needs; and
• All residents, businesses and institutions in the State be able to take full advantage of the economic opportunities available through broadband service.

Most importantly, the provision of comprehensive broadband coverage for all areas of the state is one of the most important and necessary economic development tools that the Legislature has at its disposal. The expenditure of valuable public funds for the purpose of expanded broadband coverage is likely to be one of the most significant public policy achievements in recent years.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions that you may have.