

## **Maine Sporting Camp Association (MSCA)**

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### **“Meet and Greet” Information TO Joint Standing Committee on Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (IFW)**

**Wednesday, January 27, 2021 9:00 AM**

Senator Dill, Representative Landry, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Inland Fisheries and Wildlife my name is Wade Kelly, and I am Vice President of the Maine Sporting Camp Association (MSCA) and I also operate the Tylor Kelly Camps in Allagash. MSCA represents commercial sporting lodges from Rangeley Lakes Region to Lubec and from Belgrade to Allagash.

Because of COVID, 2020 brought both challenges and opportunities for MSCA Members. Forced Springtime closures created losses for lodges dependent on spring fishing business. However, after lodges could open, an influx of Maine residents and the broad consumer focus on vacationing in the outdoors resulted in a celebrated resurgence of business. Much like what happened during the Spanish Flu epidemic of 100 years ago, people escaped the disease of the city to enjoy nature, creating new opportunities for rural tourism businesses.

As evidence for the need for building the tourism infrastructure in Maine’s forests, new records were set in the Summer and Fall testing the capacity limits of many State & Federal parks, public lands, and the North Maine Woods. And these visitors are coming back! Camping and outdoor gear sales set records and created supply chain shortages. Surveys project the trend will continue into 2021.

Most MSCA lodges are in Maine’s remote wilderness areas. Quite a few are off-the-grid. Timber company roads, boats, snowmobiles, and aircraft provide the only access for many. In addition to providing lodging, meals, equipment rentals, and guide services for overnight guests or day visitors, lodge employees and

guides are among the first responders to tourists in need of emergency assistance, be it a flat tire, gasoline, or a medical emergency.

In addition, lodges are also part of the burgeoning wild harvest and food-to-table trends. Hunting for food, whether harvesting wild mushrooms, medicinal plants, fiddleheads, fish, or big game, brings new people into the woods of Maine. Consumer choices increasingly are based on sustainability and ethical and responsible sourcing of ingredients – like the raspberry pies often featured at dinner and the abundance of moose meat which is brought home and shared with friends and relatives after a successful hunt.

Lodges provide a critical infrastructure and economic stimulus in Maine’s rural areas through employment and investments. A statewide economic multiplier effect is generated by non-resident visitors spending money along I-95 at hotels, restaurants, and retail stores. Historically many lodges attended out-of-state trade shows, at no cost to taxpayers, to promote the benefits of a Maine Vacation. The Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife receives licensing fees from these non-resident guests at 5 to 10 times the rates of residents as well as hundreds and hundreds of boat, ATV, and Snowmobile Registrations.

All taxpayers benefit from lodges collecting sales taxes, paying employment taxes, workmen’s compensation premiums, income taxes, real estate taxes, Department of Human Services Division of Licensing fees, public water supply licensing fees, and liquor licensing fees, to name a few. The kitchen manager must maintain profession certification through testing every five years. Also, to operate on private and public land, lodges pay access fees, land leases, higher premiums for commercial auto insurance, carry liability insurance, and pay gate fees.

Over the 150-year-plus history of sporting camps in the North Maine Woods much has changed. New road systems, ATV and snowmobile trails, and improved bike and hiking trails have ushered in a new era of day use tourists; and short-term visits to remote locations are the norm today. Thus, sporting camps need to be responsive to this evolution to stay in business and support the tourism infrastructure.

Although always optimistic, the following are among the items on the minds of lodge owners today:

- Fear of COVID, wage inflation, federal unemployment incentives, and closed borders make it difficult to find employees.
- Multiple studies show that as the population ages, Maine's adventure travelers prefer flush toilets, showers and warm cabins to campsites and outhouses. Continual significant investment is required to maintain a quality licensed lodge, good meal service, and equipment. Capital is rationed carefully, and investments are difficult to justify for camps operating on leased land. Clearly, however, the recent expansion of some lodges proves that "if you build it – they will come."
- Land Use Planning Commission applications to modernize are expensive because of fees and required engineering costs. Some question the benefits for so much red-tape.
- For many Lodges, hunting and fishing historically provided the greatest levels of revenue. Yet, hunter numbers are declining with no reversal in the forecast. In addition, many non-resident deer hunters have abandoned Maine for Canada and the central states and they are not coming back. Most Maine bear are harvested by non-residents, but because bear are thriving along the east coast, non-resident hunters have increasing bear hunting opportunities in their own states. Interest in fishing has some bright spots, but the average stay is declining.
- New wilderness tourists such as foragers, bird watchers, hikers, bikers, e-bikers, and even ATV riders and snowmobilers often go without guiding services, favor brief visits, and avoid all-inclusive packages.
- Non-profit corporations are directly competing by building multi-million-dollar lodges, utilizing volunteer labor, and claiming tax incentives. The tax-free status raises concerns about a level playing field.
- Airbnb and online booking agencies are renting remote cabins in the North Maine Woods. New competition without regulation and possibly taxation.
- Some are asking about the balancing of conservation easements, non-profit land holdings, public land, and private land. Will Maine's traditional values be protected? How will the needs of modern tourists be addressed?

In conclusion, in 2002, the 120<sup>th</sup> Maine Legislature issued a Joint Resolution recognizing the historical contribution to Maine's cultural heritage by Sporting

Camps and emphasized their importance to the local and regional economies. Moreover, the resolution urged landowners and abutting landowners to respect the traditions of sporting camps and allow them to thrive throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As an officer of the MSCA and a sporting camp owner, I want to thank you for inviting me to introduce the Association and I look forward to working with each of you in the months and years ahead

Thank you.

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*Wade Kelly is the Owner-Operator of Tylor Kelly's Camps, Vice-President of MSCA, and a lifelong resident of Allagash, ME. A Registered Master Maine Guide for over 30 years, he learned hunting, fishing, and trapping skills as a youngster from his father Tylor Kelly and Grandfather Jack Kelly. Wade served on the Maine Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Advisory Council as the Aroostook County Representative from 2010-2013.*

*The Maine Sporting Camp Association (MSCA) was founded in 1987 by a group of camp owners to preserve the sporting camp's uniqueness in the State of Maine. By working closely with other groups and exchanging ideas and information, the members of MSCA continue the tradition of providing high quality recreational experiences to individuals and their families, a quality experience that visitors will remember long after they return home. The MSCA is a 501C (6) non-profit organization that is led by a board of directors. **Maine Sporting Camp Association** 126 Western Avenue, Box 153, Augusta, Maine 04330, [info@mainesportingcamps.com](mailto:info@mainesportingcamps.com), Phone: (207) 888-3931*