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SPEECH TO 1st MAINE MODERN WOOD HEAT SYMPOSIUM
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Good Morning, thank you for having me here today. It's great to follow up after Bill and Tim, two friends of mine I have had the good fortune to collaborate with on a number of economic policy priorities, both in and out of the woods and the forestry industry. Both these gentlemen are prime examples of leaders in the public sector who fill their administrative roles there but also emerge to shape economic development for private enterprise and consumers either locally or statewide.

I would also like to thank Charlie Niebling and the Maine Statewide Wood Energy Assistance Team for exemplifying the innovation and collaboration that can occur when public and private entities partner to steer policy. When successful these partnerships don't only achieve great things for consumers; they also lead to some of the best initiatives that will work their way through Augusta and they validate future opportunities for partnerships like this to be undertaken in different sectors. The fact that we're here today in Aroostook County participating in an exciting event like this is a sign the Maine Statewide Wood Energy Assistance Team is building something meaningful.

It's much more of an honor to me to be asked to be here today than you might realize, and even a little sentimental. As it happens, twenty years ago this week I was engaged in something that changed my life and is the entire basis for my being here today. Last Friday, October 19th, marked the twentieth anniversary of a day in 1998 myself and twelve other loggers from Allagash left home one morning and blockaded the major point of entry for Canadian contractors and trucks at St. Pamphile.

Our purpose was to protest the presence of cheap, subsidized foreign contractors who depress the rate and who were impossible to compete with due to the exchange imbalance. Not only did we prevent this labor from entering the Maine woods, we also prevented Maine wood from being exported to Canadian sawmills and the economic activity that rightfully belonged on our side of the border but was lost due to policy makers unwillingness to stand up for what was right. The blockade was expanded to two more ports of entry at Estcourt and Daaquam during the course of the week, and twenty years ago this morning I was fielding phone calls in the kitchen all Sunday preparing for Monday and what would be the final day of the barricade.

In retrospect, that week has long been stunningly impactful on my own life as it's how I found my own voice and came to feel empowered to get into politics and make a difference. I've gotten to be involved in a number of different things since then and any time I helped a constituent with a matter or passed bills ranging from domestic violence to lowering the cost of prescription drugs it all originated with the blockade. Nevertheless, substantive, clearly defined changes that addressed the grievances we had in 1998 have been difficult to tangibly herald despite promises made to us by state and federal leaders.

The impact of those blockades is only becoming apparent now, taken in the context of other actions the preceded or came after them in the woods, as well as broader discussions across Maine about who we are as a state, what we value, and what things Mainers deserve as workers, business owners, and taxpayers. I say all this because the key message we were emphasizing in 1998 was that Maine's forest products industry did not work properly if it wasn't working right for all participants at all levels. It still doesn't, but people are talking about that more than ever before.

We are seeing a growing emphasis on the woods and its products as critical not only to the success of Maine's economy but to the viability of our culture and our regional identities. And that's where an event like this, as well as the Statewide Wood Energy Assistance Team, gives me great hope. At its core, we're here today to talk about the natural resources produced by our own forests right here in Aroostook County, a resource near and dear to us since our ancestors collectively came here in the 19th Century to harvest it. We are discussing how this resource can be used more efficiently than it historically has been to create more value in the woods to the benefit of loggers, truckers, and mills. We are talking about what that means back home in our communities, where biomass plants employ locals and these products generate electricity and value through RECs. And the discussion finally ends inside the home with our cognizance that we can continue to heat our homes just as our ancestors first did here – with wood from the land. I can't imagine many of them were burning heating oil in 1850.

It may seem self-evident or even unexceptional but I think it's worth noting just how remarkable this discussion is. This would not and could not be occurring if we did not have a renewed focus on sustainability and making our own way through our own

resources. The 20th Century's later decades, in my opinion, and from the perspective of a logger, are defined as a turn away from this kind of thinking. Frankly, it is refreshing to see this renewed emphasis on a Maine-based model that incorporates Aroostook County rather than leaves it behind as we've become accustomed to.

Those of you in the business community who have been engaged in this work for a long time may be thinking right now that it's a bit naïve to stand up here and discuss wood energy's integration into our society as a new thing. After all, many of you have long endeavored to get us to where we are now. But what I am getting at is that the work you have done is increasingly being met with interest, understanding, and purpose by Augusta. I would like to think we have all had a part in advancing this discussion and bringing it increasingly to the fore front. When I first got there it was next to impossible to get legislators to care about the forestry sector, particularly at all its levels. Today that is still challenging but broadly recognized as meaningful to Maine's economy and identity by lawmakers as far away as Kittery.

Of course there will still be significant and arduous debates ahead. And thankfully the private sector can continue to lead on

innovation when it comes to wood energy and fuels. But as a legislator hoping to be sworn in 41 days from now as the first President of the Maine Senate since John Reed of Fort Fairfield was in the late 1950s, I feel an imperative for Augusta to create the best environment possible for these products to flourish. If the events twenty years ago that got me started on this path culminate in me being elevated to the highest role in the legislature you can be damn sure we are going to take this opportunity to better the forest products industry for loggers, truckers, landowners, mills, energy producers, and consumers right here in the County. As we all know from raising families here, you do your part in the time you have and work hard to ensure you've left it better for your children and the people who come after you.

Looking at wood products as a source of heat energy or fuel, we need state government to be clearing the way for innovation, investment, and development. I would like to see wood pellet and wood chip manufacturing treated with the same urgency a paper mill is rightfully treated with and given the tools necessary to be viable. Entrepreneurs with vision and courage have put themselves on the line or will put themselves on the line if we can make these products easier to produce and market from here in

Aroostook County. If you think about the adversity that a guy like Matt Bell has been through, with two fires now, you have all the proof you need that our own people can and will make this work when given the chance.

Just this last week I've helped two constituents get in touch with Efficiency Maine when they asked about opportunities to save money by converting to heat pumps. I would like to see these incentives increasingly available for consumers considering switching over to pellets or chips as an energy source. This is particularly true for commercial entities given our ridiculously high electricity costs. Which brings me to a related point about the role of energy producers who depend on biomass in our region: again, I'm focused on what our natural resources create at all their levels.

It's clear we need biomass facilities to find the easiest path possible to sell the energy they've created at the highest value possible. Here in Aroostook the market created by our facilities for woodcutters and truckers like me and my friends and the employment guaranteed within them is jeopardized by our inclusion on a separate electrical grid from the rest of the state. This means the electricity must pass through New Brunswick

before returning to ISO-New England where only there can it be eligible for renewable energy certificates. The stress on these facilities by this inefficiency is obvious and it must be addressed if not directly than certainly creatively. While Maine's energy problems are many, our unique position on a grid apart from the rest of the state is difficult to change, and ISO-New England is its own beast, these issues so domineer and hinder our economy they're just too big to ignore.

While electricity costs are high for consumers due to distribution and transmission rates, that does not necessarily mean the price is right for generators. My understanding is also that market forces have devalued Connecticut RECs, which are traditionally much more valuable than our own. This is an opportunity for the state of Maine to seize the high ground amid a finally-evened out playing field and strengthen the position of energy producers using wood chips to generate RECs. State government absolutely needs to be involved in helping make this happen and I intend to work with our next governor on this no matter who that may be.

I will also need to work with all of you on these matters and those I may not yet be aware of, so I hope you will be eager to reach out with your own ideas and concerns. Thousands of direct and

indirect jobs, significant consumer spending power, and millions of dollars in investment and economic activity are at a crossroads here in Aroostook County and statewide. It seems obvious that the choice we need to make is to prepare it all for the future, aligning our goals where possible.

I want to thank Charlie and the Statewide Wood Energy Assistance Team, as well as everyone who came today, for your time. Election Day is 12 days away so when I leave here I'll be headed to Caribou to knock on doors and talk to people. But when I get home to Allagash tonight I might start the first fire of the year in our wood stove. That wood will have come from a hill across the road from my house and was cut by my father in law. It won't be all that different from the first fire of the season someone might have started in Allagash 100 years ago, and I'd like to think that it won't be any different in another 100 years.