Opening Statement of Senator Susan Collins
"The TICK Act: An Urgent Public Health Response to Tick-Borne Diseases
Sept. 5, 2019

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Good morning. Lyme disease and other tick-borne diseases have soared in Maine and across the country during the past 15 years. Many of you here today have first-hand experiences with the devastating consequences of tick-borne diseases. Let me take a moment to recognize Susie Whittington, whose mother Lyn Snow, a well-known Maine artist, tragically died in 2013 from Powassan, the deadliest tick-borne disease.

My thanks to the University of Maine Cooperative Extension's Tick Lab for hosting us today. I just toured the lab and saw firsthand how its outstanding work is advancing our understanding of the diseases that ticks carry and protecting Mainers every day.

In Maine last year, there were approximately 1,400 new cases of Lyme disease, nearly double the number of cases in 2010, as we can see on the chart. The incidence of Lyme disease in Maine is the highest in the country – at 107 cases per 100,000 Mainers, which is 10 times higher than the national average.

Other tick-borne diseases are also on the rise. Babesiosis, a malaria-like disease, has tripled in the past five years, and Anaplasmosis, related to rickets, has increased more than five-fold. While ticks do not discriminate, and the diseases they carry affect Americans of all ages, tick-borne diseases disproportionately affect people over age 65.

From children to seniors, far too many Americans with Lyme disease experience a complex diagnostic odyssey that takes months or even years. One of my nieces, Catherine Collins, contracted Lyme disease and had a very difficult time getting an accurate diagnosis. Regrettably, that is not unusual as we will learn from our witnesses.

In addition to the physical and emotional toll that Lyme disease can impose, it is also expensive. Medical costs of Lyme disease are estimated at $1.3 billion per year. When accounting for indirect medical costs, including loss of work, the annual costs balloon to $75 billion per year.

A correct and early diagnosis can reduce costs and improve the prognosis. But we have a long way to go. When HIV became a public health crisis, a gold standard for identification and treatment was developed within 10 years. Lyme disease was identified more than 40 years ago, yet there is still no gold standard for treatment. Existing prevention, education, and diagnostic efforts are helpful but remain fragmented. It is time to unite against ticks.

Earlier this year, I authorized the bipartisan TICK Act, which I introduced with Minnesota Senator Tina Smith and my Maine colleague, Senator Angus King.
TICK in the name of our bill stands for Ticks: Identify, Control, and Knockout. Through a unified approach, this legislation would arm local communities and states with the resources they need for prevention, early detection, and treatment of tick-borne diseases.

The TICK Act would apply a three-pronged approach to tackle Lyme and other tick and vector-borne diseases. First, it would establish an office to develop a national strategy to prevent tick-borne diseases. Second, the legislation would reauthorize Centers for Disease Control Regional Centers of Excellence in Vector-Borne Diseases that have led the scientific response to fighting ticks. Finally, the bill would establish grants to support state health departments' efforts to improve data collection and analysis, early detection and diagnosis, treatment, and public awareness.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses, which include experts from the national, state, and local levels. I especially appreciate the participation of Paula Jackson Jones and Christopher Philbrook, who will share their personal experiences with Lyme disease.

With a national effort the*TICK Act* would establish, we can slow the spread of these devastating diseases and protect the health of people in communities across the country.