

Joint letter of support for LD 1626 - An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the Task Force on Changes to the Maine Indian Claims Settlement Implementing Act

May 4, 2021

To Senator Carney, Co-Chair, Representative Harnett, Co-chair, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary:

We, the undersigned 31 Maine land trusts, conservation organizations, and natural-resource-based businesses are united in our support of LD 1626, which moves the State of Maine to properly recognize the Wabanaki Tribes' inherent sovereignty.

Many of our groups have been working with and within Maine communities for forty years to apply land conservation tools and funding to benefit local communities. Our community holds a broad set of values including ecological protection, public access and outdoor recreation, farmland protection, working forests, access to working waterfronts, climate action, and community-based economic development. Like other Mainers we work to understand the history of Maine's first people, the Wabanaki.

The Wabanaki Tribes including the Penobscot Nation, Passamaquoddy Tribe, Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians, and Aroostook Band of Micmacs – as well as the Abenaki and other tribal communities living in diaspora outside of Maine – have lived in what is now Maine for thousands of years. Throughout those millennia, the Tribes have lived in relationship with the land and waters here and have a track record of managing natural resources so that future generations could thrive. We believe that increasing land ownership by Wabanaki Tribes is a critical way to advance Wabanaki prosperity as well as the values that we as land conservation organizations share, benefitting all Mainers.

Our position is that the State of Maine should recognize the Wabanaki Tribes' inherent sovereignty through the passage of LD 1626. Unfortunately, the Wabanaki Tribes in Maine have a different, more restrictive status than all 570 other federally recognized Tribes in the United States due to the 1980 Maine

Indian Claims Settlement Act. Last year, a bipartisan task force recommended 22 changes to the Settlement Act to avoid and help settle future disputes between the State and Tribes, to remove some of the barriers preventing the Tribes from purchasing land, and to restore recognition of the Tribes' inherent rights. Those include the Tribes' rights to regulate hunting, fishing, natural resources, and land use on Tribal lands and waters, as allowed by federal law.

The Wabanaki Tribes' sovereign rights should never have been revoked and need to be restored. In just a few hundred years since the Wabanaki Tribes welcomed European settlers to these shores, the Wabanaki have lost 98% of their population, access to most land and waters, their ability to sustain themselves in traditional ways, and so much more. At a time when climate change and environmental degradation are accelerating, restoring the Wabanaki Tribes' ability to manage tribal lands, waters, and resources will benefit future generations of all Mainers.

We believe that strengthening the sovereignty of Indigenous Peoples over their lands is one of many ways we can address ongoing environmental damage, begin the process of addressing the harm of ongoing colonialization, and promote prosperity for all the people of Maine. This bill not only serves to address these rights for the Wabanaki, it also provides for a more coherent and equitable management and regulation system which will benefit all people who hunt, fish, and recreate on these lands in Maine.

Sincerely,

Appalachian Mountain Club
Baskahegan Company
Chewonki Foundation
Frenchman Bay Conservancy
Friends of Acadia
Friends of Katahdin Woods and Waters
Kennebunkport Climate Initiative
Kennebunkport Conservation Trust
Land in Common
Laudholm Trust

Loon Echo Land Trust
Mahoosuc Guide Service
Maine Appalachian Trail Land Trust
Maine Audubon
Maine Conservation Alliance
Maine Farmland Trust
Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association
Midcoast Conservancy
NATURAL DIFFERENCE, LLC
Oceanside Conservation Trust of Casco Bay
Open Space Institute
Portland Trails
Quimby Family Foundation
Schoodic Institute at Acadia National Park
Somali Bantu Community Association
Southern Maine Conservation Collaborative
The Conservation Fund
The Orono Land Trust
The Trust for Public Land
The Wilderness Society
Western Foothills Land Trust