



Testimony of Eliza Townsend, Maine Conservation Policy Director

In opposition to

LD 1685, *An Act to Increase Acreage Eligibility and Change Requirements for Filing Plans Under the Maine Tree Growth Tax Law*

May 10, 2023

Senator Grohoski, representative Perry and distinguished member of the Joint Standing Committee on Taxation, the Appalachian Mountain Club opposes LD 1685, *An Act to Increase Acreage Eligibility and Change Requirements for Filing Plans Under the Maine Tree Growth Tax Law*.

AMC is the nation's oldest conservation, recreation and education organization, with the mission to foster the protection, enjoyment and understanding of the outdoors. We have 6,600 members in Maine and own 100,000 acres of forestland in Piscataquis County which we manage for multiple use, including sustainable forestry, backcountry recreation, and environmental education. Our Maine land holdings are enrolled in the Tree Growth tax program.

Since 1971, the Tree Growth Tax Law has been in place to encourage forestland owners to retain and improve their holdings of forestlands and to promote better forest management. This policy promotes stability and predictability, and we believe that changes to the program should be limited, if any. We do not object to the provision of the bill requiring that a copy of the required forest management and harvest plan be filed with the assessor, provided those plans remain confidential.

More than 50 years ago, lawmakers determined "It is declared to be the public policy of this State that the public interest would be best served by encouraging forest landowners to retain and improve their holdings of forest lands upon the tax rolls of the State and to promote better forest management by appropriate tax measures in order to protect this unique economic and recreational resource."

In the 52 years since Tree Growth was first implemented, the need to protect forests and their many benefits has become even more important. Climate change and biodiversity loss affect our lives and our economy and threaten the very future of our planet. We live with the daily impact of climate change, from shorter, milder winters to extreme floods such as last week's, to drought. Since 1970, the world has lost a staggering percentage of its biodiversity, the variety of plants, animals and fungi that form ecosystems and support all life. Here in the U.S., 34% of plants and 40% of animals are at risk of extinction.ⁱ North America has lost nearly 3 billion birds since 1970.ⁱⁱ We must act.

Forests are a critical part of the solution because they absorb carbon pollution and provide vital habitat while cleaning and cooling air and water. Recognizing that smaller landowners have an important role to play in keeping Maine's forests as forests, Governor Mills convened a task force to develop incentives to increase carbon storage on woodland parcels ranging from 10 to 10,000 acres. Fifteen task force members representing a variety of viewpoints collaborated to identify strategies to conserve Maine's forestlands, particularly the smaller parcels.



LD 1685 runs counter to that objective. Increasing the acreage eligible for the program from 10 to 25 acres would remove an incentive to keep smaller parcels forested. Maine loses an estimated 10,000 acres of forestland per year, a figure that dates to before the pandemic-driven real estate boom. Many smaller forestland owners are located in southern Maine, where development pressures have been rising for some time, leading to higher property values and taxes. The combined effect of real estate demand and higher property taxes is a powerful incentive to sell forested parcels for development, and we believe that, if passed, LD 1685 would result in many more acres of forestland permanently lost. This is the wrong direction for Maine to move in when climate change and biodiversity loss demand action.

Please do your part to help Maine keep its valuable forest. Please vote LD 1685 Ought Not to Pass.

ⁱ <https://www.natureserve.org/news-releases/over-one-third-biodiversity-united-states-risk-disappearing#:~:text=In%20the%20first%20report%20of,risk%20of%20range%2Dwide%20collapse.>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.birds.cornell.edu/home/bring-birds-back/>