

Testimony of Sarah Woodbury, Director of Advocacy, Defend Our Health
In Support of LD 2004, "An Act to Restore Access to Federal Laws Beneficial to the Wabanaki Nations"
Before the Judiciary Committee
May 31, 2023

Senator Carney, Representative Moonen and members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Sarah Woodbury. I am the director of advocacy for Defend Our Health. Defend Our Health's mission is to make sure that everyone has equal access to safe food and drinking water, healthy homes and products that are toxic-free and climate friendly. Please accept this testimony in support of LD 2004, "An Act to Restore Access to Federal Laws Beneficial to the Wabanaki Nations".

We at Defend believe that the issue of Wabanaki tribal sovereignty is one of the great injustices of our time. Restoring sovereignty to the Wabanaki tribes will change a system of oppression that has impacted the Wabanaki people for over 40 years. The Wabanaki people have been stewards of this land for thousands of years before white settlers arrived. They have lived in harmony with the land and water, managing natural resources so that future generations can thrive. Since the arrival of European settlers, the Wabanaki people have lost 98% of their population as well as access to most of their land and water. While this bill does not restore sovereignty, it does provide a path forward to allow the tribes to benefit from federal legislation that benefits all other tribes.

The Maine Indian Claims Settlement Act that was signed in 1980 has kept the tribes from benefitting from 151 federal laws which all other tribal nations have benefitted from in the U.S. There are 570 federally recognized tribes that have more rights than the Wabanaki tribes here in Maine. In order for Maine tribes to benefit from federal law, they must specifically be named in that law. This puts an excessive burden on the tribes, requiring them to track all legislation that may benefit them and making sure that the legislation is amended to specifically name the Wabanaki people in that legislation. If Maine tribes had to work to amend every single piece of legislation that impacted them, it could take decades.

LD 2004 does not circumvent the 1980's Settlement Act. It simply changes a provision within the Settlement Act that would at least begin the process of placing the tribes in Maine on the same footing as the other 570 federally recognized tribes.

Maine's tribes are an integral part of the fabric of life here in Maine. While we believe that Maine needs to restore the sovereign rights of all tribal nations in Maine, until the state can come to agreement on that process, LD 2004 will provide a step in the right direction by allowing Maine tribes access to federal law that benefits other tribes without having to have those laws amended to specifically name them. Defend Our Health urges you to vote unanimously "ought to pass" on LD 2004.