

May 31, 2023

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Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary

RE: LD 1970 - An Act to Enact the Maine Indian Child Welfare Act

Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary, my name is Kaitlyn Nuzzo and I am the Government Relations Director for The Nature Conservancy in Maine. **I appreciate this opportunity to testify in support of LD 1970, An Act to Enact the Maine Indian Child Welfare Act.**

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is a nonprofit conservation organization dedicated to conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends. Guided by science, we create innovative, on-the-ground solutions to our world's toughest challenges so that nature and people can thrive together. We use a collaborative approach that engages local communities, governments, the private sector, and other partners. TNC has been leading conservation in Maine for more than 60 years and is the 12th largest landowner in the state, owning and managing roughly 300,000 acres.

Too often when it comes to the decisions that affect their people, lands, waters, and livelihoods, Indigenous Peoples have been denied the opportunity to participate in meaningful ways, resulting in the exclusion of important rights-holders from decision-making processes. As an organization committed to creating a future of healthy lands, waters, and communities, we believe that one of the most effective and enduring actions we can take is to strengthen Indigenous Peoples' voices, choices, and actions.

This is a major focus of TNC's work around the world. As an organization, TNC has endorsed the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). The UNDRIP describes the fundamental rights of Indigenous Peoples and supporting principles necessary to protect and fulfil those fundamental rights. In addition to endorsing the Declaration, TNC has committed itself to respecting its principles, using it as a reference in policy development, and serving as an ally to Indigenous efforts to grow the influence of the UNDRIP in development and policy reform contexts around the world.

Here in Maine, we continue to learn about the historical and ongoing injustices faced by Wabanaki children, families, and communities, and we acknowledge the urgency of addressing them. A disproportionately higher rate of Wabanaki children in Maine are taken into foster care than non-Native children. By codifying the Indian Child Welfare Act in Maine, LD 1970 would protect

Wabanaki children, families, culture, and sovereignty if the U.S. Supreme Court decides in June to weaken or destroy existing protections.

LD 1970 is a critical step toward recognizing the rights to self-determination and sovereignty of the Wabanaki Tribes of Maine, which TNC strongly supports. We urge this committee to support LD 1970. Thank you for the opportunity to comment.