

To: Sen. Carney, Rep. Moonen, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary

From: Sharon Peralta, 82 Stanley Road, Springvale, ME 04083

Re: Support for LD 2007, An Act to Advance Self-determination for Wabanaki Nations

Sen. Carney, Rep. Moonen and members of the Judiciary Committee, my name is Sharon Peralta and I live in Springvale, ME. I am writing to testify in support of LD 2007.

I grew up in NH, have lived in ME for 21 years and have benefitted from the wise stewardship of these lands by our Wabanaki ancestors over the millennia. Evidence of their long, diligent presence here is hard to miss. In recent years, I've become painfully aware of the great injustice we as a state continue to inflict on our good neighbors by denying them full recognition of their sovereignty as independent nations.

The politicians who drafted the 1980 Maine Indian Claims Settlement Act (MICSA), called it a "living document", yet for more than 40 years we have not adapted to meet our neighbor's needs. Instead, it has been a barrier that has kept the Wabanaki, along with non-Indigenous citizens in rural ME, from achieving the dramatic and sustained economic growth achieved over the same period of time by 570 federal tribes across Indian Country.

Easing the Settlement Act's restrictions will enable the Wabanaki Nations to take full advantage of federal self-determination policies that are very clearly benefiting 570 other tribes and their nearby communities across the country. Average income growth since 1989 is 61% for tribal citizens outside of ME, but only 9% for Wabanaki citizens in ME; Maine's overall income growth for the same period was 25%. Likewise, because of MICSA, the Wabanaki tribes' health, educational and economic outcomes have lagged far behind those of other population groups in ME and other tribes throughout the country. By leaving MICSA as is, we've assumed we were doing so for our own benefit, but the reality is that it has hurt the state as a whole.

Failing to address MICSA has had its greatest impact on children. According to the U.S. Census data in 2019, childhood poverty rates within Wabanaki communities range from a low of 40% at the Passamaquoddy Tribe at Motahkomikuk community to a high of 77% for the Mi'kmaq Nation in Aroostook County. By comparison, Maine's childhood poverty rate for the same period is 15%. Dramatic! To see this as anything but inhumane is delusional.

Over the years, this issue has continued to be brought before the legislature with very strong non-indigenous support across the state. Many of us recognize the inhumanity with which our neighbors are treated and, personally, it makes me sick. I am reminded of it several times daily as I stand at my kitchen sink and look out at the forest that was vibrant when I bought my home 21 years ago. It is now diseased and dying due to air and water pollution as well as climate change. The Mousam River is not far down the road from my place. It's beautiful! I can only imagine our neighbors' ancestors foraging, hunting and fishing here. Having recently learned how they consider these surroundings as family, I cannot imagine the pain and grief they must feel at seeing its demise in our hands. I literally cry at times—if I'm hurt this deeply, their pain is

unimaginable. Recent testimony in regard to the Juniper Ridge Landfill is gut wrenching. Their efforts to reclaim poisoned and obstructed rivers in this state are equally poignant. But it doesn't need to be this way.

By modernizing MICSA, Harvard researchers (<https://www.wabanakialliance.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/2022-12-2-Economic-Social-Impacts-Fed-Indian-Policies-to-Wabanaki-Nations-final.pdf>) say the Wabanaki Nations could become the economic engines of their regions, creating new opportunities for jobs and income growth for themselves and rural Maine. According to the recent Harvard Report, self-government for the tribes would likely mean an additional \$330 million a year in Maine's Gross Domestic Product, more than 2,700 jobs, and \$39 million a year in state and local tax revenue. Based on the experience of other tribes, better than half the new jobs created are likely to be filled by non-indigenous neighbors of Wabanaki tribes in rural Maine. A rising tide surely will lift all boats.

Rather than continuing to fight our neighbors, looking to keep our dominion over them—to our own detriment, and at substantial expense to tax payers—like me and each of you, would it not make more sense to revise MICSA recognizing our neighbors' sovereignty and work as partners to build a more humane state which provides for all of its citizens with respect and dignity?

Thank you for considering my comments. I hope you will vote in approval of and work toward passage of LD 2007. Our governor has long opposed such updates to MICSA, so sufficient votes will be required to prevent another override of this bill by her. It's well past time to do the right thing. The absolutely ridiculous point is that with passage; we ourselves will benefit from increased productivity, decreased poverty and its associated costs, saved tax dollars, improved relations with our neighbors and a cleaner, healthier, more productive environment.