

Sherri Billings
Fryeburg
LD 138

Greetings Senator Tepler, Representative Doudera, and Members of the Environment and Natural Resources Committee,

My name is Sherri Billings, and I live in Fryeburg, ME. I am testifying in opposition to LD138, "An Act to Exempt Airports from Certain State Endangered and Threatened Species Habitat Protections." I write to you today as a former member of the Fryeburg Conservation Committee, and a dedicated advocate for our community's natural resources. Our town has invested significant effort into preserving our ecosystems and creating public spaces for all to enjoy, including building a town forest trail with the help of the community.

Our commitment to conservation was galvanized in 2017 when a proposed TIF district sought to allow industrial development—including a plastic water bottling plant by Poland Spring—on town-owned land. This land is managed by the Eastern Slope Airport Authority, which has continually disregarded environmental protections, including the wetlands and wildlife habitat plan that governs this land. Thanks to a grassroots effort, we successfully opposed the measure by the largest margin in the town's history. We ensured that our town-owned land remains protected from such destructive proposals. However, today, we are faced with another threat: LD138, a bill that seeks to exempt airports from certain endangered species habitat protections. I strongly oppose this bill and urge you to reject it.

The Eastern Slope Airport Authority (ESAA) leases this land from the town to oversee airport operations. Despite the town's ownership of the land, we lack the capacity to manage an airport ourselves, which is why the ESAA was formed to oversee operations. However, this authority has failed to be a good steward of the land, as evidenced by illegal clear-cutting of endangered habitats and encroachment on valuable ecosystems. The ESAA has repeatedly sought to develop this land for non-aeronautical purposes, including proposals for a Poland Spring bottling plant and a solar array development. Recently, the airport received approval to expand its runway, leading to the destruction of prime wetlands and encroachment on a globally rare Outwash Plain Pond Shore Community near Round Pond. These activities cannot continue.

Committee Members, please understand that the ESAA is an anti-ecology, anti-community entity. On May 3rd, 2023, they submitted public testimony opposing Mountain Division LD404, LD1450, and LD209, arguing that old rail infrastructure should remain to "move goods." But what goods are they really referring to? Their agenda is not as it appears in public meetings, where they claim they are working for the town's best interests. In reality, they are focused on profiting from the land—sacrificing our natural resources and community values for short-term gain.

If developers, such as those on the ESAA board, seek to expand airports or rail systems for transporting goods, they are driven by unchecked greed and short-term profit. These developers prioritize revenue over the health of the environment, showing blatant disregard for the delicate ecosystems that sustain both wildlife and human communities. They are bad neighbors, ignoring the well-being of those who live nearby and the long-term consequences of their development. Such developers epitomize the opposite of responsible growth—they exploit land for personal gain, trampling valuable resources in the process.

This land, Fryeburg's town-owned land, is home to one of the richest habitats in Maine, including endangered pitch pine and scrub oak ecosystems that support rare species, as well as prime wetlands and globally significant habitats. It sits atop an aquifer, providing critical water resources. It is incomprehensible to consider removing these protections without a thorough, location-based environmental impact study and a detailed cost-benefit analysis regarding the potential loss of such vital habitat. During my time on the Conservation Committee, we invited Maine's

Beginning with Habitat to share their expertise on this land's value. They advised us to protect it and to speak out whenever it was threatened. Threats to our environment are threats to our rural economy, our vibrant community, and our healthy natural environment. We do not want to see our trees removed and our wildlife displaced. We do not want our rural community industrialized. We do not want that at all and we certainly don't want it on top of our aquifer. We want our natural environment and the endangered, threatened and specials of special concern to find refuge in the contiguous open acres surrounding our airport.

The environmental laws in place today were enacted for a reason—to preserve our natural resources for our ourselves and future generations. Why should we disregard these protections now, when we know how much is at stake? A review of the 2008 Airport Master Plan will show how carefully buffer zones were defined. The airport is currently functioning well for its intended purposes, and there is no justification for undermining the protections that keep our land and species safe. If we allow this exemption, it will not only harm the wildlife and ecosystems that call this land home but also erode the trust of the communities that have worked tirelessly to define and protect our natural treasures. At what point do we townspeople get to say, “No more?” The ESAA wants to develop, but the townspeople of Fryeburg are fighting to stop them, as evidenced by this testimony.

Fryeburg's citizens care deeply about the environment. We have invested time and resources to map the wetlands, valuable habitats, and endangered species that make our town special. We did this because we understand the importance of leaving these areas undisturbed. Removing these protections would have devastating consequences—not only for Fryeburg, but for Maine as a whole.

I urge the committee to uphold the current protections and reject LD138. Please do not allow airports to be exempt from these vital safeguards. Take the necessary actions to meet the threats facing our watershed, the land we cherish, and the species that are able to thrive among us.

Sincerely,
Sherri Billings