



Committee on Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry  
% Legislative Information Office  
100 State House Station  
Augusta, ME 04333

February 6, 2025

**RE: LD 183, An Act to Cap Publicly Owned Land Area at No More than 50 Percent of Any County**

Dear Sen. Talbot Ross, Rep. Pluecker, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Francesca “Ches” Gundrum and I am Maine Audubon’s Director of Advocacy. Maine Audubon is a wildlife conservation non-profit – we fulfill our mission to “conserve Maine’s wildlife and wildlife habitat” by engaging people of all ages in nature through a science-based approach to education, conservation, and advocacy. On behalf of Maine Audubon and our 30,000 members, supporters, and volunteers, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in opposition to LD 183, *An Act to Cap Publicly Owned Land Area at No More than 50 Percent of Any County*.

LD 183 would do three things: 1) place a limit on publicly owned land in the state to no more than 50% of the land area in any county, 2) allow the state, a county, or a municipality the ability to exceed that limit with a two-thirds approval of the Legislature, and 3) require the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF) to deliver a biennial report to this committee on the jurisdiction over public lands matters on the percentage of federal, state, county and municipal property ownership statewide and by county. For the purposes of this bill, “publicly owned land” includes land in which the federal government, the state, a county, or a municipality holds property rights, including easements, development rights, trust rights, or other ownership interests.

Maine Audubon opposes this bill because it does not address an articulable problem. The process for acquiring and designating public lands in Maine is deliberate and transparent, with ample opportunity for public input, as well as review by state agencies, municipalities, and legislators. The process for acquiring properties through the Land for Maine’s Future program (LMF), a land conservation funding program that touches the majority of public lands in the state, is a good example. LMF bonds require a two-thirds vote by the Legislature, then must be ratified by a majority of Maine voters. Land conservation projects then apply for available funding to the LMF Board, whose deliberations are public and who require municipal approval prior to awarding funds. Plainly, in order for the majority of public land to come to be in Maine, it must face significant, repeated public scrutiny.

Public lands are beneficial to the state and local economies. Many of these lands contribute to job creation and income, including forestry, agriculture, working waterfronts, and outdoor recreation and tourism-based jobs. Working forest easements keep more than two million acres of forestland in production, while allowing public access for hunting, fishing, and other traditional outdoor activities. More than 45,000 acres of productive Maine farmland and associated woodlots are held in easement, allowing farmers to stay on their land and provide affordable opportunities for a new generation of farmers. Public lands hold commercial fishing wharves and provide access to clam flats that are vital to Maine's marine fisheries and aquaculture industries. Maine's outdoor recreation economy generates tens of thousands of direct jobs and hundreds of millions in state and local tax revenue, much of which is driven by access to these public lands. Particularly during the pandemic, public lands of all kinds saw an even higher level of use, providing safe spaces for people to recreate, watch wildlife, socialize, and rejuvenate. Plainly, "public lands" are good for the economy and the Maine way of life.

Maine Audubon opposes this bill because it limits opportunities for landowners that may wish to sell or donate their land or a conservation easement if the state or their county has reached its limit. Selling easements can be a lucrative funding option for compromised landowners or landowners seeking a new source of revenue from a given parcel to keep it in active forestry, agriculture, or other undeveloped use. Similarly, the bill imposes state legislative control on municipalities that may wish to acquire land for any number of purposes, including to build a new school, a community center, or a playground.

Most importantly, Maine Audubon opposes setting arbitrary limits on public lands that preserve older forests, fragile wetlands, rare plant communities, and important wildlife habitat for vulnerable species. Public lands are elemental to conserving biodiversity, as well as iconic species like Atlantic salmon, wild brook trout, moose, and deer. Often, land conservation decisions are guided by public benefit—by demonstrating that conserving a particular parcel will help maintain water quality of a public drinking water source, for example. Capping public lands without clearly articulated reasons is counter to serving the public good.

**For these reasons and more, Maine Audubon opposes LD 183 and encourages the Committee to do the same.** Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,



Francesca "Ches" Gundrum  
Director of Advocacy