

Will Tuell
State Rep. House District 10
LD 183

Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker, Distinguished Members of the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry:

My name is Will Tuell. I represent House District 10, which includes numerous communities and unorganized territories in central Washington County, and I am writing in strong support of LD 183, sponsored by Rep. Faulkingham, and many of my colleagues from Washington County.

While at a glance this legislation may seem extreme -- rural Maine is becoming increasingly cannibalized by public, nonprofit groups purchasing vast tracts of undeveloped land to the point where a significant portion of our land mass is not only no longer developable but also no longer taxable. Washington County alone has at least 30% of its landmass swallowed up by these entities, and it is having a dramatic negative impact on our tax base.

Rep. Faulkingham's legislation would not stop the further acquisition of public lands. What it would do is cap that at 50% of a county's landmass. I would prefer that number to be lower, as I believe the state and its nonprofit allies will "race" to gobble up that other 20% in Washington County, but a cap on publicly owned property is a must if we are going to salvage anything of our rural economy.

When properties are publicly owned, their owners are under no obligation to pay taxes to the small communities where they're located. That means local people, many of whom are older Mainers; or Mainers struggling to pay for heat, lights, food, and all the vital services that their community needs to succeed such as schools, fire, law enforcement, county services, and more. There are no frills in small town rural Maine, and Rep. Faulkingham is well aware of this.

Jon Reisman, a retired economics and public policy professor at the University of Maine Machias, who I had the pleasure of having as a professor while a student at UMM, is also a selectman in the small town of Cooper in my district, and sees these challenges every day. That is what prompted him to bring this bill forward to Rep. Faulkingham and those of us in the county delegation.

While the cap may be controversial to some, the bill also directs DACF to track the amount of public lands. That at the very least should not be controversial. Nor should an expectation that if a county exceeds 50% of its landmass that the Legislature have a say in whether additional lands can be purchased for the public good.

I want to close by saying that public land has its place. But we have plenty of publicly owned land already, and need to be thoughtful about how much more we purchase, or encourage the purchase of.

I thank you for reading my remarks, and apologize for not being able to connect via Zoom on the hearing day.