

Heather Omand
Freedom
LD 735

Good Morning Senator Tepler, Representative Doudera, and ENR Committee Members,

My name is Heather Omand, I live in Freedom, ME and I am testifying in support of LD 226 "An Act to Protect the Cultural Resources and Historical Heritage of Sears Island in Searsport by Extending Conservation Easement Protections."

My family and I have enjoyed the exceptional beauty of Sears Island for many years, especially since our son was born in 2017. We visit Sears Island and study the Native American history, the history of its development, the species that live on the island, and the ecological role the Island plays in the area. I believe that the proposed development of the island is not in the best interest of Mainers, and that development of Mack point makes far more sense. We have studied the issue and it seems that Maine leadership decided that Sears Island would be developed despite the processes that happened to ensure diverse perspectives and research and that the voices of Maine people were heard. The cost estimates for the various options (including Mack Point) do not seem to be especially thorough and miss important data. These processes should be revisited, the Island should be protected, and any necessary development should continue to be focused at Mack Point.

In addition, I have carefully reviewed the points below provided by several local organizers and researchers and agree with them. They are well thought out and resonate deeply with our family's beliefs and values. I hope you will consider them carefully as well!

Conservation IS Climate Action!

Intact forests and ecosystems are the best tools for mitigating climate change, according to many reports, including the International Panel on Climate Change. The State of Maine's Carbon Budget, Version 2.0 identifies forestland as the most significant factor removing greenhouse gases from the atmosphere through carbon sequestration. Maine is, as of June 2024, nearly reaching its carbon-neutral goals ahead of the 2025 projections. The bulk of the carbon sequestration measured and confirmed in the reduction data comes from Maine's forests. Because of their age and biodiversity, the forests and wetlands in 2025 sequester 88,750 metric tons of carbon, the equivalent of 74,000 cars per year. By 2050 they will sequester 96,685 metric tons according to the Nature Conservancy's land use mapping tool. Destroying forested acres and carbon sequestering wetlands and soils for wind power is counterproductive.

Sears Island protects the Penobscot Bay Estuary

The late succession forests naturally cool stream and bay waters and support natural fisheries, including cod nurseries, lobster, clam beds, and migrating fish including Atlantic salmon and sturgeon. Decades of collaborative work have gone into restoring the native fish runs on the Penobscot River, and conserving the entire Island enhances and supports those efforts.

Sears Island is a critical stopover for migrating birds

257 species of birds have been sited on the Island. 47% of all bird species in Maine have been found there. The Island's contiguous, mature ecosystems are rare, and highly sensitive to disruption. These ecosystems provide habitat for endangered and rare plant, animal, bird and marine species, including at least 20 vulnerable species. The 5 miles of undeveloped shoreline and sand dunes are unique to the region. The newer dune that formed behind the jetty will mature over time to support grasses and provide extremely rare habitat.

Sears Island Provides Unparalleled Recreational Access and Educational Opportunities

According to a study by the Friends of Sears Island (FOSI), Sears Island provides a tremendous economic boon to the region by attracting local and non-local visitors who stop at local businesses to eat or shop. Local schools and afterschool programs, including the Game Loft, use the Island regularly. Sears Island is a beloved place for the local community; the Island's walking trails and miles of coastline are free for the public to enjoy.

Importance Historically and Currently to Penobscot People

Sears Island was originally called wahsumkik ("shining beach") by the Penobscot Nation. Wahsumkik was an important navigation beacon for Penobscots paddling their birchbark canoes around Penobscot Bay. After portaging across the neck of Cape Jellison, paddlers were guided to wahsumkik by the sight of the sand beach, eliminating a long paddle around two bodies of land that jut out into Penobscot Bay. Archaeological records confirm that Penobscot People started camping on the island over 3,400 years ago, using it as a base for hunting, fishing, and resting along paddling routes.

Wasted Taxpayer Dollars for Developing Sears Island

Efforts to develop Sears Island have cost taxpayers over \$24 million over the years. The State of Maine has already spent nearly \$6 million on the current wind port effort; a project which is not supported by a majority of the community, is unlikely to meet the regulatory hurdles, cannot attract federal money, and relies on technology that is untested.

Additional Arguments for Using Mack Point Instead

Mack Point is already an industrial site, making it a potentially better location for a wind port, rather than developing on the undeveloped Sears Island.

Developing on a previously industrialized site like Mack Point would avoid the ecological damage that would come with clearing and building on Sears Island.

Re-using Mack Point would be a less expensive option based on several realistic estimates.

Sincerely,
Heather