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March 12, 2025

Testimony 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” and Sections of LD 735 “An Act to Protect Sand Dunes on Sears Island and to Establish Criteria for Legislation Regarding Land Development”

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

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. Preserve Rural Maine (PRM), a member-funded nonprofit dedicated to protecting rural communities, farmlands, and working forests, strongly supports LD 226, “An Act to Conserve and Protect Sears Island,” and two key provisions within LD 735: the restoration of Maine's coastal sand dune protections and the requirement that Indigenous sites on Sears Island be safeguarded prior to any development.

1. Support for LD 226: Permanent Protection of Sears Island / wahsumkik

Sears Island, known to the Penobscot Nation as *wahsumkik* (“shining beach”), is a uniquely intact ecological, cultural, and recreational treasure that deserves full and permanent protection. LD 226 recognizes this value by requiring that all land on Sears Island—other than portions already under conservation easement or town/private management—be protected through a new conservation easement.

Sears Island’s late-successional forests, wetlands, and shoreline ecosystems are among the best natural climate solutions available. As Maine's [Carbon Budget \(version 2.0\)](#) makes clear, forestland is the most significant factor in removing greenhouse gases from the atmosphere. According to The Nature Conservancy’s [Land Use Mapping Tool](#), Maine’s forests sequester approximately 88,750 metric tons of carbon annually—equivalent to removing 74,000 cars from the road every year—and will increase to nearly 100,000 metric tons by 2050. In an era of accelerating climate change, preserving carbon-sequestering ecosystems like those on Sears Island is essential to meeting Maine’s climate targets—targets we are already close to achieving ahead of schedule.

Moreover, Sears Island protects the broader Penobscot Bay estuary. Its [undisturbed forests and streams](#) naturally cool bay waters and sustain essential fisheries, including cod nurseries, lobster and clam beds, and migratory fish such as Atlantic salmon and sturgeon. [Decades of collaborative effort](#) to restore the Penobscot River’s native fish runs would be undermined by damaging development on Sears Island.

Sears Island is also an irreplaceable sanctuary for wildlife. With [235 bird species recorded](#)—47% of Maine’s total—it serves as a critical stopover for migratory birds and provides habitat for more than 20 vulnerable species. The five miles of undeveloped shoreline and sand dunes are unique to Penobscot Bay, and the developing dune behind the jetty will, over time, support grasses and habitat now rare in our region.

Equally important, Sears Island is a vital community resource. Thousands of visitors each year—families, students, researchers—use the island’s free, publicly accessible trails and coastline for recreation, education, and scientific study.

Finally, Sears Island is of [deep historical and cultural significance to the Penobscot Nation](#). For over 3,400 years, Penobscot people used wahsumkik as a site for camping, fishing, and traveling by canoe, and it served as a critical navigation point for their journeys. To disturb or destroy this site is to disregard both Indigenous history and continuing cultural presence.

2. Support for LD 735: Restoring Sand Dune Protections and Requiring Indigenous Review

PRM also urges the Committee to support the provisions in LD 735 that (a) restore Maine’s coastal sand dune protections and (b) require an Indigenous Lands Protection Committee to review and certify any development plans for Sears Island.

Last session, the state stripped vital sand dune protections—protections that were not only consistent with state law but aligned with common sense in the face of rising sea levels and climate change. According to Maine's [Natural Resources Protection Act](#) (NRPA), coastal sand dunes are “resources of state significance” because of their role in protecting wildlife, preventing erosion, and buffering storm surges. The DEP’s own [“Coastal Sand Dune Rules”](#) state that Maine’s dunes are rare (only 2% of the coastline), fragile, and under severe threat. These dunes are critical nesting grounds for endangered species such as piping plovers and least terns.

To weaken these protections for the sake of building on Sears Island is to contradict the state’s own conservation mandates. It also sets a dangerous precedent: if sand dune protections can be stripped here, what prevents similar rollbacks elsewhere?

In addition, LD 735’s provision requiring an Indigenous Lands Protection Committee is crucial. Given Sears Island’s known Penobscot heritage, it is unacceptable to proceed with any form of industrial development without formal review and certification from Indigenous leaders to ensure that no sacred or culturally significant sites are disturbed.

3. Waste of Taxpayer Dollars on Failed Development Proposals

Finally, we must address the economic reality. Over [\\$26 million of taxpayer funds have been wasted](#) on repeated failed attempts to industrialize Sears Island. [Nearly \\$6 million more has been spent](#) on the latest offshore wind port proposal—despite widespread community opposition, serious regulatory hurdles, and uncertain federal funding.

Meanwhile, viable alternatives exist. Mack Point, an already industrialized site, has been consistently put forward as a [better location](#)—without threatening protected ecosystems or Indigenous sites. PRM supports offshore wind development when sited appropriately—but destroying forests, wetlands, and dunes on Sears Island for an experimental and uncertain project is neither necessary nor responsible.

In sum, PRM strongly urges this Committee to:

- **Pass LD 226** to protect all remaining unprotected lands on Sears Island / wahsumkik.
- **Support the portions of LD 735** that restore sand dune protections and require Indigenous review before any development on Sears Island.

These measures will ensure that Sears Island remains a living legacy of Maine's commitment to climate action, conservation, Indigenous respect, and community well-being.

Respectfully,

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LD 226

This version corrects carbon calculations to read: "Maine's forests sequester approximately 88,750 metric tons of carbon annually—equivalent to removing 74,000 cars from the road every year—and will increase to nearly 100,000 metric tons by 2050."

In the previous version, these numbers were applied to Sears Island alone, which is not accurate.