

February 17, 2026

To: Sen. Carney, Rep. Moonen, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary
From: Dr. Richard B. Peterson
93 Winding Way
Portland, ME 04102
Re: Support for LD 785, An Act to Advance Self-determination for Wabanaki Nations

Dear Sen. Carney, Rep. Moonen, and members of the Judiciary Committee,

My name is Richard Peterson. I live in Portland and am writing in support of LD 785. I moved to Maine in 2002 to teach Environmental Studies at the University of New England. It was a good decision. I love Maine. I love teaching about Maine's environment in the classroom, but especially through going out with my students into Maine's numerous conservation areas and well managed landscapes. That such remain is not an accident. Maine's indigenous peoples have stewarded this land for more than 10,000 years. Maine's early settlers and visitors to Maine like Henry David Thoreau were able to learn from Wabanaki peoples how to live in right relationship to the land so that both they and the land could be sustained. This has long been and remains a Maine tradition and may not have been so without the example and model of land stewardship provided by Maine's first inhabitants.

It has only been in the past decade that I have learned about Maine's unique and exceptionally regressive policies regarding its native population. Some policies date back centuries, some are more recent, mostly notably the 1980 Maine Indian Claims Settlement Act (MICSA). It is hard to believe, yet alone understand, why Maine stands alone among the states in keeping its native peoples from being able to benefit from federally sanctioned programs that have benefited all 570 other tribes in the United States. It is time for us as a state to no longer be an anachronism and to join other states in abiding by federal laws aimed to guarantee tribes self-determination, sovereignty, and economic opportunities.

Such opportunities have generated average income growth of 61% since 1989 for native peoples outside of Maine. In contrast, Wabanaki incomes have grown only 9% in that period. Our policies have helped create a "third-world" condition within our "first-world" state, where Wabanaki people, especially children, are suffering from economic, health, and educational conditions lagging far behind those of non-native Mainers, and far behind those of tribal citizens in other states. Childhood poverty in Wabanaki communities ranges from 40% to 77%, compared to Maine's overall rate of 15%. This is a great stain on our great state, and we have the power and means to scrub it out, a first step being to pass LD 785.

I am not alone. Over 1600 Mainers have testified in favor of a tribal sovereignty bill, joined by numerous civil society organizations, labor unions, faith communities, and businesses. It is time for the legislature and the governor to join with them and grant Maine's tribes their full rights of self-determination enabling them to benefit from the same opportunities for economic, social, and cultural improvement to their quality of life that the rest of us and the rest of America's tribal peoples enjoy.

Thank you for listening to me and to numerous other people whose testimonies in support of LD 785 you no doubt have received. Acting together and in accordance with the principles of democracy we are calling upon you, our representatives in government, to do the right thing. Passing LD 785 will benefit all Mainers and show the world that we too care deeply about fairness and equity in our way of life and in our relations with those who were here long before us.

Sincerely,



Dr. Richard B. Peterson
Professor Emeritus of Environmental Studies
University of New England