



**FIRST
LIGHT**

16 February 2026

Dear Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and members of the Judiciary Committee,

We are the staff and leadership of First Light writing to express our strongest support for LD 785 and LD 395, two bills that have great significance for Wabanaki Nations and non-native neighbors in Wabanaki homelands now called Maine.

First Light is a collaborative effort across more than sixty organizations working together to return land, land access, money, and decision-making authority to Wabanaki Nations. These organizations include statewide land trusts, Maine chapters of national and international conservation bodies, local “kitchen-table” land trusts, education and advocacy organizations, and foundations. Across our diverse missions, we are united in a conviction that when Wabanaki homelands are returned to their people, the entire landscape benefits. This work happens in close partnership with the intertribal Wabanaki Commission on Land and Stewardship. Returning land is a critical step in furthering Wabanaki caretaking to once more flourish across these homelands. The collaboration between First Light and the Wabanaki Commission on Land and Stewardship has become a model for private land return across the country, and we’re collectively engaged in returning more than 50,000 acres across all Wabanaki Nations as well as redistributing over \$2 million for Wabanaki-determined land care through the Wolankeyutomone Kisi Apaciyewik (“Let us take good care of what has returned”) Fund.

Over the development of this partnership, we’ve learned that land return without full sovereignty is incomplete. The full recognition of Wabanaki sovereignty is critical to the continuance of longstanding Wabanaki decision-making and land care traditions that improve the wellbeing of people, lands, and waters. Yet our work together happens in the shadow of significant state barriers to Wabanaki sovereignty. Due to the 1980 Settlement Act, Wabanaki Tribal governments are made to operate as quasi-municipalities when it comes to acquiring new trust lands, tending to existing Tribal lands, and furthering economic development. The Settlement Act imposed a barrier on full expression of Wabanaki sovereignty that hinders projects, resources and programs that would otherwise benefit land, water, and people. Furthermore, the Settlement Act added a barrier to Wabanaki inclusion in federal legislation, blocking Wabanaki access to federal policy and funding that might otherwise support land care and communities. Wabanaki Nations are alone amongst US federally-recognized Tribes in having to navigate this additional layer of state control.

The Penobscot Nation, Passamaquoddy Tribes, Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians, and Mi'kmaq Nation are sovereign nations, and it's time for the State of Maine to recognize this fully. LD 785 is built on recommendations developed by consensus through an intertribal, Indigenous and non-native, and bipartisan legislative Task Force. LD 395 brings Wabanaki Nations into the same status as every other federally-recognized Tribe in the US, ensuring they are included in future national legislation affecting tribes. Together, LD 785 and LD 395 take significant steps to remove barriers to Wabanaki self-governance and care for land and people, to the benefit of Wabanaki and non-native communities alike.

We endorse LD 785 and LD 395 and offer the Judiciary Committee our strongest encouragement to pass these bills.

Signed respectfully,

Brett Ciccotelli, Otto Muller, and Eliza Oldach
First Light Core Staff