

Testimony in Support of LD 1054, “LD 1054, An Act to Amend the Laws Governing Conservation Easements”

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Good Afternoon, Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry. My name is James Myall and I’m a policy analyst at the Maine Center for Economic Policy. I am testifying today in support of LD 1054, “LD 1054, An Act to Amend the Laws Governing Conservation Easements” with the sponsor’s proposed amendment. MECEP supports LD 1054 because we believe that as the original stewards of the land now called Maine, the Wabanaki Nations are best-equipped to care for it. What’s more, indigenous land stewardship can bring important economic benefits to all of us.

In MECEP’s recent report, *Sovereignty Starts Here: Land, Economy, and Tribal Rights in Maine*,¹ we examined both the moral and economic cases for Wabanaki land ownership and stewardship. In the report, we recommend empowering the Wabanaki Nations to hold land conservation easements as proposed in the proposed amendment to LD 1054.

Centuries of colonialism, coercive treaties and sometimes outright theft left the Wabanaki Nations confined to a tiny fraction of their traditional homelands. Our report shows how the State of Maine profited to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars from this appropriation of land between 1820 and 1980, through land sales, timber harvesting, property taxes, and other means. Meanwhile, poverty among Indigenous people in Maine is more than two-and-a-half times as high as it is for white, non-Hispanic Mainers.² The acquisition of millions of acres of Wabanaki land made Mainers rich and impoverished the Wabanaki people.

Our report also shows that reversing this pattern – returning ownership and control of land to the Wabanaki – can benefit all of us, as well as righting a historic wrong. States which have taken this approach have seen higher rates of economic growth and improved outcomes for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike.

The ability of the Wabanaki Nations to hold conservation easements, and the expanded scope of those easements under LD 1054 would be an important part of achieving that goal. Some 95% of the state of Maine is owned by private landowners, so the ability of these landowners to partner with the Wabanaki Nations to conserve their traditional homelands is important. Models of co-stewardship, in which Indigenous people work with

non-Indigenous landowners to practice traditional methods of conservation, are increasingly popular and successful across the country.

Expanding the definition of conservation as proposed in the amendment, respects the thousands of years of experience that the Wabanaki people bring to conservation in all its forms. Indigenous people across the country have successfully used natural resource management, cultural tourism, and outdoor recreation to boost local economies to the benefit of everyone.

MECEP believes LD 1054 will be an important step in recognizing the Wabanaki Nations' historic claim to the land we now call Maine, as well as a means of strengthening our economy for everyone who lives here. I urge you to vote ought to pass.

Thank you, and I'll be happy to take any questions.

Notes

¹ <https://www.mecep.org/maines-economy/sovereignty-starts-here/>

² US Census Bureau, American Community Survey data, 2024.