

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

My name is Roberta Manter, and I live in Fayette. I am writing to ask you to support L.D. 2171 to protect significant wildlife habitat.

For the past two years, my daughter, my grandchildren and I have participated in "Maine Big Night." Volunteers across the state go out on rainy nights from mid-March to mid-May to count migrating frogs and salamanders and to escort them safely across roads to the vernal pools where they were born. Seeing the migration in progress is an awesome sight, and participating in the count is addictive!

There are some who may see these critters as slimy or disgusting, but they are in fact amazing creatures. Because of their thin skin, they act as canaries in the coal mines to alert us when our environment is in trouble, buying us time to make corrections before we are affected ourselves. They also provide food for an impressive array of other wildlife, and they aid in reducing the population of mosquitoes and blackflies. There is even hope that studying how salamanders can regenerate limbs will yield important medical breakthroughs. And who doesn't welcome the chorus of Spring Peepers that announces the end of winter? Spotted Salamanders, Wood Frogs (with their raccoon-like masks), and several species of turtles rely heavily on vernal pools.

A "significant vernal pool," as I am sure others have explained, is a temporary pool that has been identified as harboring one or another sensitive species which, without our protection, might not survive. Besides providing breeding grounds for amphibians, vernal pools provide foraging grounds for many birds and mammals that prey on the amphibians and that find shelter in the undisturbed vegetation. The pools also help with flood control, and they filter water to purify it. And many species of plants grow around and in vernal pools, providing diversity which is so important to adjust to climate change. We cannot predict which species of plants and animals will be able to adjust to higher temperatures, rising tide water, or other changes in weather patterns.

But in order to reach vernal pools, wildlife needs undisturbed corridors of vegetation, tree shade, and deep leaf litter. It's not enough to leave the pool itself alone - there needs to be a wide area around it as well for the animals to live in during the rest of the year while the pool is dry. In fact, it has been shown that the amphibians that breed in these pools range as much as 750 feet from the pool. In light of that information, the fact that this bill only asks to protect the area immediately around the pool is a generous compromise.

You may wonder why it's so important to protect species that most of us will never see and may not even know exist. Our ecosystem depends on diversity. Each species has an effect on other species, in a ripple effect. When we lose one species, it can have serious consequences we did not anticipate. And once a species is extinct, we cannot simply say, "Oops, looks like we needed that one after all," and put it back. Once it's gone, it's gone forever.

Under current laws, if a person has been zealously protecting a vernal pool that straddles their property line, and wildlife in the area is thriving as a result, someone else can decide to develop the neighboring property right up to the edge of the vernal pool and in so doing destroy the habitat. Since many species return to the place where they were born in order to reproduce, they can't just find another pool. Only that one will do, and once it's gone, the life that flourished there will be gone as well.

We need to preserve wild places while we still have them. The rule changes proposed in this bill will help, without being overly burdensome. Please vote L.D. 2171 Ought to Pass. Thank you.