

Testimony of Allison Navia, Airport Manager, Sanford Seacoast Regional Airport, Sanford and Eastern Slope Regional Airport, Fryeburg

Before the Committee on Environment and Natural Resources

in Support of LD 138 – An Act to Exempt Airports from Certain State Endangered and Threatened Species Habitat Protections.

Monday, January 27, 2025 12:00 Public Hearing

Senator Tepler, Representative Doudera, and Distinguished members of the Committee on Environment and Natural Resources. My name is Allison Navia.

It does not take a degree or years of experience to understand that wildlife and aircraft do not mix, but that is precisely what our State law currently mandates happens at all of our Airports. This well-meaning law has unintended consequences. All of our public use airports are federally regulated and many have undergone year long wildlife hazard assessments. These studies, performed by a credentialed, certified wildlife biologist, evaluate the property, determine the habitats and species present, and give guidance on how to make modifications to reduce or eliminate the presence of wildlife. At Sanford this resulted in a grass height between 6 and 10 inches. Less than six inches and you are encouraging loafing and feeding (think geese and mourning doves). More than 10 inches and now there is a major problem: the plants have gone to seed and Lepidoptera abound, providing food for birds and rodents, which are food for raptors and predators. The tall vegetation is now habitat and cover for larger birds and mammals. The Grasshopper Sparrow is one "state endangered species", meaning it is rare in Maine but plentiful elsewhere due to its natural habitat preferences and temperature tolerances. It was determined to be present at the Sanford Airport (SFM) and as a result of the IFW's interpretation of MESA we were subsequently restricted each year from mowing about 100 acres of the Airfield for the entire summer while they bird's breeding season took place. The deer learned to bed down there, crossing the runway morning and night. In summer 2017 within the span of a month two aircraft struck deer at dusk. Thankfully no people were injured and there was minimum damage to the flight school aircraft; the deer died. Minutes after the aircraft and carnage were cleared from the runway, a former President of the United States landed in his jet. If that small aircraft had not struck the animal, there is a high likelihood the jet would have. At that point I notified DEP and IFW that we would be mowing the grass, regardless of the sparrow, for protection of life and property. We also exercised our State Depredation permit to take about 15 deer that had learned to use the Airport as habitat. It was a shameful waste of life for those deer; if we could have maintained the airfield to keep it unattractive for wildlife, as directed by the Federal Government and the guidance of Federal US Fish and Wildlife Animal Plant and Health Inspection Service, it could have all been prevented.

I have been an Airport Manager in the State of Maine since 2009 after graduating from Florida Institute of Technology with a Bachelor of Science in Aviation Management. I became a registered Maine Guide in 2012 and I am an avid hunter and gardener. I'm also a pilot, taking off for the first time when I was a teenager and eventually obtaining my commercial seaplane rating with a long term goal of leading guide trips to remote lakes in retirement. I own seven acres in Wells and plan to buy more to put under easement to prevent more subdivisions if I can. I am a fan of conservation.

Common sense conservation.

Mainers are known for a pragmatic, no-nonsense approach to problem solving. I have been working with IFW and the Maine Endangered Species Act for 16 years trying to communicate the issue. I'm here now to tell you LD 138 is a common sense solution.

Exempting airports does not jeopardize conservation in our State. At less than 10,000, the total acreage of airfields is a tiny fraction of the 23 million acres within the state border. I do understand, though, that for laser-focused, hardline conservationists there could be a concern for a "slippery slope" of exemptions. Future attempts, if any, would not have the same standing. I would argue against those claims by stating the truth: airfields are federally obligated, heavily regulated, deed restricted, completely unique types of properties. The singular use requires particular regulations for safety that any other type of property would not be able to meet. These would be ample cause to disapprove additional exemptions should they ever come before the legislature.

Last summer a domestic piglet escaped its owner and somehow made its way onto the Sanford airfield. Where did he go? Straight for the tall, unmowed, MESA-required grass of the infield. Had the grass been maintained at 6-10 inches like the rest of the airfield we could have seen and captured him. We searched and set traps, but a month went by and the pig wasn't seen. We did see the coyotes that started frequenting the airfield. They weren't deterred by harassment and we had to exercise our State Depredation permit and employ lethal take. When the breeding season for grasshopper sparrow was over and we could finally mow the grass, who did we find but Mr. Pig. Luckily there were no incidents with aircraft as a result of his unwelcome tenancy.

We understand that wildlife and aircraft do not mix on a fundamental level. Common sense.

Please vote "ought to pass" on LD 138.

Respectfully submitted,

Allison Navia

Airport Manager, SFM and IZG