



Maine Coast Heritage Trust

A Statewide Land Conservation Organization

Testimony on LD 183: An Act to Cap Publicly Owned Land Area at No More than 50% of Any County

Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry committee, my name is Jeff Romano. I appreciate this opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of Maine Coast Heritage Trust (MCHT) in opposition to LD 183.

Maine Coast Heritage Trust seeks to advance the conservation of lands and waters in Maine to ensure ecological wellbeing and foster thriving communities. Over the past five decades, we have conserved more than 185,000 acres, including over 160 places open for traditional outdoor recreation.

We Have Been Here Before

Four years ago, the ACF Committee unanimously opposed a similar bill. Not sure why this year's version continues to use such a broad definition for public lands, but based on previous comments by bill supporters, we wonder if their real concern is public conservation land or land conservation more generally. In any event, much like the previous proposal, LD 183 is a solution in search of a problem.

Land Conservation Works in Maine

To evaluate LD 183, it is critical to have a good understanding of land conservation in Maine (see chart below). First, our state continues to have the lowest percentage of public land (7%) in New England and one of the lowest percentages in the nation. Maine's overall conservation percentage rises due to land trust preserves and private lands with conservation easements. While this dynamic exists elsewhere, Maine, more than any other state, relies on the private sector to conserve natural resources, guarantee outdoor recreational opportunities, and protect working landscapes. This land conservation model saves Maine taxpayers year after year.

Half of Maine's Conservation Acreage is Private Working Forestlands

Maine people enjoy more than 4.4 million acres of conserved land or 22.4% of the state (number likely another 0.5% higher because not all conservation lands are in the State's GIS dataset): 7% is publicly owned, 3.3% is land trust owned, and 12.2% is privately owned with conservation easements. A closer look indicates that 50% of Maine's conservation lands are working forest easements, private lands conserved by forest products companies looking to ensure predictable wood supplies to facilities like the Woodland Pulp Mill in Baileyville, the Robbins Sawmill in Searsmont, and the Hancock Sawmill in Casco.

LMF Responds to Communities

LD 183 essentially asks whether the Land for Maine's Future (LMF) program is working for Maine people. Since 1987, LMF has been at the heart of state support for land conservation. The program has enjoyed success and ongoing statewide popularity because it is meeting public expectations: protecting working landscapes, conserving natural resources, and enhancing public access in all sixteen counties for hikers, hunters, snowmobilers, anglers, and other outdoor enthusiasts. A key to this success is its history of responding to applications from Maine communities, not, as some might suggest, the other way around. The LMF grant process also requires municipal notice and encourages public involvement. Bottom line: LMF projects occur where they are wanted.

Land Trust Activities Continue to be Misunderstood

Lastly, often bills like this come with questions about Maine’s land trusts. In 2018, this committee produced a “Study of Conserved Lands Owned by Nonprofit Organizations.” It is a great source of information with answers to common misunderstandings some have regarding property taxes paid by land trusts, activities allowed on land trust properties, and the role land trusts play in supporting our state’s natural resource-based industries. In 2024, MCHT conducted a census of land trusts in Maine. We are still compiling the data, but our initial findings are consistent with what the ACF Committee shared in your 2018 report. Highlights include:

- Annually, land trusts pay more than \$1.5 million in property taxes and other payments to local governments
- Property taxes or payments in lieu of taxes are paid on 97.8% of land trust conserved lands.
- More than 94% of all land conserved by land trusts is open for traditional uses, including hunting
- Land trust conserved lands include more than 2,000 miles of hiking trails, 1,000 miles of snowmobile trails, and 650 miles of ATV trails
- More than 86% of all land trust conserved lands are managed as working forests
- Land trusts have conserved more than 40,000 acres of farmland and more than 60 sites used by commercial fishermen to access coastal waters

Conserved Land by County, January 2025

	LAND AREA <i>in acres</i>	CONSERVED LAND <i>in acres</i>			CONSERVED LAND % <i>land area</i>		
		TOTAL AREA ³	PUBLIC INTEREST ²	PUBLIC OWNED ¹	TOTAL AREA	PUBLIC INTEREST	PUBLIC OWNED
Androscoggin	299,233	13,842	7,259	5,687	5%	2%	2%
Aroostook	4,253,840	657,842	165,480	156,266	15%	4%	4%
Cumberland	532,451	60,315	34,775	26,019	11%	7%	5%
Franklin	1,081,728	204,415	124,092	88,453	19%	11%	8%
Hancock	1,012,736	217,433	139,073	92,662	21%	14%	9%
Kennebec	551,408	31,208	18,795	17,659	6%	3%	3%
Knox	233,289	26,010	11,477	9,058	11%	5%	4%
Lincoln	290,575	28,124	6,332	3,328	10%	2%	1%
Oxford	1,323,659	313,754	146,099	125,133	24%	11%	9%
Penobscot	2,153,573	243,672	202,017	171,546	11%	9%	8%
Piscataquis	2,527,630	1,123,568	755,644	374,434	44%	30%	15%
Sagadahoc	161,815	24,025	13,463	12,163	15%	8%	8%
Somerset	2,505,274	841,972	681,535	139,393	34%	27%	6%
Waldo	465,477	35,820	18,557	17,020	8%	4%	4%
Washington	1,634,056	518,754	484,723	98,042	32%	30%	6%
York	631,825	75,378	42,102	29,156	12%	7%	5%
MAINE	19,658,579	4,416,133	2,851,422	1,366,018	22%	15%	7%

¹“Public Owned” includes conservation land owned by the federal government (e.g. national parks, forests, and wildlife refuges), state government (e.g. state parks, public lands, and wildlife management areas), or municipal governments.

²“Public Interest” includes public owned land and private conservation land that falls under “publicly owned land” definition in LD 183, e.g. private lands conserved with funding from LMF, the Forest Legacy Program, or with other public grants.

³“Total Area” includes all public and private conservation lands. The difference between Total Area and Public Interest (1,564,711 acres) includes lands owned by land trusts or other private lands with land trust held conservation easements.