

Senator Kepler, Representative Doudera and members of the ENR Committee –

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today.

My name is Jill Howell, I live in Belfast, Maine and I am the Executive Director and Penobscot Bay Waterkeeper with Upstream Watch. We are a non-profit organization based in Belfast and our mission is to protect and advocate for the health of Midcoast Maine's rivers and Penobscot Bay through science, education, and public action.

I am here to testify in support of LD 226 "An Act to Protect the Cultural Resources and Historical Heritage of Sears Island in Searsport by Extending Conservation Easement Protections."

I want to be clear that Upstream Watch's position is that should a wind port be built in Penobscot Bay, it should be built at Mack Point, not Sears Island. We recognize that climate change is having, and will continue to have significant impacts on the environment, the waters, and our communities, but we stand firm in our belief that destroying green space in the name of green energy is unacceptable. Conservation of places like Sears Island where carbon sequestering forests and wetlands are already mitigating climate impacts, and responsible citing of renewable energy projects are just as important as the transition away from fossil fuels in addressing the climate crisis.

I'm certain you'll hear from others about the importance of protecting the entire island due to its ecological significance, the recreation and education opportunities it affords to our communities, and the waste of taxpayer dollars resulting from the many failed attempts at developing the island – we agree with all of these points but the remainder of my testimony will be about Penobscot Bay itself.

As an organization that cares about the health of the water, we understand that what happens on land largely impacts the health of the surrounding waterways. The permanent conservation of Sears Island would protect more than just the island, it would protect the Bay.

The late succession forests present on Sears Island naturally cool the waters of the bay, which supports many marine species. The survival and presence of these species are dependent upon the health of the water. Penobscot Bay is a nursery for many species of fish and shellfish, including juvenile lobsters. The fisheries of Penobscot Bay have been greatly impacted by historical industrial development. The island is bounded by industrial development with Mack Point to the west and GAC chemical to the east, dams were installed on the Penobscot River without fish passage, and legacy pollution including mercury contaminate the sediment of the Bay floor. Decades of collaborative work have gone into restoring native fish runs on the Penobscot River, including Atlantic salmon and sturgeon, and conserving the entire Island enhances and supports those efforts.

Failed attempts to develop Sears Island have already caused harm to the Bay; federal agencies determined that the construction of the causeway either without the culverts required by the permits, or in the very least their failure to function properly, directly destroyed 3.7 acres of marine shellfish habitat, and blocked tidal flow around the northern end of the island. I urge this Committee to extend the conservation easement to the entire island by voting YES for this bill and permanently protecting Sears Island.