



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

2 STATE HOUSE STATION
AUGUSTA, MAINE 04333-0002
(207) 287-1440
TTY: (207) 287-4469

Reagan Paul

P.O. Box 165
Winterport, ME 04496
Home Phone: (207) 944-8033
Reagan.Paul@legislature.maine.gov

March 12, 2025
Testimony
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”

LD 735 “An Act to Protect Sand Dunes on Sears Island and to Establish Criteria for Legislation Regarding Land Development”

Senator Tepler, Representative Doudera, and the distinguished members of the Environment and Natural Resources Committee, my name is Reagan Paul and I am proud to represent House District 37 which includes the towns of Winterport, part of Frankfort, Prospect, Stockton Springs, and Searsport - which is home to the one of a kind Sears Island. I am here before you today to present my bills, **LD 226 “An Act to Protect the Cultural Resources and Historical Heritage of Sears Island in Searsport by Extending Conservation Easement Protections”** and **LD 735 “An Act to Protect Sand Dunes on Sears Island and to Establish Criteria for Legislation Regarding Land Development”**.

Let me introduce you to Sears Island—a place where Maine’s wild beauty and rich history come together, unspoiled and full of possibility. Nestled off the coast of Searsport, this 940-acre island remains one of the last undeveloped gems on the Eastern Seaboard—a rare sanctuary of towering forests, winding trails, and quiet shores where the rhythm of the tides still sets the pace of life. But Sears Island is more than just a beautiful landscape; it’s a place that has long stood at the heart of a deep and ongoing conversation. For decades, its fate has been debated—should it be developed into a deep-water port, or should it remain a haven for nature and those who seek solace in its wild spaces? Today, as you step onto its shores, you step into a story still being written—one of preservation, possibility, and the delicate balance between progress and the land we cherish.

As you prepare to deliberate on these important bills, I invite you to visit Sears Island before the work session to gain a firsthand understanding of what is at stake. Experiencing the island in person—its natural beauty, ecological significance, and the community it supports—will provide crucial context that cannot be captured through reports alone. This visit will allow you to see the land you are voting on, hear from those who cherish and rely on it, and make a fully informed decision. I hope you will take this opportunity to engage with Sears Island directly before shaping its future.

District 37 Frankfort, Prospect, Searsport, Stockton Springs, Winterport

For decades, the Maine DOT has pushed an industrial port on Sears Island, wasting millions in taxpayer money and tearing our community apart. Since the Baldacci administration, this misguided effort has gone nowhere, and now, after four massive grant failures under the Biden administration since 2023—including an \$8 million Port Development Infrastructure Program (PIDP) request in 2023, a \$130 million EPA request, a staggering \$456 million DOT request, and most recently another \$16 million PIDP request—it's clear that even the federal government doesn't see this project as necessary.

Worse still, MDOT has already burned through **\$3,616,051** of Maine taxpayer money chasing this dead-end project. How much more are we willing to waste? It's time for Governor Mills to cut our losses and do what's right: **place the entire island into a conservation easement.**

Sears Island isn't just an untouched natural resource—it's a major **economic driver** for our region, attracting **tens of thousands of visitors every year from across the world.** Hikers, bird watchers, kayakers, and nature enthusiasts bring steady tourism dollars into local businesses. Paving over this irreplaceable asset for an industrial port—one that the federal government won't even fund—is reckless and short-sighted.

Industry experts, including Chris Wissemann of Diamond Offshore Wind, have already urged the state to scale back and focus on **Mack Point**, where **modest improvements** could still support offshore wind research without sacrificing Sears Island. Even **Sprague Energy** has acknowledged that Mack Point could handle future commercial-scale projects.

And yet, MDOT refuses to face reality, doubling down on failure and proving that this isn't about offshore wind—it's about pushing industrial development at any cost. As the saying goes, **insanity is doing the same thing over and over while expecting different results.** Maine taxpayers shouldn't have to bankroll this madness any longer.

It's time to protect our economy, our environment, and our community. Conserve Sears Island once and for all.

In addition, I wanted to take a moment before going onto my next bill to make the committee aware that there is an amendment forthcoming on this bill to change the language of the easement holder to open it up to other organizations besides just the Maine Coast Heritage Trust.

Because these bills are being heard together, let me say a few words about my next bill, LD 735 “*An Act to Protect Sand Dunes on Sears Island and to Establish Criteria for Legislation Regarding Land Development*”.

LD 226, a controversial bill in Maine's 131st Legislature, weakened long-standing protections for the state's fragile sand dunes, opening the door for increased coastal development. Initially, the bill failed in the House but narrowly passed in the Senate, setting the stage for an aggressive lobbying effort. Special interest groups and lobbyists applied intense pressure on legislators, using strong-arm tactics and half-truths to sway votes. Their efforts paid off—when the bill returned to the House, enough lawmakers flipped their positions to push it through.

I come before you today to urge you to support the reinstatement of sand dune protections—protections that are not only scientifically justified but crucial to the survival of our coastal ecosystems. Weakening these safeguards would set a dangerous precedent, opening the door for unchecked environmental degradation that cannot be undone.

Maine's coastal sand dune systems account for just 2% of the state's coastline, yet their importance cannot be overstated. These dunes serve as irreplaceable natural barriers, protecting against storm surges, erosion, and property damage. According to the Maine Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), these fragile ecosystems are considered "**resources of state significance**" **because of** their ecological value and their role in safeguarding a healthy coast.

To weaken or remove these protections is to ignore both science and common sense.

The risks of failing to protect our coastal resources are not hypothetical. Less than 30 years ago, a comprehensive environmental assessment conducted by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Marine Fisheries Service found that a proposed dry cargo terminal on Sears Island would cause:

- **Irreparable harm** to aquatic ecosystems
- **Disruption** of water patterns and circulation
- **Severe impacts** to wetlands, mudflats, and marine life
- **Significant degradation** of water quality
- **Destruction** of habitat for threatened and endangered species
- **Permanent aesthetic and economic damage** to the region

The assessment determined that industrial development on Sears Island would have substantial and permanent adverse effects—not only on aquatic life and ecosystem stability but also on **Maine's commercial fishing industry**, which would suffer from the displacement of key fisheries.

And yet, here we are again. Today, we face yet another battle to protect Sears Island. One that overrides protections in pursuit of short-term industrial gain—this time for an offshore wind project that is already showing signs of failure.

Many people don't realize that Maine is rushing to **destroy protected sand dunes on Sears Island** to build a port for a wind energy project that may never succeed. The only reason that Sears Island was chosen is because of its water depth that is needed for the University of Maine's ten story high, football field length concrete platform, called the VoltturnUS. The floating wind turbine platform, central to this effort, recently **failed to advance in federal testing**, raising serious doubts about its commercial viability. Despite this, state officials and special interest groups continue to push forward, using taxpayer dollars to fund a project that may never become operational.

If offshore wind development must continue, there is a far more responsible alternative: **upgrading the already industrialized Mack Point**. Instead of sacrificing one of Maine's last untouched coastal environments, we should be focusing on sustainable solutions that do not come at the cost of irreplaceable natural resources. Destroying Sears Island for a speculative, unproven technology is an **irresponsible move driven by politics and profit—not environmental or economic sustainability**.

Beyond the immediate environmental risks, weakening sand dune protections would also have devastating consequences for Maine's wildlife—especially for the piping plover, a federally threatened and state-endangered shorebird that relies on our coastal dunes for survival.

According to the Maine Audubon Society and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the piping plover population has been struggling due to:

- **Loss of nesting habitat** from coastal development

- **Increased human disturbance and predation**
- **Erosion caused by unregulated land use**

Sears Island and other undisturbed coastal areas serve as critical habitat for these birds, providing them with safe nesting grounds essential for their recovery. **Destroying or weakening dune protections directly threatens their survival and violates our responsibility to be good stewards of our land and wildlife.**

Coastal sand dunes are Maine's first line of defense against erosion and storm damage as well. Research from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) confirms that intact dune systems absorb wave energy, reducing flooding and protecting coastlines. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change even reports that retaining intact ecosystems is more useful in reducing carbon than wind projects.

Beyond its environmental significance, Sears Island also holds deep cultural and historical importance—particularly for the Wabanaki people. This bill includes a critical provision that would prohibit the State from approving any land development on Sears Island unless an Indigenous Lands Protection Committee is first established and grants certification that the proposed site does not contain sacred areas.

For centuries, Sears Island has been an integral part of Wabanaki history, serving as a place of cultural and spiritual importance. Yet, past discussions about development have largely ignored this reality, prioritizing economic interests over the preservation of Indigenous heritage. **If the island is developed without proper safeguards, we are not just losing a vital natural resource—we are actively erasing history.**

Responsible development **does not mean sacrificing cultural heritage.** It means acknowledging the full history of the land and ensuring that any changes are made with care, respect, and due diligence. This provision is not about preventing progress—it's about making sure that progress is **thoughtful, inclusive, and does not come at the cost of erasing an irreplaceable part of Maine's history.**

This bill also introduces new safeguards for how the legislature approves land development when it conflicts with EPA regulations. Given the significance and long-term impact of such decisions, a higher threshold is necessary. The bill would require:

- A **two-thirds majority vote** in the legislature
- That any proposal of this nature **must be sponsored** by the State Representative or State Senator from the affected area

Last session, a bill to remove sand dune protections in my district **was not sponsored by me or the State Senator from Waldo County.** Instead, it was introduced by a legislator **from a district nearly two and a half hours south of Sears Island**—someone who has likely never even set foot there. That is not just misguided; **it is deeply ignorant and dismissive of the communities directly impacted.**

Now, consider this: What if the political majority in Augusta flipped to the Republicans? How would members of this committee feel if a simple majority vote was all it took to lift crucial protections to approve a project that could destroy part of **your** district—**spearheaded by a legislator who has never even visited your community?** I suspect you wouldn't take too kindly to that.

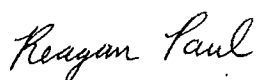
This measure is about **protecting Maine from partisan politics and reckless decision-making**—decisions often influenced by **money-driven lobbyists** who have little regard for our state or the voices of our constituents. Maine's future should not be dictated by outsiders with **no stake in the well-being of our communities**. We must ensure that those most affected by these decisions **have the strongest say in shaping them**.

We cannot allow political convenience or short-term industry interests to dictate decisions that will leave irreversible scars on our environment and economy.

With only 3 sand dunes in this entire region, let's be stewards of them and not be the ones responsible for their destruction.

I **strongly urge** a unanimous vote in favor of reinstating sand dune protections.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Reagan Paul".

Reagan Paul
State Representative