

**TESTIMONY OF THE
DEPARTMENT OF INLAND FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE
BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON INLAND
FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE
IN OPPOSITION TO L.D. 976**

**“RESOLVE, TO RESTORE ACCESSIBLE PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION TO
SWAN ISLAND IN PERKINS TOWNSHIP”**

Presented by Representative CLUCHEY of Bowdoinham.

Cosponsored by Senator TEPLER of Sagadahoc and Representatives: BRIDGEO of
Augusta, HEPLER of Woolwich, LEMELIN of Chelsea.

DATE OF HEARING: March 24, 2025

Good afternoon Senator Baldacci, Representative Roberts and members of the Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Committee. I am Nate Webb, Wildlife Division Director at the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, speaking on behalf of the Department in opposition to **L.D. 976**.

This resolve directs the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife to develop a plan to ensure that accessible, regularly scheduled public transportation is available to Swan Island in Perkins Township in Sagadahoc County.

The Steve Powell Wildlife Management Area, owned and managed by the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries & Wildlife (MDIFW), is located on the Kennebec River between the towns of Richmond and Dresden. It is an unorganized township and subject to the jurisdiction of the Maine Land Use Planning Commission. It includes Swan Island, Little Swan Island, and several hundred acres of tidal flats totaling about 1,755 acres. In 1995, the United States Department of Interior placed the island on the National Register of Historic Places in recognition of the historic architectural homesteads and landscape of the island.

The Department acquired the WMA using United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration funding starting in the 1940's to meet the mission and purpose of the WMA system, which is to provide a statewide, ecologically based system of land holdings for the protection and enhancement of important wildlife habitats that also provide opportunities for public recreation, where those forms of recreation do not unduly impact wildlife resources. More specifically, Swan Island was acquired for the specific purpose of protecting important waterfowl habitat at the head of Merrymeeting Bay.

In the mid-1960's, the Department established a campground on the WMA and began offering transportation to the island. For decades, we continued offering the ferry service to the WMA, even as we lost permanent staff capacity and began relying on seasonal contractors. To help offset the cost of providing transportation and the seasonal positions, we implemented a day-use and overnight camping fee structure.

Several recent events have led to a change in our approach towards public access to the WMA including:

1. A determination by the United States Coast Guard that the vessel was being operated as a small passenger vessel and therefore needed proper inspections and certifications and associated licensure of the captain and deckhands appropriate to the horsepower and tonnage of the vessel.
2. The loss of seasonal housing on the WMA due to mold, lead paint and other unsafe conditions associated with the staff house.
3. A changed emphasis by the Department on public outreach and communications to venues and formats that maximize public engagement.

For these reasons, the Department has worked to realign its operations with financial and staff capacity and to ensure that the island is being managed consistent with the purpose of our WMA system. Recent rulemaking removed any access fees associated with the WMA, making it consistent with the 71 other state-owned WMAs. We also transitioned to a self-access approach for the WMA, again, consistent with all other WMAs.

Re-establishing a regular ferry service to the WMA would require significant staff and financial resources, such that other necessary work and priorities within the Department would be impacted. The Department believes that self-access, or access provided by other entities, is the most effective way to provide access to the island, and in fact, several entities now offer transportation to the island. This allows the Department to focus its limited capacity on facility maintenance and habitat management.

The Department recognizes the historic and cultural importance of Swan Island and we are interested in cooperating with groups to maintain the historic structures and deliver educational programming focused on historical and cultural topics in balance with the purpose of conservation.

I would be glad to answer any questions at this time or during the work session.