

LD 829 – An Act to Standardize the Laws Regarding the Carrying of Concealed Handguns in State Parks

Testimony in Opposition

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Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and members of the Judiciary Committee,

My name is Veronica Torres, and I live in Southwest Harbor, Maine. I am here today in my capacity as the Government Affairs Manager for Friends of Acadia, a nonpartisan, nonprofit conservation organization dedicated to preserving the natural beauty, ecological vitality, and cultural heritage of Acadia National Park. With over 4,000 members, Friends of Acadia has contributed more than \$40 million to support Acadia National Park and surrounding communities since 1986.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today regarding LD 829, ***An Act to Standardize the Laws Regarding the Carrying of Concealed Handguns in State Parks***, which proposes to eliminate the permit requirement to carry concealed handguns in state parks and certain federal lands, including Acadia National Park. I urge the committee to reject this proposal—not just for the sake of conservation, but also to protect Maine’s outdoor recreation economy and the millions of visitors who see our parks as places of tranquility, reflection, and safety.

In 2024, Acadia attracted nearly 4 million visitors. Visitors from Maine and afar recognize the park’s status as an ecological and cultural treasure. It is also a major economic contributor for Maine, generating a cumulative benefit to the local economy of \$685 million, according to the latest data from the National Park Service. In 2023, this spending supported over 6,600 local jobs, particularly in lodging, dining, retail, and recreation industries. Every dollar spent in Acadia ripples through our economy, strengthening small businesses and sustaining families who depend on tourism.

However, Acadia’s reputation as a safe, welcoming, and family-friendly outdoor destination is critical to maintaining this economic engine. Introducing expanded concealed carry rights in Acadia National Park risks alienating visitors who do not expect to encounter firearms in these settings.

LD 829 arrives at a time when our national parks—and Acadia in particular—are already struggling with staffing shortages. The National Park Service operates with an almost 20 percent vacancy rate, even as parks experience record-breaking visitation. Acadia is no exception. Budget constraints, increased fixed costs, and hiring challenges have left park staff stretched thin, impacting everything from maintenance to visitor services.

One of the most critical areas affected is law enforcement. Acadia’s commissioned law enforcement rangers, whose primary role is to de-escalate conflicts, are not on duty 24/7. Law

enforcement coverage ends afterhours, meaning that if a public safety incident involving a firearm were to occur at a campground or other gathering spot, response times could be significantly delayed. This challenge is particularly severe in Acadia's remote areas, such as Isle au Haut, or heavily concentrated areas such as overnight campgrounds, where emergency responses can already be difficult due to geography and limited resources.

Furthermore, federal law prohibits firearms inside designated national park service facilities, including visitor centers and ranger stations, unless specifically authorized. This regulation is in place because these facilities are not designed to screen for weapons. An expansion of concealed carry allowances increases the risk of firearms being brought into these spaces, further complicating law enforcement's ability to ensure public safety.

Acadia National Park, along with Baxter State Park, Maine State Parks, and the Allagash Wilderness Waterway, was explicitly exempted from Maine's 2015 concealed carry law. These exemptions were not arbitrary. They recognized that parks are not just any public space—they are places of retreat, where families, hikers, and nature lovers seek a break from the stresses of daily life.

This legislation does not address a pressing problem; rather, it introduces new risks that could deter visitors, create enforcement challenges, and compromise the experience of millions who visit our parks to find tranquility, not tension.

Friends of Acadia urges the committee to vote **Ought Not to Pass** on LD 829. Maine's parks and public lands should remain welcoming, safe, and protected spaces for all—today and for generations to come.

Thank you for your time and commitment to preserving Maine's cherished outdoor spaces.

Veronica Torres



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