



BACKCOUNTRY
HUNTERS & ANGLERS
NEW ENGLAND

February 26, 2021

Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry
c/o Legislative Information Office
100 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333

Re: LD 324 - An Act To Limit Public Land Ownership in Maine

Dear Senator Dill, Representative O'Neil, and Members of the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry:

Backcountry Hunters and Anglers (BHA) is the fastest growing hunting and angling group in North America. BHA seeks to ensure North America's outdoor heritage of hunting and fishing in a natural setting by supporting land conservation, public access to hunting and fishing areas, fair chase, and the sound management of fish and wildlife and their habitats.

BHA is opposed to placing restrictions on the ownership of public lands or publicly held land conservation easements for several important reasons, as described below.

- The dramatic increase in the use of public lands and other conservation lands during the 2020-2021 pandemic demonstrates the value of public access to outdoor places. Placing an arbitrary limit on land that is available to the public for hunting, fishing, hiking, and other outdoor recreation is a dangerous precedent.
- Maine is blessed to have private timberland owners that allow free or low-cost access to millions of acres of timberland. However, in the majority of other states recreation access to private lands is leased to clubs or individuals, and the national trend is toward an increase in these leases that prevent public access. There is no guarantee that Maine's unique tradition of open access to commercial timberlands will continue. Therefore, to help ensure continued public access to forest lands the state should not place limits on public lands or the acquisition of conservation easements that allow public access.
- This bill is trying to solve a problem that does not exist. Public conservation lands and easements are acquired through a willing seller – willing buyer process. There are strict guidelines and public review procedures for the purchase of public land and easements through programs such as **Lands for Maine Future** to ensure that the public interest and landowner rights are respected and funds are carefully spent.



- This bill would impose State legislative control of municipalities seeking to acquire lands if their county or the State is at or near the bill's thresholds.
- Access to land for recreation is important to the State and local economies. Spending by hunters, anglers, and other recreationists creates many jobs and is an important revenue source.
- Public lands and private lands with conservation easements sustain forest industry jobs in the woods, in transportation and in processing. Local governments benefit when private lands with conservation easements pay property taxes.
- This bill would infringe on private property rights by not allowing a landowner to sell land or easements to anyone once the cap was reached. Limiting the number of potential buyers would also reduce the potential sales price of the land and/or conservation easements. Depressing land value by limiting the number of buyers would also result in lower assessments on large parcels of land and consequently higher tax burdens on other landowners.
- This bill would also prevent the charitable gift of land or a conservation easement to a public entity after the cap was reached. Imagine for a moment the State of Maine not being able to accept the gifts of land from Percival Baxter that resulted in Baxter State Park or the land donated by Walter Reid that became Reid State Park because the state or county cap had been reached.

In sum, this bill is detrimental to Maine's hunting and fishing tradition, to the outdoor recreation and forest products economy, and to private landowners. We urge the members of the Committee to oppose this bill.

Sincerely,

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