



Testimony in Opposition to LD 324:

An Act To Require a Lease of Public Lands To Be Based on Reasonable Market Value and To Require Approval of Such Leases for Commercial Purposes.

Jeff Reardon, Maine Brook Trout Project Director
March 4, 2021

Senator Dill, Representative O’Neil, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry:

My name is Jeff Reardon, and I am providing this written testimony on behalf of Trout Unlimited (TU), a national conservation organization whose mission is to conserve, protect and restore North America’s trout and salmon and their watersheds. In Maine, a primary focus of our work has been protection of habitat for brook trout, endangered Atlantic salmon, and other cold-water fish through conservation ownership or easements. Protecting these habitats ensures the long-term persistence of the nation’s largest stronghold of intact brook trout populations and helps prevent extinction and encourage recovery of endangered Atlantic salmon.

TU opposes **LD 324: An Act To Limit Public Land Ownership in Maine**. Our members—and Maine residents and Maine visitors—love our public lands. For TU members, it’s where we fish, and know that our children and grandchildren can fish the same places for the same species because their habitat and our right to access it is protected. From Maine’s southernmost State Heritage Waters for brook trout in the Kennebunk Plains Wildlife Management Area in York County to the 12 State Heritage Fish Waters for brook trout and Arctic charr in the Deboullie Public Reserve Lands in Aroostook County, and from sea run brook trout in the Moosehorn National Wildlife Refuge in Baring to the Rangeley and Rapid River Corridors in Rangeley, public lands get us on the water. For other outdoor lovers, public lands provide access to hiking, snowmobile and ATV trails; to land for hunting and bird watching; and to boat launches for access to Maine’s rivers, lakes and coastal waters. Public lands also protect drinking water in many of our towns and provide parks, playgrounds, sports fields and multi-use trails in developed areas. They protect the wildlife and viewsheds that make Maine a place people want to visit, bringing hundreds of millions of dollars of revenue with them when they come.

Our existing public lands have been acquired over Maine’s 200-year history, primarily through transactions between willing buyers and willing sellers. LD 324

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would set arbitrary caps of 30% of Maine's total land area and 50% of land area in any county in public ownership. The definition of "Public Lands" in the bill is different from existing definitions in statute, and appears to include lands owned by towns for public buildings like schools and town offices, properties acquired for back taxes, and easements held by local, state, and federal governments. It includes land where a private landowner has donated or sold an easement or any other land rights to be held by a public entity. This definition may even apply to rights of way for public roads held by the state or towns.

There is no good reason to set a cap that would limit what state and town governments can do on behalf of their citizens and what private landowners can do with their property assets. Maine ranks 41st out of 50 states—ninth from the bottom—in fee ownership of land acreage. Unlike some states where the federal government owns a large share of the land base, Maine's mix of public lands reflects a diverse mix of (very little) federal land, some fee ownership by the state and towns, and a diversity of partnerships between the state and private land owners and land trusts. Widespread access to land for hunting, fishing and other outdoor recreation makes Maine the envy of other eastern states. We should be encouraging, not discouraging, this unique model that keeps our waters and lands accessible to the public and protects habitat Maine's iconic fish and wildlife.

TU opposed LD 324 and urges the committee to vote ought not to pass.