



Natural Resources Council of Maine
3 Wade Street • Augusta, Maine • 04330 • www.nrcm.org

**Testimony in Opposition to LD 324,
An Act To Limit Public Land Ownership in Maine
March 4, 2021**

Good morning Senator Dill, Representative O'Neil, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry. I am Melanie Sturm, the Forests and Wildlife Director at the Natural Resources Council of Maine (NRCM), and I am providing testimony in opposition to LD 324.

NRCM opposes LD 324 for a number of reasons. First and foremost, this bill seeks to solve a problem that does not exist. The existing processes by which the State acquires land or easements are well-designed and deliberate, ensuring extensive engagement and support from municipalities, state agencies, and community organizations. For example, the Land for Maine's Future program and the federal Forest Legacy Program are two of the primary ways that Maine state agencies acquire land to advance the interests of Maine people. Both of these funding programs require a willing seller in order for the land to be considered, and both have an advisory board made up of state agency staff, dedicated professionals, and citizens. Both have competitive processes that rank applications for funding, based on carefully crafted review criteria, and all applications must meet certain criteria. In sum, we have in place effective systems for the methodical review of land acquisition opportunities by multiple parties, ensuring that new public land has broad-based support. As such, we believe this bill is unnecessary.

Further, we are concerned that the bill poses an infringement on private property rights. The bill would arbitrarily limit the amount of publicly owned land to 33% of the entire state and 50% of any given county, and would require a two-thirds vote by the Legislature to exceed those limits. Private landowners should be able to make decisions and set goals for their property without having to go to the Legislature, which they would need to do if they wanted to sell or donate their land or an easement to the State if their property exceeds the threshold set in LD 324. For some private landowners to have to get approval from the Legislature for decisions made about their property, while other landowners who made similar decisions before them did not, would be unfair and create a needlessly onerous burden and violation of private property rights.

This bill would also impose legislative restrictions on municipalities that may wish to acquire lands when the public property they have in mind would exceed the bill's thresholds. The arbitrary limits set by LD 324 would include all types of public land, not just State ownership, such as plots of land for playgrounds, ballfields, and picnic areas. Currently, 30% of the land in Washington and Piscataquis Counties is State-owned or has a State easement on it. That figure does not include town or municipal owned land, so the percentages are actually higher. Again, we believe that it would be unfair and unnecessarily burdensome to require that some municipalities secure votes from the Legislature while others would not face such a requirement simply due to timing or location in the state.

Fundamentally, we strongly believe that public lands provide significant economic, environmental, and public health benefits. For example, the Bureau of Parks and Lands hires contractors to conduct timber harvesting on its roughly 500,000 acres of Public Reserved Land statewide, supporting scores of local logging jobs. Outdoor recreation is also big business. Fishing, hunting, snowmobiling, skiing, and paddling, among many other activities are popular in Maine. The growth of the outdoor industry is a function of the availability of conserved lands and access to these lands. In 2019, 4.2% of Maine's GDP was from the outdoor economy. Maine is in the top six states in the U.S. where outdoor recreation accounts for the largest percentage of the total GDP. Increased spending while people travel throughout Maine means more federal, state, and local tax revenue from food, lodging, clothing, and gas sales. On the whole, the outdoor recreation economy generates more than 40,000 jobs, \$1.4 billion in wages and salaries, and \$548 million in state and local tax revenue, according to the Outdoor Industry Association and the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis. A bill to limit public land ownership could hinder the significant economic contributions that public lands support.

Public lands and waters and access to them have been especially important to Mainers during the pandemic. In 2020, a banner year for outdoor recreation, State Parks, land trust properties, campgrounds, trails, and other public lands saw heavy use. State Park visitation hit a record of more than three million in 2020. Most people experienced firsthand how getting outside was an attractive and relatively safe option for seeing friends and family and how beaches, woods, and mountains served as a gym for those who could not visit their normal fitness centers. Outdoor spaces also provided a place for solace and reflection during the pandemic. Research shows that time in nature is important for mental health, much needed during an incredibly stressful year.

Finally, we are opposed to LD 324 because there are ecological benefits to public lands that should not be ignored. Public lands in Maine are well-managed for multiple uses. Among their many purposes, public lands protect wildlife habitat, sequester and store carbon, clean our air and water, and prevent soil erosion, among many other ecosystem services. They also provide educational opportunities, serving as outdoor classrooms, and sometimes are scientifically important as well. The state's ecological reserves, for example, are sites for long-term ecological research that deepen our understanding of environmental change on the landscape over time. Public lands and easements ensure that natural and working lands will not be converted to development, which is especially important now during a Maine real estate boom, so ecological benefits may continue to be realized.

In summary, legislation should focus on remedying problems, not creating them. With LD 324, we do not see a problem that this bill would solve. The process for acquiring State property and easements is well-functioning. Creating new barriers for private landowners and municipalities to pursue their land management goals would be an unnecessary burden. Public lands provide a variety of benefits, including economic opportunities. Setting an arbitrary limit on public lands does not make sense.

We respectfully urge the Committee to vote Ought Not To Pass on LD 324. Thank you for your time and consideration of this issue, and I would be glad to answer any questions you may have.