

**Testimony of Eliza Townsend, Maine Conservation Policy Director for the  
Appalachian Mountain Club  
In opposition to LD 324 An Act to Limit Public Land Ownership in Maine  
March 4, 2021**

Senator Dill, Representative O’Neil, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, I am Eliza Townsend, Maine Conservation Policy Director for the Appalachian Mountain Club.

Founded in 1876, AMC is the nation’s oldest conservation, recreation, and education organization, with the mission to foster the protection, enjoyment and understanding of the outdoors. We have 6,500 members in Maine, and own 75,000 acres of forestland in the 100-Mile Wilderness region of Piscataquis County, managed for multiple use including sustainable forestry, backcountry recreation, and environmental education.

We are enthusiastic supporters of public land ownership, and for that reason we oppose LD 324.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic drew people outside in record numbers. Maine’s state parks welcomed a record 3 million visitors and camping reservations for 2021 are already up from last year. Maine Trail Finder saw a 125% increase in traffic as people searched for destinations. Retailers saw increased demand for outdoor equipment, whether tents, bicycles, skis, boats, ATV’s or snowmobiles. L. L. Bean saw a 400% increase in sales of snowshoes and sleds. The Outdoor Industry Foundation reports that record numbers of Americans engaged in hiking, fishing, and camping.

In short, millions of people discovered the physical, mental, and social benefits of being outdoors. At times, the pressure on parks, trails and preserves has become too much, resulting in closures at just the moment when fresh air, heat relief, exercise, and peace of mind were what Mainers needed most. It’s clear we need more places to refresh our minds, bodies, and spirits, not fewer.

Further, public lands contribute significant economic value. Visits to Acadia National Park generated \$380 million in spending in 2019, while visits to state parks were found to contribute \$100 million to the Maine economy, and that study was 15 years ago! That spending benefits rural Maine, where the majority of them are located. In addition, Maine is experiencing a real estate boom as people seek a safer place to live and a higher quality of life. Numerous new residents told the Bangor *Daily News* that they chose Maine in part for easy access to outdoor activities.

Public lands aren’t just about recreation, however. The lands covered by LD 324 include not only national, state, and municipal parks, but also national forests, national wildlife refuges, and state public reserved lands. Collectively, they all provide vital ecological services, cleaning our air and water, holding floodwaters, sequestering carbon, and providing plant and wildlife habitat.

While we think of Maine as a place where access to the outdoors is easy, and central to our identity, we do not all have the same access to nature’s benefits. Low-income communities, especially communities of color, are far less likely to have access to close-to-home parks and trails, and to

the fresh air, clean water, and air-cooling shade that trees provide. If we want a healthy and thriving populace, we need to ensure that every Mainer has the same access. Public land has a role to play.

In sum, public lands strengthen communities, improve our quality of life, clean our air and water, and contribute to our economy. During the pandemic, Mainers and visitors have come to appreciate them as never before. We urge you to vote Ought Not to Pass.