

Testimony on LD 486 by Vernon M. Labbe of Frenchville, ME

Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee

Good afternoon Senator Dill, Representative O'Neil, and members of the Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee my name is Vernon Labbe, a resident of Frenchville. Some may remember my testimony during the last consolidation bill between Prentiss & Carlisle and the Bureau of Parks and Lands on T10 R4 when I was Deputy Director of the Bureau. For the new members of the committee here's a brief summary of my career with the Bureau of Public Lands and the Bureau of Parks and Lands. I transferred from the Bureau of Forestry to the Public Lands forester position in the Northern Region in 1981. In 2003 I accepted the Regional Manager position in the Eastern Region. In 2005 I transferred back to the Northern Region as the Regional Manager. In late 2017 until August of 2018 I was Deputy Director of the Bureau of Parks and Lands. Unfortunately my tenure was cut short due to the 5-year rehire cap. I was then awarded a service contract to work on special projects, one of which was the consolidation of the remaining common and undivided parcels.

Consolidation of Maine's public lands has a long history dating back to the early 1970's. Consolidation of land can be an arduous process but it is time to close the books on the Bureau's common and undivided interests. For example, the consolidation of the Scopan Unit began in 1985, with the consolidation of the common and undivided interests in the T10 R4 portion of the unit being finalized recently. The common and undivided interests in the T11 R4 portion of the Scopan Unit remain to be consolidated. During this consolidation process many of the public users of the unit were surprised to hear that the State did not have full ownership. Most of the public are probably unaware that the State of Maine has partial ownership on 9 parcels.

In his 1982 Consolidation Proposal Governor Brennan stated "As Governor, I strongly believe that we shall best satisfy our Constitutional trust responsibility to the public by consolidating the Public Reserve Lands". It has long been the policy of the Bureau to consolidate scattered public lots in order to develop a more unified and manageable land base. Interestingly, there is only one remaining original, unlocated public lot. The Bureau has come a long way in its efforts to consolidate the scattered public lots, in partnership with private landowners. The remaining common and undivided parcels with all the various percent ownerships are the result of previous consolidation efforts which were not fully consummated.

The common and undivided ownership system, with its roots in colonial times, was a critical part of Maine history but now is a dinosaur. Most private landowners have transitioned from common and undivided ownership to 100% fee ownerships. I believe Prentiss & Carlisle is no longer a minority owner in T12 R13. It is time for the Bureau to do the same.

The following points are important distinctions for you to consider in future deliberations. As a minority owner, the Bureau, the citizens of Maine, have no say in how their land is managed. The policies and management objectives for Public Reserve Lands do not apply to these state lands. Often times, the goals and interests of the stakeholders of private land are very different than the goals and interests of the stakeholders of public lands. The process of implementing management practices on the landscape is very different for private ownerships than for public lands. Multi-generational timber harvesting contracts are fairly common on private lands. By contrast, the Bureau has an open and competitive bidding process to generate timber harvesting contracts.

Now to the bill at hand. The southwest corner of T11 R10 was identified by the Bureau in the mid 1980's as a strong candidate for acquisition. Due to its natural features, this area was referred to as the "Little Deboullie". The Deboullie Unit is one of the State's jewels highlighted in the Bureau's video "Untold Secret". In 2017 I initiated discussion with Clayton Lake Woodlands Holdings, LLC regarding a possible consolidation of T12 R13 and T11 R10. This led to a brief discussion of other land parcels as potential options. For a variety of reasons the consolidation discussions were put on hold.

The last project I was working on was formulating options for consolidation of all the remaining common and undivided parcels. The large minority interest in T12 R13, in partnership with the landowner(s) holding the other minority interests, could be the impetus for a new public lands unit or the expansion of existing units, or provide funding to purchase minority interests and to acquire public access to existing units.

With the current pandemic, the public is seeking outdoor activities to regain a sense of normalcy. Now is the time to finalize the consolidation process that was started nearly 50 years ago for the benefit of the citizens of Aroostook County and the citizens of Maine.

Thank you for your time.

Respectfully submitted,

Vernon M. Labbe