

Thomas Skolfield  
Weld

LD 657

March 18, 2021

Good morning Senator Dill, Representative O'Neil and my esteemed colleagues of the Joint Standing Committee of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry.

I am Representative Tom Skolfield from Weld, here today to present LD 657 and Act to

Clarify the Enforcement Powers of the Bureau of Parks and Lands.

I introduced this Bill because for the last number of years the Bureau has been reluctant to adequately address the Law Enforcement responsibilities related to Maine State Parks and Lands.

A decade or more ago the majority of the Park Managers, year round and long term Park Rangers were designated by the Bureau as Law Enforcement Officers. They were trained through the Maine Criminal Justice Academy (MCA). They took an oath to uphold the Constitution and enforce the laws of the State of Maine along with the rules and regulations of the Bureau of Parks and Lands. Their qualifications and professionalism were recognized and respected by their peers in the other natural resource and public safety enforcement agencies. Now some years later, many of those Park Managers and Park Rangers have retired or otherwise left the Park Service. This has left a hole that needs to be filled. It has gone on for far too long.

Through discussions with a past as well as the current Bureau Director, it became evident that they felt their authority to designate replacement enforcement personnel might be in question. This was because a previous Bureau Director established a policy whereby staff would not be trained and designated.

LD 657, would clearly establish the Bureau Director's authority to designate individual agents of the Bureau as Law Enforcement Personnel.

Annually, more than three million visitors arrive in Maine's Parks and Lands. They have an expectation that Park Rangers have the training, equipment and the authority to deal with the myriad situations that are likely to occur in a professional manner. Park professionals have a multitude of various responsibilities, duties and tasks they routinely perform on a daily basis. Law enforcement is just one of them. It is part and parcel of the official, documented job description, task statements and performance standards that are used to evaluate their performance.

Last session we passed into law LD 527. In summary, it required the Park Service to "implement a training program for bureau employees and agents who manage lands and waters and exercise law enforcement powers within the bureau's jurisdiction, to be implemented no later than January 1, 2020." Continued reluctance on the part of the Bureau to provide training on their own accord resulted in the need for that legislation. The passage of LD 527 provided the Bureau with the incentive to finally give folks in the field the training they needed to carry out their responsibilities. It was a good step in the right direction. There was trust, along with an assumption, that the Bureau would not only train but designate agents with the authority to carry out enforcement duties. Unfortunately however, the designation of agents did not happen, therefore we are back here today.

Traditionally, the image of a Park Ranger is one of pleasant, friendly, helpful, welcoming individual. One who instructs, informs and educates visitors. Park Rangers take seriously the manner in which they provide the stewardship that our great Parks and Lands deserve. In various ways they are charged to protect the resource from the people, the people from the resource and the people from each other. The issuance of a summons is very rarely the action taken when a first or even a second offence has occurred. Law enforcement is not, has not and will not be the primary responsibility of a Park Ranger. Assistance from other enforcement agencies will continue to be required for situations which require it. However those agencies are under pressure and have limited resources of their own. They rightfully expect that Park Rangers should take care of the problems that occur under their watch when they are able to do so. When outside agencies are requested and arrive on the scene they expect Park Rangers to be properly trained and equipped. When requested to assist in a situation, outside agencies need to be confident that what has transpired prior to their arrival was done professionally and correctly.

I am hopeful we can work toward finding a viable solution to what has been an ongoing problem and not have to revisit it any time soon going forward. The protection of the our priceless natural and historic resources, the safety of the people of our great state, her visitors and our Park Service employees deserve nothing less

Thank you for your attention to this matter and I am willing to try and answer any questions.