



**Testimony of Eliza Townsend, Maine Conservation Policy Director
In support of LD #471
An Act to Require Legislative Approval for Certain Leases of Public Lands
March 18, 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. Our Roach Pond tract abuts the Nahmakanta Public Lands Unit.

Maine’s Public Lands are an extraordinary asset. Among the most beautiful and remote places in the state, they offer unparalleled recreation opportunities, drawing visitors and their dollars to rural Maine year-round. Further, our public lands provide both critical wildlife habitat and a substantial contribution to the wood basket. These assets had nearly slipped from our grasp in the 1960’s, but were won back by diligence, public opinion, and a lawsuit. We must not take them for granted.

The people of Maine have a strong interest in the management of our public lands. Because of the wide variety of demands made on the resource, because of their value, and because of the remarkable history of their near-loss and return to the public, it is appropriate for the Legislature, representing the people of Maine--the owners of the lands-- to monitor closely their management and disposition.

State law lays out the conditions under which public lands may be leased, to whom and for what purpose. Unfortunately, the law is silent about what compensation the state should receive for the use of its land, but the law does clearly require that the lands be managed “to demonstrate exemplary land management practices, including silvicultural, wildlife and recreation management practices, as a demonstration of state policies governing management of forested and related types of lands.” Obviously, any leases must be compatible with those mandated purposes.

The issue that gives rise to LD #471 is the proposed construction of a transmission line. To be clear, Maine’s constitution says that public lands may not be reduced, or their uses substantially altered without a vote of approval by 2/3rds of the legislature. Without question, the construction of a transmission line of 150 – 300 feet in width would be a substantial alteration of the use of a public land. The Legislature, at a minimum, should enact a finding that a transmission line of such size and scale is a substantial alteration requiring the 2/3 vote set forth in the constitution.

While AMC opposes the New England Clean Energy Connect project, we ask that you craft final language addressing the broader issues of public lands management. There will be future requests for use that we cannot anticipate today. The best way to make difficult decisions balancing the many demands placed upon the Bureau of Parks and Lands is through transparency, and a clearer indication of when Legislative approval is required.



We stand ready to work with your committee to craft a final bill addressing the multiple demands on our treasured public lands.