



## **Testimony of the Environmental Priorities Coalition**

### **Supporting LD 736**

#### ***An Act To Enhance the Ecological Reserve System***

#### **Before the Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee**

**January 25, 2022**

Good morning Senator Dill, Representative O’Neil, and members of the Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee. My name is Beth Ahearn and I offer testimony on behalf of the Environmental Priorities Coalition (EPC). The EPC is a partnership of thirty-seven conservation, environmental, and public health organizations who unify around a common agenda every year. The EPC represents over 120,000 members in Maine who want to protect the good health, good jobs, and quality of life that depend upon a healthy environment. LD 736 is one of the priority bills for our coalition this year. Thank you to Rep. Grohoski for sponsoring this priority legislation.

Enacting LD 736 would accomplish two very important objectives: 1) protect and enhance Maine’s biodiversity and 2) help meet Maine’s climate goals of achieving carbon neutrality by 2045 and reducing greenhouse gas emissions by at least 80% by 2050.

Maine’s ecological reserve system was created by the legislature in 2000:

- to maintain one or more natural community types or native ecosystem types in a natural condition and range of variation and contribute to the protection of Maine's biological diversity
  - as a benchmark against which biological and environmental change may be measured, as a site for ongoing scientific research, long-term environmental monitoring and education
  - to protect sufficient habitat for those species whose habitat needs are unlikely to be met on lands managed for other purposes.
- ([http://www.mainelegislature.org/ros/LOM/LOM119th/2Pub551-600/2Pub551-600-41.htm#P1157\\_195393](http://www.mainelegislature.org/ros/LOM/LOM119th/2Pub551-600/2Pub551-600-41.htm#P1157_195393))

State-owned ecological reserves number 19 in total, covering less than 1% of the state, yet they protect some of Maine's most iconic and spectacular landscapes, including the Bigelows, the Cutler Coast, the Mahoosucs, Mount Abraham, Nahmakanta and Tunk Lake/Donnell Pond. The total acreage of these reserves is 96,000 acres. Yet the statutory goal of protecting all ecosystem types has not yet been achieved. There is currently a cap of 100,000 on these reserves that has effectively prevented the goal from being reached and has no scientific justification. LD 736 would allow the state to acquire more ecological reserve land and meet the purpose of the original legislation.

Maine's biodiversity is at risk. The Maine Climate Council's Scientific and Technical Subcommittee's (STS) Scientific Assessment of Climate Change and Its Effects in Maine (2000), describes climate change as already having a dramatic effect on biodiversity of Maine. Approximately one-third of the 442 plants and animals and 21 habitats in the state are affected by climate-change related threats. Sigh. This threat is likely to get worse before it gets better, and the best tool we have to maintain biodiversity is to ensure a network of biologically and geographically diverse lands that are well connected so that plants and animals can move across the landscape to feed and breed.

Enacting LD 736 will help Maine meet its climate goals through nature-based carbon sequestration and storage. On average, ecological reserves store 30% more carbon than other lands in Maine on a per acre basis. Expanding ecological reserves is a critical step to meeting the state's climate goals, specifically to conserve 30% of Maine land by 2030, according to "Maine Won't Wait", the 2020 Climate Action Plan. Conserving natural lands maximizes their potential to draw back carbon from the atmosphere and to achieve the state's goal of achieving carbon neutrality by 2045.

For the above reasons, please vote "Ought to Pass" on LD 736.