



SIERRA CLUB

MAINE CHAPTER

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To: Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry

From: John Fitzgerald, Sierra Club Maine

Date: January 24, 2022

Re: **Testimony in Support of LD 736: An Act to Enhance the Ecological Reserve System**

Senator Dill, Representative O'Neil, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry Committee, my name is John M. Fitzgerald. I am a semi-retired lawyer living in Sedgwick, Maine for the past few years. My career focus has been on natural resource conservation and climate change legislation and treaties. I am a member of the Executive Committee of the Maine Chapter of the Sierra Club on whose behalf I am submitting this testimony. Founded in 1892, Sierra Club is one of our nation's oldest and largest environmental organizations. We work diligently to amplify the power of our 3.8 million members nation-wide over 22,000 members and supporters in Maine. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of LD 736.

LD 736 would enhance Maine's ecological reserve system by removing most of the caps on the size of the system, while reserving nearly 400,000 acres of forested land of the Bureau for timber harvesting, and making other changes in the law. LD 736 would help the state meet its climate goals while maintaining sustainable levels of timber harvest on lands owned by the Bureau of Parks and Lands.

While we support the amendment in the nature of a substitute offered by the chair, we do have a couple recommendations to enhance the ability of the Director to restore the ecological integrity of reserves and enhance their natural ability to sequester carbon and remove greenhouse gases. I will discuss these below.

In our testimony we reflect elements of testimony recommended by a broad coalition of supporters in order to demonstrate why we recommend these few but important amendments to your new version. The coalition recommends that we note the following and we offer suggestions for helping achieve these worthy goals:

Ecological reserves have exceptional ecological values and immense public benefits. One-third of plants, animals, and habitats in Maine are threatened by climate change. Ecological reserves provide habitat for these species – both at-risk species and common species – that will have an increasingly challenging

time navigating land-use changes, fragmentation, and disturbance as well as invasive species, pests and disease, and changing weather patterns. LD 736 can help ecosystems remain intact, build resilience, and curb the decline of species that are important to Maine's economy and traditions.

Ecological reserves are also large carbon sinks, and creating new reserves is a critical step in meeting Maine's climate goals. Maine can't afford to lose one of the state's most valuable assets in the fight against climate change: forests. Ecological reserves store an impressive 30% more aboveground carbon than other lands in Maine, on a per acre basis. It is, therefore, no surprise that some of the oldest trees in Maine are found on ecological reserves, which in addition to being large carbon sinks, create complex, mature, resilient habitat for wildlife.

Furthermore, expanding Maine's ecological reserve system has been a recommendation of several expert-led, stakeholder groups.

- The 2019 Maine Land Conservation Task Force recommended, "Target[ing] land conservation efforts to effectively protect critical natural resources and help Maine combat and adapt to a changing climate."
- The Maine Climate Council's Natural and Working Lands Working Group recommended expanding the ecological reserve system.
- The Maine Forest Carbon Task Force recommended, "Establish[ing] forest reserves on sites with high carbon density and in areas of special ecological value to allow the stand to mature to a late successional forest."

In order to better ensure these goals are met, we suggest that certain limited exceptions be specified to the language prohibiting "manipulative research" and these include the authority of the Director to emphasize native Maine tree species that store more carbon than others, to restore valuable native species of plants and animals that are missing or diminished in the reserves and to permit scientifically guided research on enhancing carbon sequestration or other greenhouse gas removal, such as reducing excess methane emitted from warming wetlands or other areas using nature - based solutions. We also suggest that removing lands in a non-urgent situation be permitted only after the Committee has issued a report, however short it may be, with its recommendations on the proposed removal. Language we suggest to include these changes is brackets and italics in the attached draft.

The Maine Chapter of the Sierra Club urges the committee to adopt the attached amendments we propose and to vote Ought to Pass on LD 736. Thank you for your time.

Respectfully,

John Fitzgerald

Legislative Team Volunteer and Executive Committee Member