

LD 736 testimony draft

Senator Dill, Representative O’Neil, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry Committee, my name is Alec Giffen. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of LD 736.

By way of background, I hold a Master of Science from the University of California, with emphasis in forestry and wildlife ecology, and a Bachelor of Science in forest science from the University of Maine. I currently work at the New England Forestry Foundation as Senior Forest Science and Policy Fellow and in the same role to the Clean Air Task Force. Previously, I served as Director of the Maine Forest Service from 2003-2011 and, before that, I led both the Natural Resource Planning Division of the State Planning Office and the Land Use Regulation Commission.

Ecological reserves are important for a variety of reasons beyond their value in protecting biodiversity – these include, scientific value, practical value to inform forest management, and value to the human psyche.

My involvement with ecological reserves started as early as the 1970s. The Critical Areas Program in the State Planning Office, now referred to as the Maine Natural Areas Program, identified, among other significant resource types, old-growth forests that we felt, for scientific and ecological reasons, should be conserved. The State Planning Office published another report in 1991 that, in part, discussed the value of ecological reserves as biological benchmarks against which change could be measured and as “outdoor laboratories” for research and monitoring. It concluded, “a well-designed, adequately protected system of ecological reserves will provide an invaluable and irreplaceable resource for science, teaching, and natural resource planning today and in the future.”

The call for the creation of an ecological reserve system became louder in the 1990s. The public was concerned as a result of a spruce budworm outbreak that resulted in very extensive clearcuts. In addition, Sir James Goldsmith initiated the effort to buy paper companies to sell off their land to maximize returns. The changing ownership of the North Woods and decline in stocking caused public concern for the future of Maine’s woods and the biodiversity it supports.

As a system, ecological reserves are intended to maintain an example of all the habitat types found in Maine and, by proxy, conserve the species that depend on each of those unique habitats, although there are still gaps in the system. Setting aside land in reserves is essential to protect biodiversity, and we can do that while still maintaining the other economic and recreational values provided by working forests. Ecological reserves were meant to

complement the surrounding working forests that occupy most of the landscape, not displace them.

For that reason, I believe the ecological reserve system to be an effective, science-based conservation tool, and LD 736 as proposed to be amended would help achieve its intended purposes by removing arbitrary size limitations in the law.

Now is the time to update this law. The need now is even greater than in 2000 when the ecological reserve system was created. While the system has been largely successful in the past couple decades, significant gaps remain. According to a recent review of the goals of the Land Acquisition Priorities Advisory Committee by the Maine Natural Areas Program, “no ecoregion has adequate representation of all habitat types within ecological reserves or similarly managed lands.” Simply put, we haven’t finished the job. The same LAPAC report notes that 4.6% of Maine land is under some form of management that is compatible with ecological reserves, meaning no timber harvesting is allowed. To put that number in perspective, the Harvard Forest in its 2010 [Wildlands & Woodlands](#) report calls for protecting 10% of all of New England’s forests as reserves. The logical place for most reserves is on public lands. In my view, the Bureau should be given the opportunity to expand the ecological reserve system in order to address the growing conservation need for protected habitats and to enhance the values of public lands, including their carbon storage potential.

On that note, I would like to point out that climate change was a known problem when the ecological reserve system was being discussed prior to 2000, but it has taken on greater importance today. Increased attention is needed on the role forests play in mitigating climate change and building ecological resilience in the face of climate-induced drought, wildfire, disease and pests, and storm events.

In conclusion, the ecological reserve system has been successful but remains incomplete, and several more habitats need to be protected for the scientific and ecological benefits I described. I urge the Committee to vote Ought to Pass on LD 736 as it is proposed to be amended. Thank you for your time and consideration.