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**Testimony of Representative Nicole Grohoski  
In Support of LD 736, *An Act to Enhance the Ecological Reserve System*  
Before the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry**

**25 January 2022**

Greetings Senator Dill, Representative O'Neil, and honorable members of the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry. I appreciate the opportunity to share my support of **LD 736, *An Act to Enhance the Ecological Reserve System***.

**What is the Ecological Reserve System?**

You may not know the system by name, but you may recognize and love its component parts. Here they are listed by county, all 19 and 96,000 acres of them. Do you see any in your county, any that you have visited?

- Aroostook County: Deboullie and Salmon Brook Lake Bog
- Franklin County: Bigelow, Crocker Mountain, and Mt. Abraham
- Hancock County: Tunk Lake Area
- Penobscot County: Nahmakanta and Wassataquoik
- Piscataquis County: Gero Island, Chamberlain Lake, and Big Spencer
- Oxford County: The Mahoosucs
- Somerset County: Number 5 Bog and St. John Ponds
- Washington County: Cutler Coast, Fifth Machias Lake, Great Heath, Duck Lake, and Rocky Lake

Just yesterday, I realized that some of the Donnell Pond reserve in Hancock County where I live is along the north shore of Spring River Lake. Okay, so what? Two months into the pandemic, I joined a friend for a paddling adventure to navigate Tunk Stream from its source of Spring River Lake to the sea in Steuben. As we pushed off from the boat launch, the view across the lake was stunning – a completely unmarred shoreline and mountains beckoned us toward the outlet. Many boaters were trying their luck fishing on the lake and enjoying time together, in the fresh air, free for the time being from worry. And as we rounded a bend to exit this scene, we startled a moose, which lumbered off into what I now know was an ecological reserve. The adventure continued through rapids, around a waterfall, in meandering wetlands, and eventually to the ocean. When we biked back to our cars to round out the day, this was the view across the lake, to the reserve. Completely peaceful, quiet, and calm – the perfect end to an adventure, the perfect respite from the uncertainty and chaos of an upside down world.



The ecological reserve system was created in the year 2000 by the Legislature, acting at the recommendation of a broad, multi-year stakeholder process. “Ecological reserve” is defined [in statute](#) as:

“an area owned or leased by the State, under the jurisdiction of the bureau, designated by the director for the purpose of maintaining one or more natural community types or native ecosystem types in a natural condition and range of variation and contributing to the protection of Maine’s biological diversity and managed:

- A. As a benchmark against which biological and environmental change may be measured;
- B. To protect sufficient habitat for those species whose habitat needs are unlikely to be met on lands managed for other purposes; or
- C. As a site for ongoing scientific research, long-term environmental monitoring and education.”

Our current ecological reserves are functioning as intended – fertile grounds for research by University of Maine students, the Maine Natural Areas Program, and others. It remains well understood to this day that there are scientific, recreational, and cultural benefits to protecting certain lands in Maine from high-impact activities.

The system was intended to include representative samples of all native ecosystems in Maine, to allow for study and protection of biodiversity. Think of the ecological reserve system like Noah’s Ark – a way to save just enough of everything that is special for the future. So far, we have assured many of these places safe

passage on our ship, but there are other ecosystems in Maine that are not yet included, and there is no more room on our Ark due to statutory limits. We're gonna need a bigger boat!

### **Shortcomings in Statute**

Current statute limits the ecological reserve system in a number of ways. When it was written, over 20 years ago, forest products stakeholders were concerned that the conversion of public lands from operable timberlands to inoperable forests would disrupt their businesses. That was a reasonable concern, given that this was a new idea at the time. Now, we know that this has not been the case. The limits of decades ago are arbitrary, do not protect our forest economy, and are preventing the ecological reserve system from reaching the desired outcome of preserving some of everything.

Here are some fun facts:

- Ecological reserves on public lands account for less than one percent of land in Maine.
- The largest reserve is Nahmakanta, which is less than 20% of the size of Ellsworth. It contains a 333 year-old northern white cedar and a 410 year-old red spruce. The world-famous Appalachian Trail bisects it.
- The smallest reserve is Wassataquoik Stream in Penobscot County at 775 acres. Small but mighty – in the shadow of Baxter State Park and surrounded by National Monument.
- Ecological reserves store roughly 30% more aboveground carbon than other lands in Maine on a per acre basis.<sup>1</sup>
- The Bureau of Parks and Lands revenue is generated by its timber harvest operations. Thus, it has no incentive to put too many acres of land into ecological reserve status or it would bankrupt itself.
- The Bureau of Parks and Lands must calculate a “Sustainable Harvest Limit” for which harvest is below growth. For the operable land acreage under BPL management, that number of cords per year is more than what is [permitted by statute](#). And what is permitted by statute is well above what BPL has harvested in 14 of the past 15 years. The ecological reserve system is not a limiting factor in BPL’s harvest volume. Market fluctuations are the biggest driver of harvest volume.
- The Forest Opportunity Roadmap / Maine (2018) reports “that there is a significant opportunity for increased use of Maine softwoods, most notably the Spruce/Fir resource. Currently, there are more than 3 million tons of potential Spruce/Fir available, with further increases possible in the future.” Meaning – there is plenty of wood to go around.

### **Bill Structure**

Since I am the first person to speak on this bill, I will take this opportunity to discuss how it is drafted.

- The first part removes obsolete language about the origins of the system and strengthens the public process if BPL were to propose that a parcel of land be removed from the system. BPL must provide info to this committee to review, which this committee can act on through legislation. Currently, there are no requirements for BPL to remove a parcel from the system.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.maine.gov/dacf/mnap/reservesys/carbon\\_report\\_ecological\\_reserves\\_2021.pdf](https://www.maine.gov/dacf/mnap/reservesys/carbon_report_ecological_reserves_2021.pdf)

- The “allowed uses” subsection rephrases the older language to use active language per the recommendation of OPLA. Additionally, it allows Wabanaki people to gather materials for traditional uses as one of the low-impact activities permitted on the land. Other allowed activities include: scientific research, education, hiking, camping, skiing, hunting, fishing, and trapping.
- There is no change to subsections on allowed trails and roads for motorized vehicle use and incompatible uses, specifically logging, mining, and excavation, nor are there changes to the final section on reporting requirements.
- The subsection on resource protection permits BPL to use certain wildfire suppression tactics to protect the integrity of the landscape, per request of BPL.
- And what about the bigger boat? The last subsection removes three arbitrary limits to the system, two of which are redundant at this point, and one of which is overly complex for what it is trying to achieve. I won’t drag you through the math on that one and hope that BPL and others won’t have to keep going through it either.
- Additionally, it increases the threshold of operable timberland acres on public lands that can be designated as ecological reserves from 6 to 8%. That would allow the Bureau to designate an additional 8,580 acres of their current landholding as ecoreserves. This type of limit is maintained to prevent the Bureau from outstripping its revenue generation needs or significantly decreasing the amount of timber entering the market from public lands. That acreage would allow one reserve smaller than the Bigelow or the Mahoosucs, or two smaller-than-average reserves to be added to the system at this time.

### **Conclusion**

The ecological reserve system began as a vision to protect Maine’s biodiversity and allow us to study landscape change. Many of the reserves have become beloved hubs for recreation and support our outdoor recreation and tourism economy. The utility of the system is now well established, well understood, and ripe for refinement. Some, but not all ecosystems are included – such as northern hardwood forest and cedar swamps in northern Maine or large forest blocks in southern Maine. This bill would allow us to finish the job.

Ecological reserves are more than just a system of parcels scattered around the state, they are in the very lifeblood of Maine – of its people, its flora and fauna, its long history. **They are what connect our past to our future.** They are where we can go to find quiet, to learn, to adventure, to be in the wild. And similarly, they are invaluable to the many other species that we share this great state with. I hope you will support this bill to enhance our ecological reserve system for the benefit of generations to come.

I thank you for your time and consideration of this testimony. I’d be happy to answer any questions.