

**Testimony of Catherine B. Johnson in support of LD 736**

**Jan. 25, 2022**

Senator Dill, Representative O’Neil, and members of the ACF committee:

My name is Cathy Johnson. I am a resident of Alna. I support LD 736, An Act To Enhance the Ecological Reserve System.

In 1994, the concept of “protecting biodiversity” entered the public debate about land management in Maine because of the controversies surrounding the protection of the spotted owl in the Pacific northwest.

Seeking to avoid the kind of pitched battles and lawsuits about protecting biodiversity that were flooding the Pacific Northwest, the Natural Resources Council of Maine, the Maine Forest Products Council, and the Maine Nature Conservancy joined together to create a multi-stakeholder process to try to agree on what protection of biodiversity would mean in Maine and to develop strategies to protect Maine’s rich biological diversity.

The process we created included anywhere from 50 – 100 people at different times, including representatives of all of the major forest landowners and paper companies, representatives of all the conservation groups active in Maine, and Maine’s top biodiversity and forest ecology scientists including representatives from state government agencies and academic institutions in the state.

For six years, this diverse group of stakeholders met two or three times a year for two days at a time to attempt to come to a common understanding of what was needed to protect biodiversity in Maine. These meetings were always educational and focused on practical solutions. They were often heated as folks from different perspectives worked to protect their interests.

The solutions discussed focused on two primary types of land in Maine: those that are managed for commercial timber production and those that are managed to protect a relatively undisturbed natural environment. An early realization of the group was that the more that biodiversity can be protected on public land, the less of a burden there would be on private land.

After six long years of hard and often frustrating debates, the stakeholders achieved consensus on two necessary and complementary paths to protect biodiversity: one was a detailed manual of strategies those managing commercial timberland could incorporate into their commercial timber harvesting operations; the other was to establish a permanent ecological reserve system in Maine to protect lands in their natural state.

The ecological reserve system in Maine was established the following year. The goal of the system is to protect viable examples of all of the 104 natural community types found in Maine, including the different types of wetlands, open lands like grasslands and alpine areas, and all the different forest types.

The current system is an excellent start but more needs to be done to achieve the goal of protecting examples of all our natural communities.

LD 736 is an important step towards that goal. By increasing the percent of operable timberland under BPL's management that can be placed in ecological reserves, the state will be able to protect natural community types that are currently not protected or are inadequately protected. While I support the increase from 6% – 8%, I would encourage the committee do even more and increase the percentage to 10%.

When the system was established over 20 years ago, there was uncertainty about how much of BPL's operable land could be dedicated to ecological reserves without degrading the Bureau's ability to manage all of our public lands and so the very conservative figure of 6% was chosen. Now with 20 years of experience, I think it is clear that the Bureau could designate up to 10% of its operable acres and still achieve all of the other management goals of the public lands system.

As I understand it, the difference between 8% and 10% would be about 6000 acres. Given the size of the Bureau's current operable timber land base of about 429,000 acres, the potential loss of 6000 acres would have minimal impact, yet the addition of those 6000 acres to the ecological reserve system could provide the opportunity to protect multiple currently un-or- under protected natural areas, avoiding permanent loss of biodiversity. It would be a very important step forward.

One final thought: the ecological reserve system was always intended to be a permanent designation. I also support the changes proposed to clarify that lands could be removed from the system only in conjunction with the adoption of a management plan for the parcel including the opportunity for public comment, and after providing notice and the rationale for the proposed removal to this committee.

I strongly urge you to adopt LD 736 after increasing the proposed 8% limit to 10%.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments.