



Testimony Supporting LD 736:

An Act to Enhance the Ecological Reserve System

Jeff Reardon, Maine Brook Trout Project Director
January 11, 2022

Senator Dill, Representative O'Neil, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry:

My name is Jeff Reardon, and I am providing this written testimony on behalf of Trout Unlimited (TU), a national conservation organization whose mission is to conserve, protect and restore North America's trout and salmon and their watersheds. TU has 5 chapters and more than 2,000 members in Maine. TU strongly supports Representative Grohowski's amended language for LD 736, which will make small but important changes to the statutes regarding establishment of ecological reserves on lands owned by the Maine Bureau of Parks and Lands (BPL).

Maine's system of ecological reserves was established more than 20 years ago, with the intention of conserving a small fraction of Maine's public lands that represent habitat types where timber harvesting and most other human disturbance are not allowed. Through its land management planning process, with public input, BPL initially established about 70,000 acres of ecological reserves. Over the past 20 years the system has grown to about 97,000 acres. These ecological reserves include some of the state's most iconic and well-loved landscapes, including Bigelow, the Cutler Coast, the Mahoosucs and many others. Of particular importance to TU and other conservation-minded anglers are trout and salmon waters protected within ecological reserves, including many that are protected as State Heritage Fish Waters. Examples include the Deboullie Reserve, with four of Maine's twelve remaining lakes that support native Arctic charr and many other waters supporting native brook trout; Nahmakanta, with its concentration of native brook trout ponds; Wassataquoik, protecting important brook trout and Atlantic salmon in Wassataquoik Stream and the East Branch Penobscot River, along with important floodplain forest; and Donnell Pond, which protects the headwaters of Tunk Stream and its important habitat for brook trout, including sea-run brook trout.

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Ecological reserves are a critical strategy to maintain biodiversity in the face of climate change that threatens native coldwater fish. Older forest stands provide shade to cool streams and maintain thermally suitable habitat, improve fish habitat through recruitment of large wood into stream channels, and provide an important carbon sink in forest biomass and soils.

Recent analysis by BPL suggests that while Maine habitat types such as high elevation forests and emergent wetlands are well represented in the state's Ecological Reserves, many lower elevation forest types are not. Protection of these under-represented habitat types is important. Conserving many of them—northern hardwood forests and white cedar swamps in northern Maine; oak-pine, oak-northern hardwoods, and hemlock forests in Central and Western Maine; and any intact forests on the seacoast plain in southern Maine—is important to protect forest biodiversity and will have secondary benefits in protecting habitat and improving climate resilience for brook trout in parts of the state that are most sensitive to climate change.

The primary change proposed by Representative Grohowski's amended version of the bill would simplify existing language that limits the maximum acreage that can be designated as ecological reserves on BPL lands. Current statute sets three different caps: (1) 15% of the total land acreage under BPL jurisdiction; (2) 100,000 acres; and (3) No more than 6% of operable timberland acres on public reserved and non-reserved lands. Representative Grohowski's amended bill would increase the "operable timberland acres" cap to 8%. We support this change, which would allow for modest growth in the state's portfolio of ecological reserves while still providing for sufficient timber harvest to provide the revenue that supports BPL and to make a substantial contribution to Maine's wood basket. We would also support raising this cap to 10% and request the Committee to consider that change during Work Session. The other two limits are unnecessary and should be removed.

Thank you for your consideration. We urge you to support this bill and work with the sponsor, the BPL, and each other to provide for modest expansion of Maine's system of ecological reserves while still providing financial support for BPL's land management and wood and fiber from public lands to support Maine's economy.

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