

Senator Dill, Representative O'Neil, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry Committee, my name is Janet McMahon. I am an ecologist who helped develop the original blueprint for Maine's Ecological Reserves System in 1993. I am testifying in support of LD 736, as proposed to be amended by the sponsor.

In the late 1990s, the Maine Forest Biodiversity Project - a group of 100 people that included wildlife and fisheries biologists, large forest landowners, conservation groups, sportsmen, representatives from BPL and IFW and many others - came together to figure out how best to represent and conserve Maine's incredible diversity of plants and wildlife into the future. After meeting for a year, the group agreed on three things:

1. the need to assess the state of Maine's biodiversity
2. the need for guidelines to help commercial and private forest land owners manage their forests with biodiversity in mind, and
3. the need for a system of ecological reserves that represented the full variety of Maine's native species and landscapes.

The first two needs have been met, but we are only part way there when it comes to a Maine Ecological Reserve system. The purpose of the system is to represent all native ecosystem types across their natural range of variation in Maine and protect habitats for species found no where else. In addition, reserves are critically important educational resources and provide places for low-impact recreation.

The ecological reserves legislation passed in 2000 has been highly successful. However, while many ecosystem types are represented, especially wetlands and higher elevation forests, other habitats, and the variety of plants and animals they support, are not - especially those found in the southern half of the state. The goal was to identify the best potential reserves on public land first, and then work with private groups to identify the lands and waters needed. There are still many places on public lands that would help round out the system.

I view reserves as perhaps the most important use of land in Maine. Not only do they contribute to the health of our native wildlife populations, but they serve as benchmarks against which biological and environmental change in both managed and unmanaged forests can be measured. The value of these benchmarks grows clearer by the year, especially as Maine's climate changes at an unprecedented rate. Monitoring work at reserves is helping us understand how forest trees and soils sequester carbon, how species rearrange themselves on the land as temperatures warm, how to deal with invasive pests, and much much more

The cap in the current legislation is arbitrary, and after twenty years, other improvements are needed to help complete the important work we started more than two decades ago. I urge you to support LD 736 and the amendments proposed. The result will be an invaluable and irreplaceable resource for the people of Maine. Thank you for considering my testimony.