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Testimony on LD 736 – “An Act To Enhance the Ecological Reserve System”

Senator Dill, Representative O’Neil, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry. My name is Andy Whitman, I am Director of Applied Science at Manomet, a conservation organization which applies science and engages people to sustain our world. I work with foresters and farmers in Maine and across North America to support their efforts at achieving sustainable working lands. This means improving conservation of natural lands while also increasing conservation and production on working lands everywhere. Thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of LD 736 – “An Act To Enhance the Ecological Reserve System”.

Maine is remarkable for being one of the first states in the country to create an ecological reserve system. People from Maine’s environmental community, the hunting and fishing community, and the forest products industry all recognized the need for an ecological reserve system decades ago. It is often forgotten that Maine’s forest products industry played a key role in the development of the ecological reserve network, despite its concerns about its possible impacts to the forest products industry. All stakeholders appreciated that it was too much to expect private landowners to support ecological reserve on their lands.

The overall goal of ecological reserve system was to include representative areas of all the habitat types found in Maine. Unfortunately, this goal has not been met. The ecological reserve system lacks many common habitat types found in southern Maine. Even some common habitat types found in northern Maine such as spruce fir flats are not well represented in the ecological reserve system. Thus ecological reserve system is incomplete.

Why are reserves important?

Ecological reserves foremost conserve ecological legacies, a key part of Maine’s natural heritage, part of our common heritage as Mainers and one to bestow on our children, and grandchildren. This includes a limited number of rare species, populations of which are best secured on natural lands, once common habitats, and ecological conditions rarely found elsewhere in Maine.

They also provide areas for scientific research which serve as scientific reference points for understanding environmental change. With climate change and other large scale changes, this need has become more pressing. The ecological reserve system helps us make better sense of ongoing, large-scale changes in our state and understand what if any response is necessary.

Finally reserves have supported recreation. They have been designed to permit recreation and continue to be used by Mainers.

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Why expand the ecological reserve network?

This bill aims to increase the cap on area in ecological reserves to 8% of operable acres, which would allow about the network to expand by 14,000 additional acres. These added acres would fill gaps and better meet the needs to conserve ecological legacies and our heritage, understand and address environmental change, and continue to provide recreation. This bill allows Bureau of Parks and Lands (BPL) to slightly expand the ecological reserve network to better achieve these objectives for all Mainers.

In its 20-year history, the ecological reserve system has not adversely impacted the BPL's wood harvesting or the wood supply. BPL has done an exemplary job managing its lands for multiple purposes and balancing the needs of most user groups that it serves. However, in this final regard, I have to echo Barbara Vickery's comment about the need for BPL to find better ways to address the concerns of the Wabinanki Nations by allowing them the opportunity to gathering of materials for cultural and traditional uses. This aside, I encourage this committee to support this bill and expand the cap on Maine's ecological reserve system.