



Senator Henry Ingwerson
Rep. Bill Pluecker
Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry
100 State House Station
Augusta ME 04333

January 24, 2023

Dear Senator Ingwerson, Rep. Pluecker, and distinguished member of the ACF Committee,

The Appalachian Mountain Club appreciates the opportunity to comment on the three bills you are considering concerning Maine's beloved state parks: LD 25 *An Act to Provide Indigenous Peoples Free Access to State Parks*, LD 56, *An Act to Provide Free Admission to State Parks and Historic Sites for the Spouses and Children of Veterans Holding Free Day Use Passes*, and LD 77, *An Act to Require the Bureau of Parks and Lands to Maintain Public Restrooms at State Parks*.

AMC is the nation's oldest conservation, recreation, and education organization, with the mission to foster the protection, enjoyment, and understanding of the outdoors. We have 6,600 members in Maine and own 100,000 acres of forestland in the 100-Mile Wilderness region of Piscataquis County, managed for multiple use including sustainable forestry, backcountry recreation, and environmental education. We believe strongly in the importance of affordable, accessible outdoor recreational for all.

AMC is a member of the Wabanaki Coalition, and we recognize that the state of Maine and our parks are located in unceded Wabanaki territory. We want the people who have lived in relationship to this land for 10,000 years or more to continue to enjoy access to their traditional territory. We bring to your attention the troubling economic status of Wabanaki members, as laid out in the December 2022 report produced by the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development. Our Wabanaki neighbors suffer disproportionately from lower per-capita incomes, higher child poverty rates, and higher unemployment rates when compared to Maine as a whole.

We are grateful to our veterans for their service. We know that time spent in nature is essential to both physical and mental health and can strengthen family relationships.

Finally, we support adequate infrastructure in our state parks

We do want to point out that, taken together, these three bills highlight the challenges facing the state park system. Our extraordinary parks are gems, oases of beauty and relaxation in our too-busy world. They are diverse, ranging from the remote Allagash Wilderness Waterway to the popular beach parks of Crescent, Popham, and Reid. They welcome nearly 3.3 million visitors each year, including record numbers of campers in 2022. They have long provided respite and refreshment to both Mainers and visitors, contributing an estimated \$100 million to the state economy in the process, much of that in rural Maine.

But for far too long the parks have been asked to do this without adequate investment. In fact, the park system faces a maintenance backlog of at least \$50 million and operated for 5 years—including years with soaring demand resulting from the pandemic—with reduced staff after losing 24 positions in 2017.



We are grateful that Governor Mills and the 130th legislature recognized the importance of the state parks and the extraordinary pressures placed on them. Over the past two years, they restored the much-needed staff positions, invested \$50 million in American Rescue Plan Act funds in parks renovation, and allowed the park system to retain a portion of their revenues for ongoing maintenance needs.

As you consider the bills before you and address issues related to the park system in the coming two years, we urge you not to backslide in that commitment. Please approach our state parks as precious assets worthy of investment and as resources that have the potential to contribute even more to our economy and overall well-being. If you ask the park system to take on more responsibility, whether discerning who qualifies for free admission or increasing availability of bathroom facilities, please ensure adequate staff and funding to meet that responsibility.

We look forward to working with you on these issues over the coming session.

Sincerely,

Eliza Townsend
Maine Conservation Policy Director