



Testimony before the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry
By Robin Kerber, American Farmland Trust, New England Policy Associate
March 17, 2023

Re: Support for LD 294: An Act to Include a Tribal Member in the Baxter State Park Authority

Dear Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry:

I appreciate this opportunity to testify in support of LD 294, An Act to Include a Tribal Member in the Baxter State Park Authority. My name is Robin Kerber, and I am the New England Policy Associate for American Farmland Trust.

American Farmland Trust is the nation's leading conservation organization dedicated to protecting farmland, promoting sound farming practices, and keeping farmers on the land. Since its founding in 1980 by farmers and citizens concerned about the rapid loss of farmland to development, AFT has helped protect over 6.5 million acres of farmland and led the way for the adoption of conservation practices on millions more. Established in 1985, AFT's New England office works to save the land that sustains us across the region.

Baxter State Park is one of Maine's largest protected natural spaces and represents one of Maine's first land conservation efforts. Initially purchased by Governor Baxter, the Park was donated to the State in 1931 under set terms. These terms outline that unlike other state parks supported by state tax dollars in the general fund, Baxter State Park is funded by an immense trust. The Park's operations are solely governed by three individuals appointed in statute who comprise the Baxter State Park Authority. These individuals include the Director of the Maine Forest Service, the Commissioner of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, and the Maine Attorney General. As a vital step towards Tribal sovereignty in the State, we support the proposed legislation of adding a fourth individual to the Authority representing Maine's Tribal community.

The area that is now Baxter State Park has been an area of cultural importance to Indigenous people for millennia. If you've hiked up Mount Katahdin (a name that means "the Greatest Mountain" to the Penobscot), you might see a trail sign for Pamola Caves, a landmark named after the evil spirit Pamola that is believed to guard this sacred mountain. Indigenous communities have been part of the region far longer than the boundaries of the Park have been established. Baxter State Park is approaching a century of welcoming visitors to explore and see first-hand the value of large-scale conservation in Maine. This legislation will ensure that Indigenous communities have a seat at the table and are a part of the important decisions that will impact the future of Baxter State Park.

We support the intent of this legislation to lift the voices and knowledge of Maine's Indigenous people. In 1980, The Maine Indian Claims Act blocked many federal resources and support for Maine Tribes established in 1934 as part of the Indian Reorganization Act. The State has been slow to recognize how this has restricted Indigenous communities' growth, health, and resilience. A 2022 [Harvard study](#) showed that while Tribes in other states saw 61% growth in per capita income since 1989, Maine Tribes are systematically underperforming and have only grown by 9%. While the last thirty years have shown an economic boom in much of Indian Country because of their self-governance and fiscal independence, this is not happening in Maine due to the negative and restrictive impacts of the Maine Indian Claims Act. The proposed legislation is a step toward acknowledging that Maine Tribal communities must be strengthened and uplifted. We support the opportunity to bring Indigenous people into a leadership position in a place with profound and significant cultural importance.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on this vital legislation. Please feel free to contact me at rkerber@farmland.org or my colleagues at American Farmland Trust if you have any questions about this testimony on LD 294.

Sincerely,

Robin Kerber
New England Policy Associate
American Farmland Trust

American Farmland Trust is an agricultural non-profit organization with a mission to save the land that sustains us by protecting farmland, promoting sound farming practices, and keeping farmers on the land. AFT is the only national agricultural organization that approaches its work in this comprehensive, holistic manner. We recognize the connection between the land, forward-looking farming practices, and the farmers who do the work.