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LD 395

To the Joint Standing Committee,

I am writing in strong support of LD 395, An Act to Restore Access to Federal Laws Beneficial to the Wabanaki Nations.

This bill is not about granting special treatment. It is about correcting a longstanding and well-documented inequity that places the Wabanaki Nations at a disadvantage compared to every other federally recognized tribe in the United States.

For decades, the unique legal framework created by the Maine Indian Claims Settlement Act and subsequent state interpretations has prevented the Wabanaki Nations from fully accessing federal laws and programs intended to support tribal self-determination, public health, environmental protection, housing, education, and economic development. These exclusions were not the intent of Congress when those federal laws were enacted, yet in practice, the Wabanaki Nations have been denied their benefits.

LD 395 is a necessary and measured step toward restoring parity.

When federally recognized tribes in other states can access protections under laws like the Clean Water Act, the Indian Child Welfare Act, the Violence Against Women Act, and key health and housing programs, but the Wabanaki Nations cannot, the result is structural inequity embedded in law. This inequity has real consequences: for environmental stewardship, for family stability, for public safety, and for economic opportunity.

Maine often prides itself on its commitment to fairness, stewardship of land and water, and respect for community. Yet the current legal landscape contradicts those values by limiting the sovereignty and self-determination of the Wabanaki Nations within their own homelands.

Restoring access to federal laws does not diminish the authority of the State of Maine. Rather, it strengthens collaboration, clarifies jurisdiction, and allows the Wabanaki Nations to fully participate as partners in addressing shared challenges: from climate resilience and watershed protection to public health and community wellbeing.

Importantly, LD 395 does not create new rights. It restores rights that already exist for every other federally recognized tribe in the country.

This is a moment for Maine to move from a legacy of exception to a future of equity.

I urge the Legislature to support LD 395 and take a meaningful step toward honoring the sovereignty, dignity, and inherent rights of the Wabanaki Nations.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully submitted,
Shay Bellas