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LD 785

Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and members of the Judiciary Committee, my name is Isabelle Hamann, and I am a student at the College of the Atlantic in Bar Harbor, Maine. I am writing in strong support of LD 785.

LD 785 is about ending a long-standing injustice and restoring to the Wabanaki Nations the full right to govern themselves.

For more than forty years, the 1980 Maine Indian Claims Settlement Act has imposed restrictions on the Wabanaki Nations that no other federally recognized tribes in the United States face. These restrictions are not just lines in a statute. They shape daily life, whether communities can plan for the future, protect their lands and waters, care for their people, and build durable local economies.

The costs of this unequal system are not abstract. According to data compiled by the Wabanaki Alliance, while tribal income outside of Maine has grown by more than 60% since 1989, Wabanaki income has grown by only 9%. In Wabanaki communities, childhood poverty rates range from 40% to 77%, compared to about 15% statewide. Behind these numbers are families making impossible tradeoffs and children growing up with fewer chances, not because of a lack of effort, leadership, or vision, but because of a legal framework that has constrained their communities for generations.

LD 785 would begin to change that. Restoring meaningful self-government would allow the Wabanaki Nations to use the same federal tools that tribes across the country rely on to strengthen healthcare, housing, education, environmental protection, and economic development. Research shows this would benefit Wabanaki communities and also strengthen Maine's rural economy, adding hundreds of millions of dollars in economic activity and creating thousands of jobs, many of them for non-tribal Mainers. More than that, it would give Wabanaki communities the stability and freedom to invest in their own futures.

The Settlement Act was never meant to be frozen in time. Its authors described it as a "living document," meant to evolve. Yet for decades, its structure has produced conflict, uncertainty, and costly litigation instead of cooperation. Former Attorney General Michael Carpenter has acknowledged that the state has too often ended up in court, wasting public resources rather than building constructive relationships with the tribes. That is not responsible governance, and it is not the relationship Maine should accept as normal.

Maine's identity is inseparable from its land and waters, and the Wabanaki have cared for these places since long before this state existed. That relationship is not symbolic. It is lived, practiced, and carried forward. Supporting Wabanaki self-government is not only a matter of justice, it is a commitment to the long-term health of the places and communities that define Maine.

LD 785 is a chance to leave behind a system built on limitation and distrust and to choose one grounded in respect, partnership, and a shared future. It is a chance to support Wabanaki families, strengthen tribal governments, and finally begin to build a relationship that reflects both fairness and common sense.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge the Committee to vote Ought to Pass on LD 785. Thank you for your time and consideration.