

Katherine Sarton Dunn
Gray
LD 785

LD 785 levels the playing field for the Wabanaki Nations. For 40 years, restrictions in the 1980 Maine Indian Claims Settlement Act (MICSA) have blocked the Wabanaki Nations from accessing all of the federal self-determination policies that helped 570 other tribes create thousands of jobs and generate hundreds of millions in economic activity. While tribal income outside of Maine grew 61% since 1989, Wabanaki income grew only 9% (compared to Maine's 25% overall). It's time to remove these barriers.

Children are bearing the brunt of the Settlement Act's failures. Childhood poverty in Wabanaki communities ranges from 40% to 77%, compared to Maine's overall rate of 15%.

Modernizing the Settlement Act is an economic win-win. Harvard researchers project that tribal self-government would add \$330 million annually to Maine's GDP, create 2,700+ jobs (more than half filled by non-tribal rural Mainers), and generate \$39 million yearly in state and local tax revenue. When the Wabanaki thrive, rural Maine thrives.

The Settlement Act was designed to evolve. The politicians who drafted the 1980 Settlement Act called it a "living document" meant to be updated. The law itself allows Maine, the Passamaquoddy Tribe, and Penobscot Nation to amend it. After more than 40 years of harm, it's time to modernize this broken deal.

For the Wabanaki Nations, uncertainty, litigation, and delays are consequences of MICSA's exclusionary language since 1980. Former Maine Attorney General Michael Carpenter, who voted for MICSA when he was a state senator representing Houlton, noted in a 2021 Bangor Daily News commentary that when he was reelected to the Maine Senate in 2016, it had become clear tribal relations with the state had deteriorated significantly, noting "Instead of working with the tribes, we were unnecessarily in the courts squandering taxpayer dollars."

Maine's wild and scenic beauty didn't happen by accident. . The Wabanaki have been protecting the environment and maintaining sustainable ecological practices for millennia, long before European settlement of Maine. They will continue to do so; it's their heritage and birthright as Wabanaki peoples.

Mainers overwhelmingly support Wabanaki self-determination. . More than 1,600 Mainers testified in record numbers supporting tribal sovereignty legislation based on the consensus recommendations of a bipartisan legislative task force. Environmental organizations, social justice organizations, organized labor, and faith-based groups continue to voice strong support on behalf of tens of thousands of their members. Over 250 businesses and organizations have joined the Wabanaki Alliance Tribal Coalition — including the newly formed "Businesses for Wabanaki Sovereignty". It's time to remove the barriers that have kept the Wabanaki and their rural Maine neighbors from the economic resurgence achieved by tribes across Indian Country.