

**TESTIMONY OF THE
DEPARTMENT OF INLAND FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE**

**BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,
CONSERVATION AND FORESTRY**

IN OPPOSITION TO L.D. 183

“An Act to Cap Publicly Owned Land Area at No More than 50 Percent of Any County”

SPONSORED BY: Representative FAULKINGHAM of Winter Harbor.
Cosponsored by: Senator MOORE of Washington and Representatives:
MCINTYRE of Lowell, MINGO of Calais, QUINT of Hodgdon, STROUT of
Harrington, TUELL of East Machias.

DATE OF HEARING: February 6, 2025

Good morning, Senator Ross, Representative Pluecker and members of the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry. I am Bethany Atkins, Habitat Conservation Section Supervisor at the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, providing this testimony on behalf of the Department, in opposition to **L.D. 183**.

The mission of the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (IFW) is to preserve, protect, and enhance the inland fisheries and wildlife resources of the state as well as to enable and promote the safe enjoyment of Maine's outdoors. Land ownership and management is an important component to accomplish the Department's mission.

IFW currently owns and manages 71 Wildlife Management Areas and 182 water access sites. These properties, totaling about 140,000 acres, provide habitat to Maine's suite of fish and wildlife and are open to the public, free of charge, for a wide variety of recreational activities including hunting, trapping, wildlife watching, fishing and boating. Examples of IFW owned lands include the nearby Jamies Pond Wildlife Management Area, a popular destination for hiking and local community outings; the Togus Pond Family Fishing site, providing multi-modal access for fishing and boating; and the Lexington Deer Wintering Area, acquired as a result of recent Legislative direction to the Department to purchase and manage more deer wintering habitat.

IFW also holds easements and state and federal grant agreements on approximately 65,000 acres of private lands in Maine. Through these mechanisms, we work with landowners to support habitat conservation, management, restoration and public access priorities while keeping land in private ownership and contributing to local tax assessments. This arrangement of owning some lands in fee as well as using other mechanisms to work with private landowners, is a pretty typical public lands portfolio in our state.

This proposed legislation defines publicly owned lands as “land in which the Federal Government, the State, a county or a municipality holds property rights including easements, development rights, trust rights or other ownership interest”. Publicly owned lands under this definition include national, state, and town parks, these lands together are essential to the success of the state’s recreation economy. It also includes military lands, school properties, and roads, for example- sites key to defense, education and transportation.

Under this definition, publicly held conservation easements, access easements, leases, and state and federal grant agreements are also considered publicly owned lands. These acres include many large working forests, farms and working waterfronts, most of which remain in private ownership.

Putting a cap on the amount of public lands by county could interfere with IFW’s ability to conserve and manage valuable wildlife habitat and provide access for the public. Additionally, this cap could interfere with private landowner’s options on their own lands. For these reasons, our agency opposes this bill.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions prior to or during the work session.