



Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility

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Committee on Agriculture Conservation and Forestry
Clerk Dylan Sinclair
Cross Building, Room 214, 287-1312
c/o Legislative Information Office
100 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333

ACF@legislature.maine.gov

RE: Letter of Support for L.D.527

Dear Members of the Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee:

I am writing on behalf of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER) in support of L.D. 527. PEER is a national service organization for federal, state, and local pollution control and resource protection employees.

PEER has deep roots in park, refuge, forest, and rangeland law enforcement. We have, for example, provided legal representation in defense of a wide variety of park law enforcement personnel, ranging from seasonal rangers to the Chief of the U.S. Park Police. For more than 25 years, PEER has been an advocate for natural resource law enforcement programs and professionalism. Among other roles, PEER operates the National Park Rangers Lodge of the Fraternal Order of Police.

Our position supporting this measure “Directing the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, Bureau of Parks and Lands to Establish a Law Enforcement Training Program for Park Managers and Certain Bureau Staff” is informed particularly by the mission and mandate of the Bureau of Parks and Lands.

The Bureau directly manages more than 700,000 acres and when conservation easements and leases are added, the total land area managed by the Bureau exceeds 2 million acres. This total is significantly larger than the total land area of the State of Delaware. No one would seriously argue that Delaware does not need a trained law enforcement force.

As you know, visitation to Maine's 48 state parks grew by 11 percent in 2018, drawing nearly 3 million visitors. That number is greater than the entire population of the City of Chicago. Surely, no one would seriously contend that Chicago does not need a trained law enforcement constabulary.

In this country, 48 states have park law enforcement programs. All include some form of training, up to and including dedicated academies. L.D. 527 would have Maine join these ranks by requiring that "the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, Bureau of Parks and Lands shall establish a law enforcement training program for bureau employees and agents who and who exercise law enforcement powers of the bureau in enforcing bureau rules and state law within the jurisdiction of the bureau."

The bill's required training topics focus on basic law enforcement functions, such as nonlethal self-defense equipment, use of motor vehicle emergency lights, and requesting identification from a person.

The presence of some trained law enforcement professional in state parks and forests is important for visitor safety. Human behavior does not change simply because they enter a state park or forest. Thus, state employees will encounter the range of problems, from domestic abuse to drunk driving, that are encountered in any city. It would be prudent if there were state employees available and trained to handle these situations that will inevitably arise.

Beyond visitor safety, a law enforcement presence is important to protect and deter damage to state resources. Given the economic value of state park resources, the failure to provide any degree of trained protection is tantamount to an invitation to steal or vandalize.

Finally, there should be a concern about the safety of state employees. While we are not aware of state-level statistics, national park rangers are among the ten most dangerous positions within the federal civil service. At the national level, PEER has tracked assaults and threats against federal natural resource staff and employees since the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. Recorded incidents of attacks and threats against these refuge, forest, park, and rangeland workers have risen steadily during those years. PEER does not believe that Maine is immune from this overall trend.

For those reasons, PEER supports L.D. 527 and urges its enactment.

Sincerely,

Tim Whitehouse
Executive Director