



*FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE*

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### Wabanaki Nations Statement Regarding L.D. 1626

As leaders of the Wabanaki Nations, we wish to provide the statement below regarding the Legislature's work on restoring tribal sovereignty.

The Legislature formed a bipartisan task force in 2019 to consider statutory changes that would comprehensively reform and modernize the state settlement act that has governed our Nations for the past 40 years. The task force issued 22 consensus recommendations designed to reform the settlement act so that our Nations would have the same rights, powers, privileges and immunities as other federally recognized Indian tribes in the United States. While the federal government's policy towards Indian tribes has improved and progressed since 1980 to one of self-determination and self-sufficiency, due to the state settlement act, the Wabanaki Nations lack the ability to exercise the same sovereignty in their territory as other tribes. The settlement act has resulted in decades of social and economic injustice for the Wabanaki people and has also harmed the surrounding rural communities because our Nations have been prevented from fully accessing federal dollars to support critical social and health services.

In the 129<sup>th</sup> Legislature, the task force's recommendations became L.D. 2094, but that bill never received a vote on the floor of the Legislature because of the coronavirus pandemic. In the 130<sup>th</sup> Legislature, the recommendations for tribal sovereignty restoration were reintroduced as L.D. 1626, which has received robust committee hearings, floor debate, and votes in both chambers of the Legislature. Permanent sovereignty restoration remains the legislative priority for the Wabanaki Nations, and it will continue to be our priority moving forward.

The dialogue and legislative activity surrounding sovereignty restoration is beyond what some of us imagined. When the Legislature first created the bipartisan task force, several of the tribal chiefs were not sure it was worth our time. In fact, some of us



considered not participating in the process because there were task forces in the past that failed to lead to any progress. But, the task force process, L.D. 2094, and L.D. 1626 have generated a level of support far beyond what any of us expected. More than 1,600 testimonies were provided on L.D. 1626 during its hearings before the Legislature. The Nations formed a grassroots advocacy movement to further progress around the state and in Augusta. Leaders of both parties are now asking the leaders of the Wabanaki Nations how best to address sovereignty restoration. We have never been asked before. So, we find ourselves in an unfamiliar place.

The Governor has consistently indicated that she has concerns with the current language of L.D. 1626, that she is concerned it would increase state-tribal conflict, and that as a result she will veto the bill should it reach her desk. The Governor has stated in a letter to legislative leaders and the tribal chiefs that she does not want a confrontation on L.D. 1626 and would prefer to continue to work together on making meaningful progress on areas of mutual concern. She specifically pointed to the potential for negotiated agreement on issues of health, education, economic development and jurisdictional issues, including ensuring that the Wabanaki Nations have access to the full range of federal benefits generally available to other federally recognized tribes.

As leaders of the Wabanaki Nations, we are disappointed that the Governor and Attorney General's office continue to have concerns about the provisions of L.D. 1626. But, in talking with the Democratic legislative leaders and looking to the vote count for L.D. 1626, it is clear that there are not enough votes in the 130<sup>th</sup> Legislature to override a veto. So, while we have made significant and concrete progress in moving the needle, there is still more work to be done. Time is on our side. Our people have lived with the negative consequences of the settlement act for over 40 years. However, we have made more progress in our sovereignty restoration efforts in the past four years than we did in the previous several decades. We need to remember that we started this fight on the backs of our ancestors and those who came before us, and our goal has always been to make progress for the next 7 generations that will come after us. Our fight for sovereignty restoration will not end today. We want the conversation to continue and we will press forward to engage more Mainers on these issues.

L.D. 1626 is a product of four years of work, and thousands of individual Mainers supporting our efforts. Today, we ask that our supporters – the thousands of individual Mainers who stood by our sides during the rallies and testified in support of sovereignty restoration – continue to work with us. Today, we ask that those legislators who were willing to lead our legislation, and those who worked in the background to help us navigate the legislative process, commit to continue to walk with us down this path to



restore our inherent rights and sovereign powers. The evidence is clear that when tribal communities prosper, so do the surrounding communities. Wabanaki sovereignty is good for all of Maine. Everyone should support it, but we need to educate more people, including local municipalities and the forest products industry, who continue to misunderstand how tribal sovereignty can be the rising tide that lifts the economies and overall socioeconomic wellbeing of our neighbors in rural Maine.

Governor Janet Mills has signed L.D. 906 and said she will sign into law L.D. 585. We sincerely appreciate the good faith dialogue and negotiations with the Governor that resulted in these bills. Neither of those bills represent sovereignty for all Wabanaki Nations and people in Maine, but each does provide important benefits that will strengthen our respective communities. We are going to continue to push for our sovereignty regardless of the outcome on L.D. 1626, and we acknowledge that this process now rests with state government and is out of our hands. Our ancestors made sacrifices so we could be here today, and it is our sacred duty to continue to press for full restoration and recognition of Wabanaki sovereignty. We look forward to continuing this work with all of our partners and allies.

Sincerely,

*/s Clarissa Sabattis*

Clarissa Sabattis, Chief  
Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians

*/s Kirk Francis*

Kirk Francis, Chief  
Penobscot Nation

*/s Charlie Peter Paul*

Charlie Peter Paul, Chief  
Mi'kmaq Nation  
Township

*/s William Nicholas, Sr.*

William Nicholas, Sr.  
Passamaquoddy Tribe at Indian

*/s Elizabeth Dana*

Elizabeth Dana  
Passamaquoddy Tribe at Pleasant Point