

STATEMENT of CONGRESSMAN MICHAEL MICHAUD
Testimony on H.R. 2984, the “Maine Coastal Islands Wilderness Act”
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
House Committee on Natural Resources
Thursday March 29, 2012

Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Grijalva, and Members of the Subcommittee – thank you for holding this hearing on H.R. 2984, the “*Maine Coastal Islands Wilderness Act*.” I would also like to thank Chairman Hastings and Ranking Member Markey of the full committee for their continued efforts to address wilderness issues.

Stephanie Martin will also testify today in support of this bill. Stephanie is on the Board of Directors of the Friends of Maine Seabird Islands, and she will discuss the local benefits and support of the bill. I want to express my appreciation to the Friends of Maine Seabird Islands for their collaborative efforts to restore seabird wildlife habitat and promote nature-based tourism. I would also like to thank Representative Pingree for partnering with me on this legislation, which includes islands in both of Maine’s Congressional Districts.

H.R. 2984 would designate 13 coastal islands – approximately 3,256 acres - as federal wilderness areas within the Maine Coastal Islands National Wildlife Refuge complex. This wilderness designation will achieve two important objectives. First, it will increase the marketability of this area to tourists and give a boost to the local economy. Second, it will codify the current status of these islands, which reflects a thoughtful balance between recreational, fishing and aquaculture, and refuge uses.

The process of drafting this bill has been a long one. In 2004 the Maine Coastal Islands Wildlife Refuge began their first conservation planning process. They held two years of public hearings to discuss various issues relating to the Refuge, including whether or not the 13 islands my bill addresses should receive the federal wilderness designation. As a result of the broad support for the wilderness designation, their 2006 final conservation plan included the recommendation that Congress pass legislation to establish the Maine Coastal Island Wilderness Area.

Since that recommendation my office has heard from numerous organizations asking me to introduce legislation that would codify the wilderness designation for these 13 islands as recommended six years ago by the Refuge’s conservation plan. In addition to listening to these groups, my office also talked to other constituencies to ensure that they were on board with this initiative.

This outreach effort raised several legitimate concerns that I have attempted to address by inserting provisions in this legislation that are critical to its objective. Because many of these provisions are unique for wilderness designation bills, I’d like to take the time to explain them. First, my legislation clarifies the seaward boundary of each wilderness island to be the well-defined high water mark to ensure that motorized boats can still land on these islands, a priority for local fishermen and recreationists. Second, the legislation clarifies that there are no buffer zones or impacts to nonwilderness activities adjacent to the wilderness boundaries to further guarantee fishermen’s and recreationists’ access to these islands. Third, although man-made

devices are generally not permitted in wilderness areas, my legislation allows for the installation of essential navigational devices to accommodate all public safety concerns. Finally, this bill explicitly protects private property rights by excluding all private lands and access right-of-ways from the recommended wilderness boundaries.

I am very grateful for the local organizations' willingness to collaborate with me on this project to ensure that this bill suits the communities and industries it seeks to support. I believe the final result is a balanced approach to conserving these unique island landscapes while making sure that the public can still enjoy them. If the Committee believes, however, that any concerns can be more completely addressed, I am more than happy to work with you to amend the bill to make it even stronger between now and when it comes to the floor.

My primary motivation for introducing this bill was its economic benefit. As you know, Mainers have a lot of pride in their beautiful state, and much of our economy depends on getting more people to see for themselves just how beautiful it is. In that vein, this legislation will make it easier for these coastal communities to market themselves and grow their nature-based tourism. The Penobscot Bay Regional Chamber of Commerce and members of the Ellsworth Area Chamber of Commerce, as well as many other local organizations, support this wilderness designation for this reason. During these times of high unemployment and a stagnant economy, especially in coastal communities where the fishing industry faces numerous issues, I am a strong advocate of efforts that encourage private sector job growth. That is why I introduced H.R. 2984.

My secondary motivation for introducing this bill was to ensure that these coastal islands remain as they are. My legislation, as you know, simply assigns these islands the official title of the Maine Coastal Islands Wilderness Area. But by including the special provisions that I mentioned above, H.R. 2984 also codifies, and therefore makes harder to change, the islands' current status and accessibility. Mainers are very proud and protective of their land, which is why I've carefully crafted this bill not only to make the wilderness designation but also to clarify that the land's current uses will remain the same.

In closing, once again I would like to thank Chairman Bishop and Ranking Member Grijalva for bringing this bill before the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands and for the opportunity to provide my testimony today. I ask the committee to support this balanced effort to help local communities in Maine enhance their efforts to grow their nature-based tourism sectors while preserving the accessibility and use of these coastal islands.

Thank you.