

Testimony on H 716  
From Peter Forbes  
Fayston, Vermont  
February 21, 2020

Good afternoon Representative Sheldon and members of this committee on Natural Resources, Fish, and Wildlife, my name is Peter Forbes. It's an honor to be with you and to bring my voice as a farmer and hunter in support of House Bill 716.

For 20 years now, my family and I have bred and sold sheep and grown food for our community and hunted our land, and allowed others to hunt our land. One of the great privileges of being a Vermonter is getting to know a landscape, a home ground, really well. One of our daughters was born in our home and both of our kids, who are no longer living at home, carry our farm and a love of Vermont in their hearts. I'm telling you all this because pride of place, love of home, is really important. I think it's part of what makes us Vermonters.

With pride, I can tell you the names and stories of every settler who made their way to the land we now farm and put their generations of sweat into making the place that we call home: Knoll Farm. Rufus Barrett was the first European; he arrived in 1804, the same year that Lewis and Clark set out to "discover" the west. He was Fayston's first town clerk and first settler. I see his stones piled in our field. I have pride in his story and all their stories right up to my generation for how we have improved the land and made a contribution to our community.

I am shamed, however, the fact that I can tell you their names, but I can't tell you the name of the Abenaki family that Rufus Barret most certainly displaced in 1804 to claim our land. Though Rufus walked on an Abenaki foot trail from Burlington over the App gap to Fayston, I cannot tell you the names of the Abenaki family who really settled the land and was there first. In 1804, when Rufus Barret could have settled anywhere in Fayston, he sought out 25 acres of south facing hillside *because it had already been cleared*.

I don't know who they were; I don't know their story; and my experience as a Vermonter is diminished without this knowledge and relationship. Though every road I drove my car on to get here today had its start as an Abenaki foot trail, I know precious little about the enormous contribution the Abenaki y have made and continue to make to our lives.

So, when I read about this legislation, I felt compelled to ask Rep Dolan if I could speak with you today.

Granting the Abenaki free hunting licenses is a practical and fiscally responsible way of showing respect and beginning to make amends. Certainly, there would be financial costs with this legislation, but those would be far, far outweighed by the social gains from showing respect and making amends.

To those who say that we can't give special treatment to a group of people, I offer that the Abenaki are not a special interest group, they are a sovereign nation. Of course, therefore, they deserve a different level of respect and treatment. And to give the Abenaki a higher level of respect does not diminish anyone else; it uplifts all of us.

This opportunity that Vermonters face to restore rights and to offer respect is an awakening happening over many parts of our country right now.

While I'm a proud Vermonter, I also have deep roots in Maine and my family also cares for land in Washington County, Maine in the heart of Wabanaki country. Our land there is adjacent to Passamaquoddy burial grounds. Through my love of land, I've developed over two decades a professional life as a cross-cultural facilitator and I'm leading a collaboration now in Maine between the 5 Wabanaki nations and 25 conservation groups, including the very largest ones, who are also committed to making amends in the form of returning land and granting access – special treatment if you will—to Wabanaki people in respect of their status as sovereign nations and first peoples.

Acadia National Park, a federal agency, grants the Wabanaki free special licenses to gather sweetgrass and other medicines from the national park, rights that no one else gets.

Maine State parks are starting to do the exact same thing.

Conservation groups in Maine have granted special uses this year to Wabanaki people over 62,000 acres of land. Our goal is to grant this special access over a quarter million acres in the

next 5 years. No other group gets these rights. Because no other groups are first peoples, are actually sovereign nations by treaty .

Certainly, there are fiscal costs to granting these rights, but these federal and state agencies and these nonprofit organizations do so because they recognize a much greater social good.

Monday, the Maine legislature took up consideration of changes to the 1980 Maine Indian Claims Settlement Act because of a growing recognition that significant parts of our past have been wrong and there is a public value to making amends.

Very similar efforts are happening right now to grant rights to indigenous groups in Massachusetts, Virginia, Indiana, Oregon, Washington, Arizona, Florida, Pennsylvania and Alaska.

Every state needs to find their own way into the process of reconciliation and making amends around broken treaties and our important relationship with sovereign peoples.

As a hunter, as a farmer, and as a Vermonter most of all, I want to make amends.

Making Amends with the Abenaki is critically important because to do so elevates them but equally elevates all of us because it elevates what it means to be a Vermonter. Making Amends is a very big project that needs to start with concrete, practical steps forward. Granting free hunting licenses is a fiscally responsible and socially conscious way to begin that important work.

I hope these words have had some meaning, and I'd be happy to answer any questions.