



TESTIMONY OF THE HONORABLE BRIAN WEEDEN, CHAIRMAN

on

AN ACT TO AMEND THE "LONG-TERM LEASING ACT" TO AUTHORIZE LEASES OF UP TO 99 YEARS FOR LAND HELD IN TRUST FOR THE MASHPEE WAMPANOAG TRIBE AND THE WAMPANOAG TRIBE OF GAY HEAD (S. 236)

December 17, 2025

Introduction

My name is Brian Weeden and I am the Chairman of the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe (“Mashpee” or “Tribe”). Chair Murkowski, Vice Chair Schatz, and distinguished members of the Committee, we thank you for holding this hearing on S. 236, an “Act to amend the Act of August 9, 1955 (commonly known as the ‘Long-Term Leasing Act’), to authorize leases of up to 99 years for land held in trust for the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe and the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah), and for other purposes.” We also want to thank our great home-state champions from the Massachusetts congressional delegation, Senator Ed Markey, Senator Elizabeth Warren, and Congressman Bill Keating. All have been good friends to our Tribe, and we appreciate their sponsorship and support of S. 236 and its House companion bill, H.R. 681.

Our Tribe is well known as the Tribe that greeted the Pilgrims for the First Thanksgiving in 1621. Yet despite our rich and well documented history, and our central role in America’s history, for many, many generations all of our land was lost to us. We had no federal reservation on which we could develop our economy or provide employment to our people. Our people suffered.

Today, we are now blessed to have been able to reestablish a federally-protected reservation within our historical territory, but we have had that reservation only for a relatively short period of time, and we have few resources to develop our economy and provide employment for our people there. Sharply rising housing costs in our area of southeastern Massachusetts and the skyrocketing cost of childcare have put even more pressure on our tribal families. Having been landless for so many generations, Mashpee now desperately needs economic development to build an economy to support our people, to preserve our culture, and to plan for the long term health and security of our future generations. Only with a long term economic development plan can we responsibly address these pressures on our people, and to make such a plan viable, we need the authority to enter into long term leases on our tribal lands.

Long Term Leasing Authority is Crucial to Our Future

In certain business situations, a maximum lease of 25 years just is not sufficiently long-term or stable enough to support adequate capital investment. Longer lease terms provide more financial security and generally allow for lower cost financing. Without the ability to enter into these longer term leases, investment on Indian lands is often discouraged. As you know, economic development is especially important for tribes because it provides employment and the revenue generated funds tribal governmental programs such as housing, elder care, health care, and language preservation. Mashpee is no different—we need revenue to support important services such as rental assistance, emergency repair, educational scholarships, and child and family services. We have too many members who are still unhoused and still dependent on federal and state assistance programs.

Just as important to the economic imperative is the tribal sovereignty imperative. Every tribe should be allowed to make its own decisions about how it wants to use its land. Tribal leaders best know their community's needs. Decision-making on tribal land use should rest with tribal governments, and should not be complicated or held hostage to lengthy and sometimes expensive federal approval requirements. Enacting S. 236 would help to empower Mashpee to make decisions about its own future with less federal oversight.

Overview of The Long Term Leasing Act and S. 236

Enactment of S. 236 would amend the Long Term Leasing Act, 25 U.S.C. § 415(a) to allow the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe to enter into lease agreements for up to 99 years. As you know, the Long-Term Leasing Act was enacted in 1955 to allow tribes to enter into a broad range of leases for 25-year terms (plus a single renewal) with the approval of the Secretary of the Interior. In the decades following, however, it has become clear that longer-term leasing authority is critical to tribes' ability to truly and responsibly plan ahead for seven generations. Since enactment in 1955, Section 415(a) of the Act has been amended *nearly 50 times to allow around sixty* other tribes to enter into leases for up to 99 years. Mashpee asks that we be provided with this same authority that has been afforded to so many other tribes.

Indeed, Mashpee believes that all tribes should be afforded these opportunities equally. We heartily applaud the work that Chairwoman Murkowski and Vice Chairman Schatz have done by reintroducing again in the 119th Congress the UNLOCKED Act (S. 3383). We also support related legislation that has been introduced (H.R. 5910) which similarly enjoys bipartisan support. But we also understand that it may take some time for this broader legislation to become a reality given differences between the Senate and House bills.

We urge the Committee, in the meantime, to do everything it can to move forward our tribal-specific legislation S. 236, which was originally introduced in the 118th Congress, and which already has moved out of the House Natural Resources Committee in this 119th Congress.

Thank you

The Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe thanks you for including consideration of S. 236 in the Committee's hearing today. We urge the Committee to do all it can move the legislation forward to help ensure its passage in the 119th Congress. We also thank you all on this Committee for the tremendous and important work you do for Indian Country.