

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 14, 2016

The Honorable Penny Pritzker  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Commerce  
1401 Constitution Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Secretary Pritzker:

We are writing to call on the U.S Department of Commerce to establish and lead an integrated, multi-agency Economic Development Assessment Team (EDAT) focused on Maine's forest based economy. Over the past several years, the pulp and paper industry and communities that support this sector have experienced significant economic hardship as a result of a series of mill closures that have led to the loss of thousands of forest and manufacturing jobs. As these rural communities have repeatedly told us, they are in the midst of an economic crisis of unprecedented magnitude, creating a situation requiring urgent action, heightened focus and new federal economic and workforce development resources.

Maine is home to vast forest and natural resources and a skilled workforce that has harvested, hauled, and processed wood from Maine's forests for generations. Unfortunately, due largely to dramatic changes in the pulp and paper markets, what was once a prosperous and robust industrial sector that provided a strong economic backbone in many rural areas is today facing a serious downturn and rapid decline. In recent years the situation has significantly worsened in Maine, where we have seen the closures of six major mills in the last eight years, four of those in the last two years.

The once thriving rural communities that once were the homes to these mills are today hurting. For example, the communities in the Katahdin and Lincoln area where the forest products industry provided good paying jobs spanning generations, and brought prosperity to a region once considered one of the most prosperous in the state, today are struggling after the closing of three major mills. The same situation is true in western and eastern Maine which has also experienced a similar decline in the forest products industry. If you came to listen to the people in these rural communities, which we encourage you to do, you would hear that they are facing serious economic challenges: significant jobs losses, decreasing property values, deteriorating infrastructure, lack of access to high-speed broadband, and a growing migration of people leaving the area.

In response to the severity of the challenges facing Maine's forest economy, we urge the Commerce Department to form an Economic Development Assessment Team with active on the ground involvement of multiple, relevant federal agencies including the Economic Development Administration, U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Forest Service, Department of Energy, Small Business Administration, and others. This collaboration should bring together local, state and federal stakeholders, all working together to identify existing assets and new resources, to

perform a gap analysis, to develop strategies that support economic development, and to increase economic diversification. This multi-agency effort in the region should focus on:


- Listening to local leaders, business owners, and economic development stakeholders;
- Conducting an inventory and analysis of industry assets in the impacted region, and an assessment of the impact of the decline in the forest based economy;
- Identifying economic challenges, opportunities, and resources that will strengthen and diversify existing forest and community assets;
- Supporting new enterprise and innovation in forest products, bio-based energy development and entrepreneurs working to create jobs ;
- Sharing federal agency resources and best practices of economic development, applicable to rural communities impacted by decline of industry;
- Strengthening the region's skilled workforce and workforce training efforts; and
- Developing strategies with local stakeholders to support bottom-up economic development that improves local infrastructure, the digital economy, and strengthens the long term economic vitality of these impacted areas.

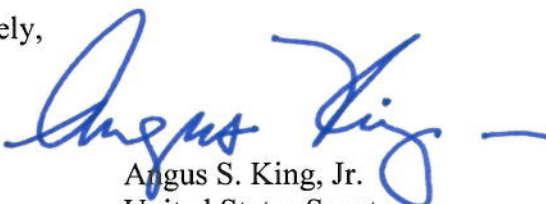
Our hope is that this effort will help set the stage for the affected regions in the state to shape their own economic future by strengthening existing assets and support new innovation and ideas that create jobs and support our rural communities. The lessons learned from this multi-agency targeted effort could be used as a model for rural economies across the country that have been impacted by the decline in industry.

The Department of Commerce has a proven record of leadership in responding to economic and natural disasters, working with federal, state, and local partners to help rebuild and strengthen the economic infrastructure in the affected communities where people have historically relied on local industry for good jobs and economic prosperity. This record includes comprehensive responses in regions negatively impacted by the downturn in the coal industry, the collapse of fisheries, and the Deepwater Horizon spill. Through these efforts, communities have been able to isolate their most important needs, assess and utilize the resources available, and receive advice and assistance from technical experts on best practices.

We appreciate your careful consideration of the productive and positive role the U.S. Department of Commerce could play in helping strengthen Maine's forest economy, building stronger rural economies and helping diversify the economic future of these impacted regions. Please notify Adam Lachman (Senator King) at (202) 224-5344 and Olivia Kurtz (Senator Collins) at (202) 224-2523 if you have any questions or concerns. We look forward to hearing from you about how the Commerce Department can lead a multiagency effort to support and strengthen the future of rural communities in Maine.

Sincerely,

  
Susan M. Collins  
United States Senator

  
Angus S. King, Jr.  
United States Senator