



March 3, 2023

Eric Venturini, Executive Director of the Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine

Testifying in Support of LD 258, Biennial Budget, Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine, Page A-131

Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, and esteemed members of the Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker, and esteemed members of the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, my name is Eric Venturini, and I am the Executive Director of the Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine. I appreciate this opportunity to testify in support of the proposed Biennial Budget as it relates to the Wild Blueberry Commission.

I. HISTORY, PURPOSE, AND GOALS OF THE WILD BLUEBERRY COMMISSION OF MAINE

The Wild Blueberry Commission ("Commission") is a successful public-private partnership with the Legislature that has thrived for almost 80 years. Pre-dating the Commission was the establishment of the Wild Blueberry Tax, which was created in 1945 (the Legislature simultaneously appropriated \$25,000 for the establishment of a blueberry research farm, today known as Blueberry Hill Farm in Jonesboro). Revenue from the tax was originally dedicated to the University of Maine to be used for research and extension. Also established in 1945 was the Blueberry Advisory Committee, formed to provide advisory help to the director of the research farm and the University of Maine's agricultural extension services. The Advisory Committee still exists today, providing essential producer input to research and extension specialists, and helping guide research priorities and efforts. The Commission itself was statutorily established in 1971 as a public instrumentality of the State.

The Commission's Mission is, as stated in statute,

[to] promote the prosperity and welfare of this State and of the wild blueberry industry of this State by fostering research and extension programs, by supporting the development of promotional opportunities and other activities related to the wild blueberry industry.

36 M.R.S.A. § 4301.



The Commission's Mission is further refined by its vision, as adopted by the Commission in December of 2022,

[to work towards] an agricultural business environment that promotes a vibrant wild blueberry community and fosters profitability, innovation, and the social, economic, and environmental sustainability of Maine's wild blueberry farms and food processors across all scales of production.

The Commission works on behalf of Maine's 485¹ wild blueberry farmers and businesses who grow wild blueberries on approximately 42,000² acres across the state and on Passamaquoddy tribal land by supporting, (1) research and extension, (2) promotion, and (3) other activities such as advancing state and federal agricultural policy.

Research & Extension (Development)

University of Maine research and extension programs, and the Maine Agriculture and Forest Experiment Station, are critical to addressing new threats to Maine's wild blueberry growers while also providing the scientific basis for enhancing Maine's crop and are worthy of investment. The ongoing partnership between the University of Maine and the wild blueberry industry has driven a 500% increase in production over the last 50 years and is foundational to the cutting-edge Integrated Pest Management practices that are employed throughout the industry today. The University of Maine has helped to transform our industry into the economic powerhouse it is today. It drives important workforce development and helps to prepare our next generation of leaders. Their ongoing partnership is critical as we seek to overcome new challenges to create a vibrant, innovative, and sustainable future for our industry.

Promotion

For 40 years, Maine's wild blueberry growers and processors have made repeated and significant investments in promotion to increase consumer demand and improve the market condition for farmers. The Wild Blueberry Association of North America – US is an organization that promotes Maine wild blueberries, and the Commission is closely affiliated with this promotion organization to this day.

The growers and processors have worked with the Legislature multiple times to increase the tax paid by growers and processors to invest more in promotion and other priorities. In addition, wild blueberry tax revenues also supports groundbreaking health research that further drives consumer and trade interest in wild blueberries.

Today, the industry is confronting head-on a host of challenges. Due to inconsistent supply and market forces, the wild blueberry market and, therefore, farm gate income in the industry is volatile. While prices climbed steadily for 5 years following the record lows you may remember reading about in 2017, without ongoing and increasingly strategic investment in this industry and in promotion to drive demand, the market condition will deteriorate, with notable knock-on effects on hundreds of multi-generational Maine family-owned wild blueberry farms.

¹ National Agricultural Statistics Service. 2017. Berries: 2017.

https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_2_County_Level/Maine/st23_2_003_3_0033.pdf

² Based on 2021 harvested acreage (appx. half of total acreage in any given year).

<https://extension.umaine.edu/blueberries/factsheets/statistics-2/crop-production-statistics-2019/>

Other Activities

The Commission fosters agricultural literacy with Maine Agriculture in the Classroom, conducts intensive public education and outreach via Maine fairs and events, builds demand for Maine wild blueberries as part of the USDA School Lunch program, interfaces with state and federal agencies and representatives, and more. For a more comprehensive account of our activities and programs refer to the 2021 Annual Report provided with this testimony.

Economic Impact

Wild blueberries directly support the Maine economy, with \$80.3 million dollars in direct farm gate receipts to growers in 2021. Through direct and indirect contributions, our economic impact on the State of Maine economy is estimated at \$250 million annually. Maine's poorest county, Washington County³, is also the heart of Maine's wild blueberry production and contains approximately 75% of Maine's 42,000 acres of wild blueberry land. Thus, the wild blueberry industry has an outsized impact on the economy of Washington County, where that economic activity is most sorely needed.

II. FUNDING

The Current and Budgeted funding for the Commission can be found in the Biennial Budget Part A, page A-131.

The Commission's funding is Special Revenue, not General Fund. The Wild Blueberry Tax consists of 1 ½ ¢ per pound paid by growers and processors (see 5 M.R.S.A. § 4303).

Following the passage of LD 585 last year (2022), blueberries grown on tribal land are no longer subject to the tax that funds the Commission's work. Therefore, budgeted amounts for 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 are reduced by an estimated \$95,000 from the previously budgeted annual tax revenue of \$1,875,000.

Department Summary – All Funds	Actual 2021-22	Current 2022-23	Budgeted 2023-24	Budgeted 2024-25
	\$1,875,000	\$1,875,000	\$1,780,000	\$1,780,000

III. BUDGET PRIORITIES

The Commission must maintain its current focus on research and development, promotion, and public policy to continue to support Maine's wild blueberry growers and processors who are facing pressures that stem from unstable markets, rising input costs, lack of a seasonal workforce, and increasing competition. As informed by our industry through a series of grower listening sessions, our Commission has identified the following priorities that will shape our work in 2023:

- Help address labor and workforce housing challenges.

³ 19.4% of those residing in Washington County are below the poverty level, the highest rate of poverty in any Maine county. *Poverty in Maine*. Dec. 2011. Volume 3, Issue 1. Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center, the University of Maine and the Maine Community Action Association. Data from 2010 US Census.

- Coordinate the development of practical best management practices to support food safety goals.
- Develop strategic initiative(s) to reverse the trend of decreasing wild blueberry farm numbers.
- Advocate for state and federal policies, opportunities, and regulations that support our industry.
- Support and foster research, innovation, and opportunities that aid climate change adaptation, increase resiliency to climate change, and reduce supply inconsistencies.
- Carry out and support promotion and health research programs to generate demand across scales and business models.
- Catalyze research and development to increase efficiencies and address critical business and infrastructure challenges.
- Develop and execute strategies to remove barriers to growth and innovation.

And over the next two years:

- Improve the level and consistency of profitability across scales of production.
- Increase the consistency of wild blueberry supply.
- Grow the number of Maine wild blueberry farms and businesses.
- Build capacity for wild blueberry research and Extension at the University of Maine.
- Support strategic wild blueberry promotion, health research, and market development to grow demand and loyalty.

I urge you to support the Biennial Budget as it relates to the Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine. Thank you for your time. I'd be happy to answer any questions that you may have.