



March 3, 2023

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

Testifying in Support of LD 258, Biennial Budget

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 following entities which are vital to the success and future of Maine's iconic wild blueberry industry.

Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry: The Bureau of Agriculture, Section A, Page A-61 through A-66

Over the last several years, Maine's Bureau of Agriculture, under the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, has created and carried out a robust process of, soliciting and compiling agricultural stakeholder input, then developing programs and initiatives that offer our farm and food producers opportunities to solve their most pressing challenges. We commend them on their efforts, their willingness to collaborate, and do not doubt that the funding allocated to them in this budget will be used to benefit Maine's hard-working farmers and food producers.

The Agricultural Infrastructure Investment Program, or AIIP, is just one example of the many ways in which the Department has delivered to Maine's farmers, where they most need it. The AIIP is a competitive grant program that awarded 64 agricultural businesses a total of almost \$20 million dollars in 2022. Eight wild blueberry farms and food businesses were awarded a total of almost \$2.5 million in funding. This funding is transformational to these businesses and their future as self-sustaining wild blueberry businesses. In total, 850 producers requested over \$177 million in funding through this program, demonstrating the tremendous need for continued and ongoing capital and infrastructure investment in Maine farm and food production.



University of Maine, Section A, Page A-643 through A-649

University of Maine research and Extension programs, and the Maine Agriculture and Forest Experiment Station, are critical to addressing the challenges facing Maine's farmers today and are a catalyst to making the most of the opportunity that is Maine agriculture tomorrow. In fact, the scientific expertise and capacity at the University of Maine has helped to grow the Maine wild blueberry industry by 500% over the last 50 years.

We rely on a team of dedicated University researchers who discover the most effective and sustainable Integrated Pest Management strategies to combat new pests and diseases, and to test and deliver innovative new ideas to increase our resilience to climate change. We cooperate with the University's engineers to create technological innovations that can improve profitability across scales of production. Producers brainstorm and develop new uses for wild blueberries and commercialize those ideas with the help of the University's Food Lab. Producers can accelerate the commercialization of those novel products through the University's accelerator programs. In short, an investment in the University of Maine as the State's Land Grant University, is also an investment in Maine agriculture.

Farmers' Drought Relief Fund, Part A, Page A-76

In two of the last three years (2020 and 2022) Maine wild blueberry farmers have suffered significantly from the effects of drought. We lost approximately 45% of the Maine wild blueberry crop in 2020. In 2022, Midcoast producers were hit hardest by drought, and some lost 80 or even 100% of their crop. Recent research shows that wild blueberry fields are warming more quickly than the rest of the state.¹ In short, our industry is experiencing the challenges of climate change in real time and is seeking ways to adapt.

The most significant and immediate climate change-related concern in our industry is drought and its influence on the stability of production. In our perennial system, the clearest solution to drought is the capacity to irrigate. With a few notable exceptions, Maine wild blueberry producers do not currently have the capacity to irrigate their fields. The funding allocated to the Farmers' Drought Relief Program in this Biennial Budget funds a program created by LD 1998, a bill that passed without funding in the 130th Legislative Session. This 2-million-dollar allocation and \$300,000 annually thereafter is a significant step towards helping producers develop sustainable, environmentally sound, and affordable sources for irrigation water, and is a significant step towards increasing Maine farmers' resilience to climate change. I thank Governor Mills for her proactive approach and offer the wild blueberry industry's firm support of this funding.

Thank you for allotting me this time. I urge you to support the Biennial Budget as it relates to the University of Maine, the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, and the Farmer's Drought Relief Program. I'd be happy to answer any questions that you may have.

¹ Tasnim, R., F. Drummond, and Y.-J. Zhang. 2021. Climate Change Patterns of Wild Blueberry Fields in Downeast, Maine over the Past 40 Years. Water, 13(5): [10.3390/w13050594](https://doi.org/10.3390/w13050594).

