



March 4, 2024

Senator Rotundo
Representative Sachs
Senator Ingwerson
Representative Pluecker

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

Testifying in Support of LD 2214, Supplemental Budget

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

I appreciate this opportunity to testify in support of the proposed Biennial Budget as it relates to the Farmer's Drought Relief Grant Program on page A - 12, section Z364. This section allocates \$1 million to the Farmer's Drought Relief Grant Program.

This funding is necessary and is critical for supporting a thriving agricultural future for Maine:

1. Funding will support sustainable water source development and irrigation infrastructure, decreasing risk to Maine farms from future droughts and sustaining their important place in Maine's economy.
2. The lack of irrigation infrastructure in wild blueberry causes dramatic swings in supply, which leads to a volatile market and an unstable wild blueberry economy; This funding will help to moderate wild blueberry supply.
3. While 68.3% of Maine farmers intend to invest in irrigation, more than 50% do not have the financial resources for those investments.

In two of the last 4 years (2020 and 2022) Maine wild blueberry farmers have suffered from the effects of drought. We lost approximately 45% of the Maine wild blueberry crop in 2020. In 2022, mid coast 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.ⁱ Our industry is experiencing the challenges of climate change in real time and is seeking ways to adapt.

One of the biggest risks in our industry is drought. Drought causes interannual fluctuations in supply, which disrupts the market and reduces economic viability. 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.

On behalf of the wild blueberry industry, I am asking you for full support of the Farmer's Drought Relief



Grant Fund. This funding will help the wild blueberry industry, and other Maine agricultural sectors, to build resiliency to increasingly likely drought scenarios. The development of sustainable water sources and irrigation represents critical adaptations that most producers cannot afford on their own.

Thank you for your time and consideration, and Governor Mills for seeking funding in her Supplemental Budget for this program. I would be happy to respond to any questions that you may have.

Additional Information, The 2020 Maine Drought and Agriculture Report

In 2021, The University of Maine published *The 2020 Maine Drought and Agriculture Report*.ⁱⁱ This report describes farmer surveys (n=253) and documents the impact of the 2020 drought, using the five years prior to 2020 as baseline. The report includes respondents from across agricultural sectors and establishes that:

- Over 50% of Maine farms did not have sufficient water in 2020.
- All producer groups reported higher than normal losses in 2020.
- 68.3% of respondents indicated that they intend to invest in irrigation, but **more than half stated that they do not have the financial resources needed for those investments.**

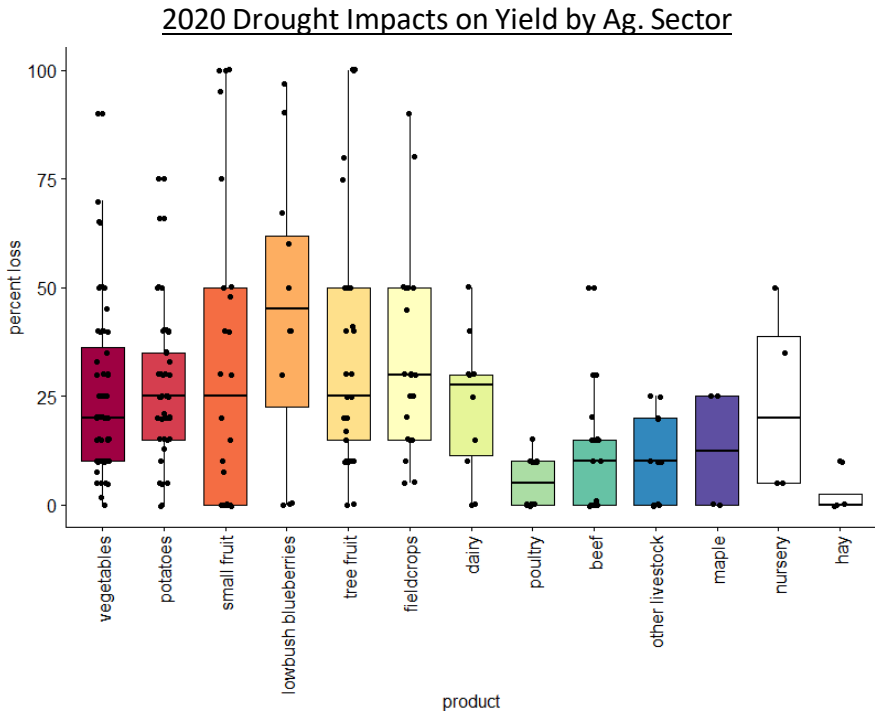


Figure from Schattman et al., 2021, 2020 Maine Drought and Agriculture Report. University of Maine.

About the Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine

The Wild Blueberry Commission (the “Commission”), made up of wild blueberry growers and processors, works on behalf of Maine’s 485ⁱⁱⁱ wild blueberry farmers and businesses who grow our iconic wild blueberries on 39,400^{iv} acres across the state and on Passamaquoddy tribal land. In 2023, Maine produced 74 million pounds of wild blueberries representing nearly 100% of all **wild blueberries** grown in the United States. Our industry contributes an estimated \$361 million dollars^v in sales to the state’s economy



annually, with the lion's share of that economic impact supporting Maine's most impoverished county, Washington County.

ⁱ 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).

ⁱⁱ Schattman, R. E., Goossen, C., and Calderwood, L. 2021. The 2020 Maine Drought and Agriculture Report. University of Maine, Orono. 1-30. DOI: [10.6084/m9.figshare.14474055](https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.14474055)

ⁱⁱⁱ USDA 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_0033_0033.pdf

^{iv} USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service. 2023. News Release, Maine wild blueberry production down 26% from 2021.

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

^v Camoine Associates. Unpublished Data. Economic and Fiscal Impacts of the Maine Wild Blueberry Industry. Wild Blueberry Association of North America – US, October 2023.

