



Testimony of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association

in support of

LD 2256 - An Act to Provide Emergency One-time Relief from the Wild Blueberry Tax for Growers in Maine

March 13, 2024

Good afternoon Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker and members of the Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee. My name is Heather Spalding and I am deputy director of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA). I am speaking today in support of *LD 2256 - An Act to Provide Emergency One-time Relief from the Wild Blueberry Tax for Growers in Maine*.

MOFGA is working to build a food system that is healthy and fair for all of us. Through education, training and advocacy, we are helping farmers thrive, making more local, organic food available and building sustainable communities. MOFGA certifies 526 organic farms and processing operations representing more than \$120 million in sales and we are working hard to create opportunities for Maine's next generation of farmers. Each of these farmers is a Maine businessperson for whom economic health and environmental health are interdependent. While MOFGA envisions a future of healthy ecosystems, communities, people and economies sustained by the practices of organic agriculture, we attribute our success to collaboration and outreach to growers across the management spectrum.

The 2022 agricultural census data is sobering, indicating continued farm decline in the U.S. and a 7.4% decline in the number of farms in Maine. Statistics relating to the blueberry sector provide a rare bright spot indicating that the number of low bush blueberry farms increased by 5% since 2017, with a 20% increase in acreage. MOFGA Certification Services records show that the number of certified organic blueberry producers has more than doubled since 2012 – we now certify 55 organic blueberry operations. All of that would be encouraging if not for the very real and discouraging dynamics reported by Maine's Wild Blueberry Commission. The data is already a couple of years old and it doesn't provide a clear picture of the economics. In 2023, a declining market caused wild blueberry farmers to spend more to grow and harvest their crop than they earned from farming wild blueberries; the average price paid to wild blueberry growers, adjusted for inflation, declined by 45% over the past 20 years; and the price of supplies critically necessary for farming has increased as much as 78% in the last 3 years. The dramatically changing weather patterns that Maine farmers face are hitting particularly hard on the blueberry sector.

We feel that the tax relief proposed in LD 2256 for sellers of low bush blueberries would be very helpful to the long-term health and stability of the broader blueberry community. Providing a one-year tax exemption for sellers of blueberries would be meaningful to the growers and would not diminish the important income for the Wild Blueberry Commission that the processors and shippers would continue to pay. Thank you for your consideration of this legislation. MOFGA urges the Committee to vote unanimously in support of LD 2256.



The Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA) started in 1971 and is the oldest and largest state organic organization in the country. We're a broad-based community that educates about and advocates for organic agriculture, illuminating its interdependence with a healthy environment, local food production, and thriving communities. We have 15,000 members, we certify more than 500 organic farms and processing facilities representing \$120 million in sales, and we are working hard to provide training and create opportunities for Maine's next generation of farmers. Each of these farmers is a Maine businessperson for whom economic health and environmental health are interdependent. While MOFGA envisions a future of healthy ecosystems, communities, people and economies sustained by the practices of organic agriculture, we attribute our success to collaboration and outreach to growers across the management spectrum.