



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

Neither For Nor Against, LD 1065, An Act Regarding the Reduction and Recycling of Food Waste

Senator Tepler, Representative Doudera, and esteemed members of the Committee on the Environment and Natural Resources, my name is Eric Venturini and I am the Executive Director of the Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine.

The Wild Blueberry Commission (WBCM) works on behalf of Maine's 512¹ farms who grow wild blueberries on 47,600¹ acres across the State. In 2024, Maine produced approximately 85 million pounds of wild blueberries representing nearly 100% of all *wild* blueberries and approximately 10% of all *blueberries* grown in the US. Our industry contributes \$361 million dollars to the state's economy annually² and is the only state with significant commercial production of wild blueberries.

I thank Senator Brenner and co-sponsors for carrying forward in this version the work that had been done to improve this bill during the last session. Importantly, we support the definition of "food waste," under section 3-D, which does not include inedible material such as plant stems, stalks, and roots.

In our industry, agricultural food processing residuals are byproducts of food processing lines that includes leaves, twigs, stems, and crushed berries. This material is mixed together and is run over the processing line multiple times to extract all usable product. Most companies apply these materials back to fields to build soil health and fertility. Other companies sometimes sell or provide it to composting operations. I have heard no examples of the material being wasted, or disposed of in a landfill. Such disposal would impose additional costs and would be a poor business practice.

Our most significant concern with LD 1065 comes down to reporting requirements. Should we burden wild blueberry agricultural operations with weighing, recording, and reporting to the state their agricultural residuals which are already put to their best use as matter of good business? Our farmers are struggling and we are losing operations. Part of the reason for producer frustrations are the oversaturation of regulations and reporting. Is this a problem that we really need the legislature to solve when producers are already, as a matter of good business, putting these materials to their best use?

I'd like to point out that unlike last year's LD 1009, LD 1065 does not include an appropriation. LD 1009 appropriated \$554,349 to fund 5 positions to support the delivery of this new program. This bill does not include funding for necessary positions. Should the legislature pass this without the funding necessary?

¹ USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service. 2022. Berries: 2022. United States Census of Agriculture.

² Camoine Associates. Unpublished Data. Economic and Fiscal Impacts of the Maine Wild Blueberry Industry. Wild Blueberry Association of North America – US, October 2023.



To address these concerns for wild blueberry producers, I ask the committee to consider the following:

1. Exempt agricultural operations from tracking and reporting agricultural food processing residuals.

Most if not all wild blueberry processors, small and large, already put food processing residuals to use. These materials are run on the processing line multiple times to claim and use any edible portions, what is left behind is used either as on-farm or in-field compost, or sold to commercial composters. To my knowledge, no wild blueberry agricultural operations are sending food processing residuals to municipal disposal sites. Therefore, regulating these materials produced by agricultural operations will not help the state meet its State waste disposal reduction goals as described on the bottom of the second page of the bill under 1-B. State waste disposal reduction goal.

2. The most significant loss of wild blueberries is at harvest, not during processing.

We estimate that 10-32% of the crop in any given year is left in the field due to the basic mechanical challenges of efficiently and effectively removing berries from the plants without dropping or crushing them. In addition, if producers project poor market conditions, they may decide that it will cost more to harvest than they would receive for their berries. In these markets, farmers would lose money by harvesting their crop. To correct these challenges and reduce this source of waste, farmers need capital and industry wide innovation, not additional regulation that will only increase their costs.

3. Harvesting efficiency challenges and reduction of wild blueberry field loss are already being addressed, not through regulation but through innovation.

The Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine developed and is now providing guidance and support to a \$1M project with the aid of a \$500,000 grant from the Maine Technology Institute, and matches from key partners like the University of Maine, to improve harvesting efficiency and reduce the proportion of wild blueberries left in the field.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony. I'd be happy to answer any questions that you may have.

