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Good afternoon honorable members of the taxation committee, attending representatives and staff.

My name is Seth Kroeck and I am a certified organic produce grower in Brunswick. For the past 10 years I have farmed more than 70 acres of wild blueberries in Cumberland County.

As stated in the language of this bill, the wild blueberry industry in Maine is in trouble. We are losing growers, infrastructure and most importantly to this morning's conversation, market share. During my 10 years of growing, the organic commodity price has not increased and for my friends who are conventional growers this price has been dropping. Maine is the only state in the union with commercial production of wild blueberries. The berries we grow have greater health benefits and unbelievable flavor compared to the high bush fruit that dominates the market. We grow a unique, high quality crop. Our problem is that we struggle to convince the national market that there is difference, importance and ultimately a greater value in this product.

While on the surface it might make sense to provide relief to financially strapped growers from the tax on their harvest, I propose that the effect will actually be the opposite. The tax funds the work of the Maine wild blueberry commission, the only organization entrusted with the promotion of this crop. To suspend the tax would jeopardize the continued existence of the commission itself and with it any hope of turning the current market trend around. There is disfunction in the relationship between growers and processors, small and large producers as well as between the blueberry commission and the board of wild blueberry association of North America. These issues need to be resolved but in the meantime we need to fund the promotion efforts of the commission.

When polled recently by the commission, wild blueberry growers voted overwhelmingly in favor of paying the tax and these same growers have said time and again that the tax is not a significant burden on their bottom line. The struggle growers face is with the commodity price, reflective of an uninformed and unresponsive market.

Please consider the long term goals of this industry and not short term savings when you debate this bill going forward. I urge you to vote against this bill.

Thank you.