



Senator Talbot Ross

Representative Pluecker

Members of the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

RE: Support of LD 1605 – An Act To Support Farmers And Food Banks Affected By Federal Funding Cuts To Their Existing Contracts

My name is Eric Venturini and I'm the Executive Director of the Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine testifying in support of this bill.

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.

Federal funding underpins essential wild blueberry activities that span conservation, promotion and marketing, sales contracts, and more. In recent months, programs in Maine and nationwide have been paused, frozen, or cancelled. Some of these actions impact farmers directly. In the face of uncertainty, this bill – possibly as amended may be recommended by the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry and the sponsor Senator Brenner—could ensure that producers holding federal contracts have viable options.

Maine's wild blueberry producers rely upon the programs of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). In 2024 the NRCS in Maine utilized an allocation of approximately \$20 million to provide cost-share to Maine farmers. Wild blueberry producers frequently participate in mulching for drought resistance, rock-removal to reduce carbon emissions while improving the economy of management, and several other practices. In one county alone there are 14 applications for whole field mulching that if funded, would apply to ~160 acres and be worth ~ \$1.5 million in farmer contracts. These applications were paused when funding for the NRCS's climate smart commodities program was cancelled. Many producers whose contracts are approved are receiving mixed signals on the status of funding and are uncertain as to whether they should continue to expense their time and money to execute those contracts.

I heard from three wild blueberry producers in the past three weeks impacted by the loss of the Local Food Procurement Program. This program provides funding to organizations to support purchasing local food for food banks. Two farmers each lost contracts of around \$17,000 that represented 10-20% of their gross income. Another recently invested in a significant expansion to deliver into a new procurement market, and it appears that the market is now uncertain.

We support efforts by the legislature to provide producers with options and bridge loans that may allow them to better navigate some of the uncertainty around federal farmer contracts. On behalf of Maine's wild blueberry industry, I ask you to give this bill your support.

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.