



Senator Talbot Ross

Representative Pluecker

Members of the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

RE: Support for LD 1450 – An Act Regarding the Voluntary Municipal Farm Support Program

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.

Today, the industry is confronting head-on a host of challenges. The global cultivated blueberry industry, of a size with the Maine wild industry 20 years ago, now annually produces 45 times Maine's production. The producer price index, a measure of the cost of doing business, hit records levels in '21, '22, and '23. Producers are still struggling with dramatically higher costs even as pressure from cheaper Canadian wild blueberry imports, and cheaper cultivated blueberries from across the globe, depress our market. Grower profits have been below break-even for most growers for two years.

There are many proposals before the legislature that would help to improve the profitability of Maine farms – an outcome that is desperately needed. This bill will not resolve all challenges facing Maine farmers, but it will make a beneficial existing program easier to use. The voluntary municipal farm support program is currently underutilized. It is voluntary both on the part of the farmer and of municipal governing boards. This bill intends to increase use of the program by moving it into tax law, decreasing the amount of time that farmland would need to be protected under the program (20 years to 10 years), and increasing flexibility of the municipal enrollment process.

The Maine Farmland Trust has conducted an analysis of the program and its needed improvements. This bill is an attempt to address those shortcomings, improve the program, and increase its use. This program could reduce the tax burden on farmers in participating towns.

On behalf of the Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine, I urge you to vote Ought to Pass on LD 1450.

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.