



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

Testifying in Support

LD 258, An Act Making Unified Appropriates and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2023, June 30, 2024, and June 30, 2025

Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, and esteemed members of the Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs, Senator Rafferty, and Representative Brennan, and esteemed the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Eric Venturini, and I am the Executive Director of the Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine. I appreciate this opportunity to testify in support of the proposed Biennial Budget as it relates to the University of Maine.

On behalf of the Wild Blueberry Commission, I strive to represent the voices of Maine's 485¹ wild blueberry farmers and businesses who grow wild blueberries on approximately 42,000² acres across the state and on Passamaquoddy tribal land. Our industry produces in some years over 100 million pounds of healthy wild blueberries and contributes an estimated \$250 million dollars to the State's economy annually.

Through ongoing partnership and collaboration with the University of Maine, our industry has increased the production of this healthy berry 500% over the last 50 years. Our excellent partners at the University of Maine have helped to transform Maine's iconic wild blueberry industry into the economic powerhouse it is today, and their ongoing partnership is critical as we seek to overcome new challenges to create a vibrant and sustainable future for our industry.

Challenges to our industry's future like those posed by climate change. In 2 of the past 3 years most of our farmers have faced devastating losses due to climate change-induced drought.³ Wild blueberry

¹ National Agricultural Statistics Service. 2017. Berries: 2017.

https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_2_County_Level/Maine/st23_2_0033_0033.pdf

² Based on 2021 harvested acreage (appx. half of total acreage in any given year).

<https://extension.umaine.edu/blueberries/factsheets/statistics-2/crop-production-statistics-2019/>

³ Maine's wild blueberry industry experienced a 45% crop loss in 2020. In 2022 the mid-coast was hit especially hard by drought conditions and many growers lost 50, 80, or even 100% of their crop.



researchers at the University of Maine leverage industry partnerships, industry tax-funded grants, and the Maine Economic Improvement Fund (MEIF) to secure an estimated \$300,000⁴ additional external dollars in 2022 and as much as \$2.5M in 2023 to understand climate-change impacts to wild blueberries and find solutions. And they are finding solutions.

Challenges to our future like low profitability. Did you know that wild blueberry harvesters can leave as much as 20 or 25% of the crop on the ground? In close partnership with the University, we leveraged industry tax dollars and University match from sources that include the MEIF and in December secured a \$500,000 grant from the Maine Technology Institute to reduce harvest shrink. This grant kicks off a \$1M project led by University of Maine engineers and Extension faculty—a project that could drastically increase the profitability of Maine wild blueberry farmers.

Maine's wild blueberry farmers and businesses rely on the University of Maine for research and development, for solutions. In an era where our major competition measures their output by the billions of pounds, when new pests are always on the horizon, when a reliable and affordable seasonal workforce is harder and harder to come by, farmers lean heavily on the good faculty and staff at the University of Maine for solutions. To continue to provide those solutions and to maintain and to grow the competitiveness of critical industries like the wild blueberry industry, our agricultural researchers and Extension faculty and staff need your continued support. An investment in University of Maine research is an investment in the future of wild blueberry farming in Maine.

I urge you to support the Biennial Budget as it relates to the University of Maine. Thank you for your time. I'd be happy to answer any questions that you may have.

⁴ Estimated based on information provided by University of Maine researchers to the wild blueberry Advisory Committee in November 2022.

