



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

Testifying Neither For Nor Against

LD 901, Resolve, to Establish a Pilot Project to Support Farm Apprenticeships in Maine

Senator Henry Ingwersen, Representative Bill Pluecker, and esteemed members of the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, my name is Eric Venturini and I am the Executive Director of the Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine.

I recognize the good efforts of Representative Osher in working to craft this legislation and trying to find a solution to one of Maine agriculture's biggest challenges. The average age of Maine's wild blueberry producers is 64.5. By some estimates we lost approximately 200 Maine wild blueberry farms from 1997 to 2017. In grower listening sessions, and in conversations with producers, the topic of recruitment of new young farmers into the industry is often near the top of the list. Clearly this bill is targeting real industry challenges.

I have several questions about this bill:

1. How will this program increase interest in farming? An apprenticeship program will not be successful if there is not a healthy pool of apprentices willing to participate.
2. Will this program be attractive to farmers? The program as proposed includes a high expectation for farmers to fill out and submit paperwork as a condition of using it. To maximize farmer interest in participation, I suggest that minimizing paperwork and reporting requirements.
3. Several time-tested agricultural apprenticeship programs already exist in Maine, most notably, the Maine Organic Farmer and Gardener Associations' apprenticeship and journey person program. Does the proposed program seek to build upon these models of success?

I suggest that to create a successful farm apprenticeship program in Maine would take considerably more time and stakeholder input. This bill could be the vehicle if, instead of creating a program at this stage, it provides for study of the issue by considering existing models and soliciting robust stakeholder input to inform the development of a successful Maine farm apprenticeship program.

