



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

Testifying Ought To Pass, LD 1050, Resolve, Directing the Department of Labor to Request a Federal Waiver to Allow Presumptive Work Eligibility for Asylum Seekers

Senator Michael Tipping, Representative Amy Roeder, and members of the Committee on the Labor and Housing, my name is Eric Venturini and I am the Executive Director of the Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine. In this role, I strive to represent the diverse voices of Maine's 485 wild blueberry producers. I am testifying before you today in support of this legislation because there are not willing workers in Maine today to fill wild blueberry producers' workforce needs.

Labor challenges have been on the top of the Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine's priority list since 2022, and in a series of three grower listening sessions that we hosted across the State last year, producers consistently ranked "Addressing Labor Challenges," as their top priority.

Most producers pay \$15 to \$20/hour for seasonal work, well above the State minimum. Despite this, they cannot attract and maintain a reliable workforce. Farms and food producers hire workers who do not show up during critical windows. Good agricultural land is going unharvested. Acreage designated for agriculture in Maine is shrinking. The success of Maine's agricultural industries is stymied by the lack of a reliable workforce.

We applaud recent State efforts¹ to improve infrastructure and increase the resiliency of Maine's food supply, but without an accessible workforce to maintain that infrastructure, operate machinery, harvest crops, and clean, process, and pack wild blueberries, these efforts will be wasted.

Yet, as we speak, there are over a thousand asylum seekers in hotels in Portland, Maine, who are willing to work to support themselves and their families—yet they are not allowed to. Many estimate that the number of entrants could increase significantly in the coming years.

If the State is able to request a Federal waiver that allows presumptive work eligibility for asylum seekers, these individuals can support themselves and their families as soon as they arrive, reduce the tax burden, and by increasing the number of people in Maine looking for work, help Maine agricultural to remedy its workforce crisis.

Thank you for your time. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.

¹ The Agricultural Infrastructure Investment Program (AIIP), a competitive grant program run by the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry in 2022, injected almost \$20 million dollars in Maine farms for basic infrastructure improvements.

