



April 26th, 2023

Senator Rotundo
Representative Sachs
Esteemed Members of the Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs

RE: Testifying in Support, LD 460, An Act to Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue to Improve Student Success and Workforce Readiness Within the University of Maine System

My name is Eric Venturini, and I am the Executive Director of the Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine. The Wild Blueberry Commission works on behalf of 485¹ wild blueberry farmers and businesses who grow wild blueberries on approximately 42,000² acres across the state and Passamaquoddy lands. Maine's growers often produce crops exceeding 100 million pounds and supply markets from Maine to California and across the globe.

I appreciate this opportunity to testify in support of the proposed bond issue for the University of Maine. University of Maine research and Extension programs, and the Maine Agriculture and Forest Experiment Station are critical to addressing the challenges facing Maine's farmers today and are a catalyst to making the most of the opportunity that is Maine agriculture tomorrow. In fact, the scientific expertise and capacity at the University of Maine has helped to grow Maine's wild blueberry production by 500% over the last 50 years and remains on the front lines in helping our industry deal with threats like climate change.

The University needs your support. The deferred maintenance of University of Maine facilities impacts its ability to hire the best and brightest minds, retain students, and ultimately to serve the people of this state in pursuit of its land grant mission. The Association of Public Land Grant Universities estimates that more than 69% of land grant research and education facilities are at the end of their life cycle. The University of Maine System has \$1.6 billion in deferred maintenance and immediate infrastructure needs; \$900 million of that is on the flagship campus in Orono.

The University of Maine system is creative and competitive in their pursuit of external funding for agricultural research and related facilities. Last year they were awarded \$3 million through a Congressionally Directed Spending request for Blueberry Hill Farm in Jonesboro, thanks to the support of Senators Collins and King. The industry itself, both through the Wild Blueberry Commission and through business partners within the industry is also helping to shoulder these needs. In fact, Wyman's,

¹ USDA - National Agricultural Statistics Service. 2017. US Census of Agriculture.

² USDA - National Agricultural Statistics Service. 2022. *Maine Wild Blueberry Production up Significantly from 2020*. Estimate provided is based upon 2021 harvested acreage (appx. half of total acreage in any given year due to biennial harvests).



through a major gift, has partnered with the University to create Wyman's Wild Blueberry Research and Innovation Center in Old Town. Clearly our industry values and is committed to continuing to invest in Maine's land grant university. However, UMaine is a public asset, a public good, a key component of Maine's business community, and is deserving and in need of public investment. An investment in the University of Maine is an investment in the people of Maine, in Maine agriculture, and in Maine's business community.

I urge you to support the University of Maine and in so doing support this State, its people, and its economies. Please vote LD 460 Ought To Pass. Thank you for allotting me this time.

Sincerely,



Eric Venturini
Executive Director
Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine
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