



April 26th, 2023

Senator Ingwersen
Representative Pluecker
Members of the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry

RE: Testifying in Support, LD 1670, An Act to Strengthen Maine's Agriculture, Food and Forest Economy by Funding the Maine Agriculture, Food and Forest Products Investment Fund and Amending Related Provisions of Law

My name is Eric Venturini and I am the Executive Director of the Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine. This bill, and the annual funding that it allocates, will be a game changer for Maine agriculture and for Maine's heritage wild blueberry industry and we wholeheartedly support it. Thank you Speaker Talbot Ross and cosponsors, many of whom are on this Committee, for putting this bill forward.

The bill before you is the result of several years of effort on the part of the legislature, the Department of Agriculture Conservation and Forestry, the Department of Economic and Community Development, and the Governor's office. The fund was first established, unfunded, in 2021. Subsequently, the DACF in coordination with the DECD surveyed "agricultural, food, and forest product industries to inform development and structuring of disbursements."¹ That survey, I believe, also helped to structure last year's Agricultural Infrastructure Investment Program (AIIP). AIIP allocated \$20 million in federal funds through a competitive grant process to enhance agriculture and food processing infrastructure in Maine.

I have asked several wild blueberry producers and value-added users of wild blueberries, who were fortunate enough to secure AIIP funding last year, to submit testimony in support of this bill today. From them, you will hear how instrumental this capital injection is and will be in helping them to build a more vibrant and viable future for their businesses and their downstream partners. They will tell you how essential it is to—essentially make AIIP permanent—now in the form of the Agriculture, Food, and Forest Products Investment Fund so that others can access the same opportunity.

The State received more than 850 applications from farmers and food producers in response to the request for proposals to the Agriculture Infrastructure Investment Program. This equates to a total request of more than \$180 million—about nine times the program's allocation.² This dramatic

¹ Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry. 2021. Maine Agriculture, Food and Forest Products Investment Fund Assessment, Interim Report. December 1, 2021. <https://legislature.maine.gov/doc/7732>

² Office of Governor Janet T. Mills. Governor Mills Announces Nearly \$20 Million in Maine Jobs and Recovery Plan Grants to Support Maine Farmers and Food Processors. Press Release. August 19, 2022. <https://www.maine.gov/governor/mills/news/governor-mills-announces-nearly-20-million-maine-jobs-recovery-plan-grants-support-maine>



oversubscription demonstrates both the tremendous need for capital infrastructure investment in this sector, and the phenomenal success that the department and partners had in making the application process accessible.

I would like to point out several structural considerations that I hope this Committee, the Departments, the Maine Agriculture, Food System and Forest Products Infrastructure Investment Advisory Board, and others involved in the development of this fund and its execution will consider as the program develops.

Limited Eligibility: AIP was so successful, in part, because it was only open to farms and food producers. This fund should remain true to that purpose and should not be available to organizations, non-profits, associations, and other entities, e.g., the Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine should not be eligible for this funding.

Ease of Applying: Current grant and loan programs available to farmers would be more utilized if the application process was simpler. USDA grants, e.g., Value-Added Producer Grants, due to an extremely complicated and burdensome application process, limit applicants to those that can hire a professional grant writer, or to business owners that have their own grant-writing experience. That does not make for an equitable and accessible program. I suggest that the application process for these grants is upon the AIP—simple and straightforward.

Eligible Expenses: As demonstrated by the oversubscription to AIP, farmers and food producers are in dire need of capital investment in agriculture and food processing infrastructure. These basic infrastructure expenses should be eligible under this fund. Additionally, one of the most significant issues facing agriculture in Maine today is access to a reliable labor pool. One of our biggest barriers to producers being able to hire a workforce is their inability to comfortably house workers. If farm worker housing were an eligible expense under this fund, this funding would very quickly help to resolve our sector's workforce challenges.

Again, thank you Speaker Talbot Ross and cosponsors for putting this bill forward. We will do all that we can to help it succeed. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have now or in the work session.

Sincerely,



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