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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,
CONSERVATION AND FORESTRY

IN SUPPORT OF LD 2256

*An Act to Provide Emergency One-time Relief from the Wild
Blueberry Tax for Growers in Maine*

March 13, 2024

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, I am Craig Lapine, Director of the Bureau of Agriculture, Food and Rural Resource of the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF). I am here today to speak in favor of LD 2212, *An Act to Provide Emergency One-time Relief from the Wild Blueberry Tax for Growers in Maine*.

Maine's iconic wild blueberry industry is facing significant challenges. Producers are contending with low prices, market competition from cultivated blueberries grown worldwide, high input costs, labor constraints, and climate change impacts. Together, these pressures are straining wild blueberry producers to the point that some are exiting the industry altogether. This is a blow to our wild blueberry industry, heritage, and our rural communities Downeast and beyond.

In 1945, Maine wild blueberry growers identified the need to invest in scientific research to grow their industry through the creation of a tax. Maine's wild blueberry tax was the outgrowth of their advocacy and eventually led to the creation of the Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine. In the following decades, the Commission has invested the tax revenues into critical research spanning plant physiology and pest management to wild blueberry nutrition and health benefits. Funds also have supported national school lunch marketing campaigns and international trade efforts.

The Commission is the voice of Maine's wild blueberry producers and is well-positioned to understand and advocate for what the industry needs. The Commission identified this one-year suspension of the grower tax as a small but impactful step to help reduce the financial pressures that they face. They are advocating for this while understanding that the Commission itself will recoup less tax revenue for 2024.

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We can assure that there are no general fund impacts to the Department or elsewhere if it passes, and therefore, DACF supports the Commission's request for the suspension of the tax assessment on wild blueberry producers for the calendar year 2024.

I'm happy to answer any questions you may have, now or at the work session.