



March 27th, 2025

Senator Bailey

Representative Gramlich

Members of the Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services

RE: Support for LD 893, An Act to Exempt Nonprofit Agricultural Membership Organizations from Insurance Requirements

My name is Eric Venturini, and I am the Executive Director of the Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine.

About the Wild Blueberry Industry

The Wild Blueberry Commission (WBCM) works on behalf of Maine's 512¹ farms who grow wild blueberries on 47,600¹ acres across the State. In 2024, Maine produced approximately 85 million pounds of wild blueberries representing nearly 100% of all *wild blueberries* and approximately 10% of all *blueberries* grown in the US. Our industry contributes \$361 million dollars to the state's economy annually² and is the only state with significant commercial production of wild blueberries.

Economic Challenges and Competitiveness

Wild blueberries are healthy, they are Maine, and they have the best story of origin and heritage than any other fruit in the US. Despite that, a recent publication by the University of Maine³ indicates that the cost of producing 1 pound of wild blueberries ranges from \$0.42 to \$0.76 per lb. In 2023, the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service's annual survey⁴ indicated that most growers received a field price of \$0.52 per pound. To be clear, that is below the cost of production for most producers. Market indicators like import pricing for frozen wild blueberries give us no reason to be optimistic that conditions are improving.

Meanwhile, the global cultivated blueberry industry, a major reason why prices remain low, is expected to double its production, which is measured in billions of pounds annually, in the next five years. Most of that

¹ USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service. 2022. Berries: 2022. United States Census of Agriculture.

² Camoine Associates. Unpublished Data. Economic and Fiscal Impacts of the Maine Wild Blueberry Industry. Wild Blueberry Association of North America – US, October 2023.

³ Hoshide, A, and D. Yarborough. 2023. 2024 Enterprise Budgets. Retrieved from Cooperative Extension: Maine Wild Blueberries, <https://extension.umaine.edu/blueberries/factsheets/marketing-and-business-management/2024-enterprise-budgets/>, on March 24, 2025.

⁴ USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service. 2024. New England Berries, Tree Fruit and Grapes, 2023 Crop. News Release, USDA NASS, Northeastern Regional Field Office.



supply comes from Peru, but more countries grow blueberries each year. On the wild side, Canada now grows two to three times Maine production of wild blueberries, and the US market is their top export market. The cost of production (e.g., labor, agricultural inputs, energy) differences between countries make it challenging for Maine growers to compete. Country to country differences between government supports, like health care coverage, also impose significant obstacles to the ability of Maine growers to compete.

Approximately 70% of Maine wild blueberry growers do not grow wild blueberries as a full-time occupation and 57% are paid for off-farm work.⁵ They work off-farm because they must to support their families. This is partly due to the flat prices we've seen in this industry over the past 10 to 20 years. However, a big part of this decision comes down to insurance. If wild blueberry farms had health insurance coverage options through the Maine Farm Bureau, more farmers would be able to focus full-time on their farms – and focus full-time and improving their profitability,⁶ and frankly, their viability. It's hard to change your business model when you only farm part-time.

Health Coverage as a Limitation and an Opportunity

In Canada (the only other country that produces wild blueberries) the government offers universal health coverage. Maine growers have no such option. Additionally, the Canadian Federation of Agriculture and its provincial arms (e.g., the Ontario Federation of Agriculture), which are similar in structure to U.S. state Farm Bureaus, can offer flexible individual or group plans for farm families and their employees. Anecdotally, our contacts in Canada tell us that these plans are extremely popular amongst growers. In Maine, a full-time farmer has few affordable options to provide health coverage for themselves and their families. This is another cost that comes out of the pocket of Maine farmers, another cost they cannot afford.

Expanding access to health care and making it more affordable for Maine people and small businesses is a priority for Governor Mills. This bill would provide Maine farmers with a new option through a trusted source, the Maine Farm Bureau. It will increase health coverage for this important sector of Maine's working people, and for their employees. We may never be able to compete with Canada's universal health coverage in this country – but if we can present farmers with more options for coverage, more farmers will be covered – and that is a win.

This bill has been presented to this committee multiple times before. This year is different. The Maine Farm Bureau has proposed a plan to address what, I believe, was this bill's biggest obstacle in the past – regulatory oversight of the health plans that would result from it. Already proven in Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Texas, and Tennessee, we believe that this proposal would offer our producers an affordable health care option, while also ensuring the needed protections.

On behalf of Maine's wild blueberry industry, I urge the committee to support this bill for Maine's farmers. Thank you for the opportunity to speak on this matter. I would be happy to try and answer any questions.

⁵ Malacarne, J. Unpublished Data. 2021 State of Maine Wild Blueberry Industry Survey. University of Maine, School of Economics.

⁶ Supporting farm profitability is the single biggest priority for the Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine in 2025.

