



TESTIMONY OF THE WILD BLUEBERRY COMMISSION OF MAINE

March 9th, 2025

Re: Support for LD 1140, An Act to Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue to Strengthen the Resilience and Growth of Maine's Agricultural Economy

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, and esteemed members of the Appropriations Committee, my name is Eric Venturini, and I am the Executive Director of the Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine.

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.

Wild blueberries are healthy, they are Maine, and they have the best story of origin and heritage than any other fruit in the United States. 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. Yet in 2023, the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service's annual survey⁴ indicated that most growers received a field price of only \$0.52 per pound. Market indicators like import pricing for frozen wild blueberries give us no reason to be optimistic that conditions are improving.

The economic condition of the wild blueberry industry is, today, at an all-time historic low. We estimate that the average price paid to wild blueberry producers for their fruit, as adjusted by the Producer Price Index, has declined 45% between 2002 and 2022.⁵ Producers have paid money for the privilege of being a wild blueberry farmer for the last two years. As the price has steadily declined, the cost of farm inputs has

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 Unpublished Data.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.

⁵ USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) average published (processed and fresh) prices, as adjusted by the Producer Price Index commodity data for farm products, to account for inflation. Illustrates commodity price cycle and decline from 2002 to 2022. Analysis by Dr. Aaron Hoshide, University of Maine.



risen nationally by 78% from 2020 to 2023.⁶

Our competitor, the global cultivated blueberry industry and a major reason why prices remain low, is expected to double its production (measured in billions of pounds annually) in the next five years. Another competitor, Canadian wild blueberry producers, continue to benefit from strategic government investments in research and development, their land, and equipment, investments like the one proposed here in LD 1140.

In 2022, the Governor's Agricultural Infrastructure Investment Program (AIIP) used a one-time allocation of federal dollars to make 64 awards ranging from \$41,000 to \$500,000—a total injection of \$19.3 million in Maine's farms. Sixty four farms and businesses received awards, and importantly, 786 Maine farms that requested another \$160.7 million did not. The oversubscription of this 2022 program demonstrates the incredible need for capital and investment in Maine's agricultural economy.

It is the momentum behind investments like this one and the opportunities that it will provide, that give me hope of a brighter future for this industry. To survive, producers need to reinvent their businesses, develop value-added manufacturing and expand processing infrastructure and capacity to break their businesses away from commodity price swings and the race to the bottom. To do that, they need capital, pure and simple.

I thank Senator Talbot Ross for her work to create this program through LD 1670 and LD 2212 in the 131st, and the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry for their unanimous support and prioritization of these efforts in the past.

On behalf of Maine's wild blueberry industry, I ask you to give this bill your full support.

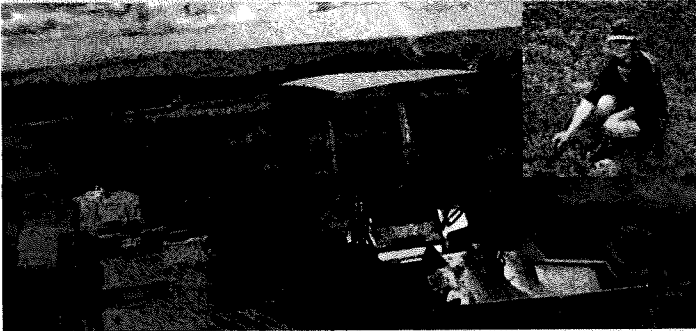
Thank you for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.

⁶ United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry. 2023. USDA Says High Farm Production Costs Not Easing in 2024. July 13th, 2023.





Blue Ox Blueberries Builds Value with AIIP Grant!



Laura Flannery owns and operates Blue Ox Blueberries, a 200 acre organic wild blueberry farm in Charlotte. She is an AIIP grant recipient. The award supported:

- Purchase of harvesting equipment that tripled the farm's harvest in 2023
- Expansion into value added production and a direct sales model with 2 new processing lines
- Increased capacity allowed her to double managed acreage, including fields owned by 8 other wild blueberry land owners.

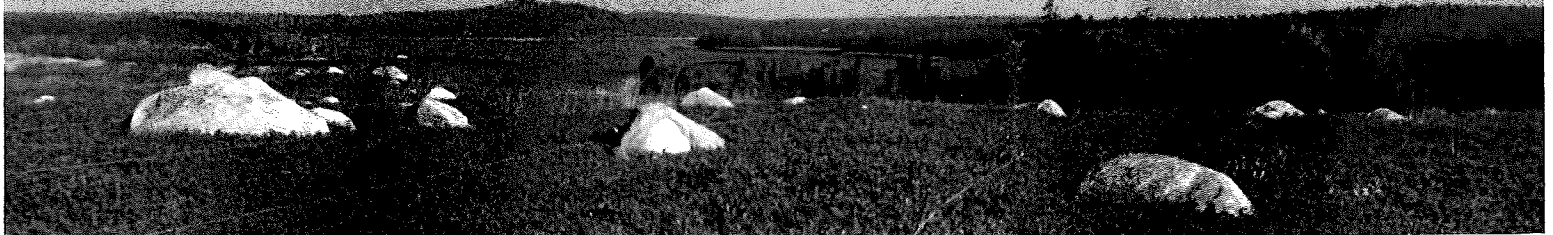
Help farmers like Laura bring more land back into production and support Maine's farm economy by adding value and needed infrastructure. **PASS LD 1140!**

Maine Agriculture is at a Turning Point!

- Real berry price to wild blueberry growers has declined 45% over 20 years!
- Critical farm inputs have risen by 78% nationally from 2020 to 2023!
- Rates for non-real estate farm loans rose faster in 2022 and 2023, than at any point in the prior 40!
- **HELP FARMERS** build infrastructure, add value, grow viability, and increase farm resiliency in Maine!

The Governor's Agricultural Infrastructure Investment Program (AIIP)

- Used a one-time allocation in 2022 to inject \$19.3 Million into farm infrastructure.
- Awarded 64 farms and businesses projects ranging from \$41k-500k (read on for examples of how funding was used in wild blueberry).
- **786 MAINE FARMS REQUESTING \$160.7 MILLION IN ADDITIONAL PROJECTS WERE NOT FUNDED.**
- Illustrates tremendous need for investment in Maine agriculture!





W.R. Allen Advances Labor Innovation and Reduces Food Waste with AIIP Grant!

Simeon Allen owns and operates W.R. Allen in Orland, a wild blueberry processor and grower. He is an AIIP grant recipient. The award supported the purchase of an optical fruit sorter, allowing them to:

- Reduce processing food waste by 50%!
- Increase the volume of USDA Grade A fruit by 20,000 pounds!
- Improve viability of 30 wild blueberry growers that supply them by increasing proportion of quality fruit, and decreasing proportion of waste!
- Reduce labor costs by \$100/hr!

Help producers like Simeon improve the viability of Maine agriculture by adding value and needed infrastructure. **PASS LD 1140!**

Brodis Blueberries Becomes a Local Hub of Wild Blueberry Innovation

Ron Howard and Gwen Brodis are part owners of Brodis Blueberries in Hope, a 9th-generation family-run farm. Howard realized 10 years ago that selling a raw unimproved product was not a viable business model. In 2022 they received an AIIP grant that allowed them to:

- Purchase a state-of-the art optical sorter to easily double the farm's consumer sales capacity!
- Become a cost-saving hub for a group of 15 other wild blueberry farmers!
- Become a demonstration site, energizing other growers about the possibility of value added infrastructure and markets!

Help producers like Ron and Gwen improve the viability of Maine agriculture by adding value and needed infrastructure. **PASS LD 1140!**



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