



## TESTIMONY OF THE WILD BLUEBERRY COMMISSION OF MAINE

March 17, 2025

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, and members of the Appropriations Committee, my name is Eric Venturini, and I am the Executive Director of the Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine (the "Commission") testifying in support of LD 1014 to authorize a \$100 million bond issue for University of Maine infrastructure.

The Commission works on behalf of Maine's 512<sup>1</sup> wild blueberry farms and businesses who grow wild blueberries on approximately 47,600<sup>1</sup> acres across the state and on Passamaquoddy tribal land. The Commission supports an iconic Maine industry that produces nearly 100% of United States wild blueberries, and 10% of U.S. blueberries.

The Commission has collaborated with and leveraged the research, development, and extension capacity of the University of Maine for 80 years. This partnership has resulted in,

- the only wild blueberry research station in the United States, Blueberry Hill Farm in Jonesboro;
- a 500% increase in Maine wild blueberry production over the last 50 years;
- workforce development and education that consistently seeds the next generation of our sector's best and brightest;
- research that allows our sector to develop sustainable and effective management strategies to control new invasive pests and diseases that would otherwise devastate our industry;
- and 2024 metrics that include \$23 of external funding generated for every \$1 invested in wild blueberry research and extension by the industry, and 22 different ongoing wild blueberry Maine Agriculture and Forest Experiment Station (MAFES) and Extension projects carried out by more than 15 different University of Maine (UMaine) faculty and staff members that help to optimize net returns and deliver concrete recommendations our industry can use.

I speak highly of UMaine and am incredibly thankful for the great work that they do in support of our industry. I also have grave concerns as to the state of their budgets, which we see year after year as key

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<sup>1</sup> USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service. 2022. Berries: 2022. United States Census of Agriculture.



positions are cut. The agricultural community relies on modern research and development to remain competitive in a national and global marketplace. UMaine needs to grow to fulfill the needs of the stakeholder community, and to do that UMaine needs your support.

The University has \$1.6 billion dollars of deferred maintenance needs. Due to budgetary challenges, agricultural program funding within both MAFES and Extension is reduced below what is needed to sustain and grow these critical programs. Federal funding uncertainty has led to alarming but needed decisions, like the recent decision to pause all new offers of research assistantships and fellowships. These positions are essential for virtually all research at the University.

The bottom line is that the University of Maine needs the support of the State and of the Legislature to continue to deliver on its Land Grant Mission to the benefit of Maine wild blueberry producers and many other stakeholders.

Thank you for your time. I urge you to vote Ought to Pass on this bond issue.

