



April 23rd, 2025

Senator Tipping
Representative Roeder
Members of the Committee on Labor

RE: Support for LD 1712, An Act to Amend the Paid Family and Medical Leave Benefits Program to Balance Support of Businesses and Employees, and LD 952, An Act to Exempt Agricultural Employers and Employees from the Maine Paid Family and Medical Leave Benefits Program

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.

I thank the sponsors of all of the Paid Family Medical Leave Act (PFMLA) bills before this committee today. It is important to strike a balance between the benefits offered by PFML with the costs and challenges it imposes upon employers.

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. Market indicators like import pricing for frozen wild blueberries, and longer term trajectories of blueberry supply give us no reason to be optimistic that conditions are improving.

LD 952 would completely exempt agricultural from the costs and benefits of PFML. Maine's wild blueberry businesses cannot afford the costs imposed by PFML. The State of Maine lost over 1,000 farms over the

¹ United States. 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 Unpublished Data.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 United States. USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service. 2024. New England Berries, Tree Fruit and Grapes, 2023 Crop. News Release, USDA NASS, Northeastern Regional Field Office.



last 10 years (16%), which amounts to approximately 220,000 acres of farmland.⁵ We cannot continue to add costs to our farms if we would like Maine to have a healthy agricultural economy. For that reason, I urge you to consider exempting agricultural from PFML with LD 952.

LD 1712 does not exempt anyone from PFML contributions, but it does lessen the potential impact on a business. I refer to the proposed amendments to Sec. 1. 26 MRSA §850-B, sub-§7 which would allow undue hardship exemptions for several conditions that include,

- Small businesses for whom the loss of a few employees could be a significant percentage of their workforce;
- Leave claims that would take place during the summer. Summer workforce shortages limit wild blueberry producers' ability to bring in the crop – most farms' sole source of revenue. When farms are struggling to find profitability, limiting farms' ability to harvest the fruit of their work over the past 2 years, is a non-starter;
- Seasonal businesses that generate at least 60% of annual revenue within a 5-month period.

We offer one friendly amendment to LD 1712 in sub-§7, C. Wild blueberry businesses sell fruit year round to ensure that, e.g., grocery stores and ingredient buyers have a regular supply. However, they generate the product in a short seasonal window. To account for that, I ask the Sponsor and the Committee to consider amending the language as follows:

“C. The employer generates at least 60% of the employer’s annual product or revenue during a 5-month period, and it is during that 5-month period; or”

The adjustments proposed by LD 1712 are reasonable and beneficial changes that would limit the negative workforce impact of PFML on Maine farmers and I urge this committee to support it.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony. I would be happy to try and answer any questions that you may have.

⁵ United States. U.S. Census of Agriculture. United States. 2022. Web Archive. Retrieved from Library of Congress, <http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/>.

