



TESTIMONY OF THE WILD BLUEBERRY COMMISSION OF MAINE

January 26, 2026

Re: Opposition to LD 2089, An Act to Amend the Law Governing Agricultural Labor Housing Standards

Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder, and esteemed members of the Committee on Labor, my name is Eric Venturini, and I am the Executive Director of the Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine. I am testifying in opposition to LD 2089.

The Wild Blueberry Commission (WBCM) works on behalf of Maine's 512¹ farms who currently grow wild blueberries on approximately 40,000 acres across the state, contributing \$361 million dollars to the state's economy annually.² Maine is the only state with significant commercial production of wild blueberries, producing nearly 100% of all *wild blueberries* in the US.

Maine's wild blueberry acreage under active management declined by more than 20% in the last 5 years. Why? Wild blueberry producer field prices have declined by more than 45% in the last 20+ years³ and most industry members' profit margins have been starkly negative at least the last 3 years. Our own economic analysis found that Maine wild blueberry producers' cost of production doubled from 2023 to 2025, and we lost an estimated \$28M industry wide.⁴

To be more concise, most of the players in Maine's iconic wild blueberry industry are not currently viable.

There are many building blocks that must be in place before our industry can reclaim viability. One of those is access to affordable and reliable labor. Seasonal work used to be a backbone of Maine's economy.

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 Unpublished Data.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 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.

⁴ Hoshide, A. K. Unpublished Data. 2025 Estimate of Loss in Maine's Wild Blueberry Industry due to Weather. Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine.

Today, it is exceedingly difficult to find someone in Maine interested in working hard for a good paycheck for just a month or two (e.g., wild blueberry harvest). Increasingly, our employers are turning to the federal H-2A program and foreign workers. If a farm can navigate the bureaucratic hurdles of the H-2A program, it delivers—perhaps not very affordable—but certainly reliable workers. Anecdotal early reports from the Maine Dept. of Labor suggest that H-2A applications were up significantly last year.

Why then, don't more wild blueberry producers use the H-2A program to secure a harvest workforce? Industry members tell me that the biggest obstacle preventing their use of the program are its workforce housing standards. Our farmer employers have failed inspections due to quarter-sized holes in a window screen, ceilings less than 7 feet high, and trash cans without lids. My family and I purchased a lovely 4 bedroom on the Penobscot in Orono Maine five years ago – a home that I know would fail an H-2A farm worker housing inspection.

It is widely recognized that farm workforce housing standards are not practical. Thankfully, proposals to improve the H-2A program (Farm Workforce Modernization Act)⁴ and simplify farmworker housing standards (The BARN Act),⁵ among others, are under consideration in Congress and their appears to be some momentum building towards passing H-2A reform. If these efforts are successful, we would see increased H-2A participation, and in one proposed bill, housing standards that could comply with existing local and state regulations *instead* of the current stringent federal standards.

There is a real need to make farm workforce housing standards practical and realistic, lowering barriers (not raising them) for H2-A participation and helping to resolve farm labor challenges. If the federal government does relax farm worker housing regulations, and Maine decides to keep the old regulations (which I believe the state could via LD 2089), Maine farmers would be put at a severe competitive disadvantage.

Maine's farm employers already need to comply with multiple layers of farm workforce housing. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) temporary labor camp standards apply to newer housing. Older housing sometimes falls under Employment and Training Administration standards. The Migrant and Seasonal Worker Protection Act (MSPA) housing regulations overlay these. Do we really need to add a layer of State regulations on top of these?

On behalf of Maine's wild blueberry industry, I strongly oppose this bill.

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

⁴ H.R. 3227 - Farm Workforce Modernization Act of 2025. 119th Congress. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/3227/text>

⁵ H.R. 6122 - BARN Act. 119th Congress. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/6122/text?s=2&r=6&q=%7B%22search%22%3A%22farm+labor%22%7D>

