



TESTIMONY OF THE WILD BLUEBERRY COMMISSION OF MAINE

February 27, 2026

Re: Support for LD 2212, An Act Making Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2026 and June 30, 2027

Senators Rotundo and Talbot Ross, Representatives Gattine and Pluecker, and esteemed members of the Committees on Appropriations and Financial Affairs, and Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, 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 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.

Wild blueberry field prices have declined by more than 45% in the last 20+ years.³ Nationally, the cost of agricultural production has increased more than 25% in just the last 5 years even as farmer prices decline.⁴ Maine's wild blueberry acreage under active management has declined by more than 20% in the last 5 years. Wild blueberry farm and business profit margins have been starkly negative for most of our industry for at least the last 3 years.

The State can reverse these trends with strategic investments. The State has, through previous investment,⁵ catalyzed the development of *viable* wild blueberry businesses that deliver jobs and tax base to their community. Businesses that are well-loved in their communities and will now, thanks to that investment, be staples of those communities for years to come. That is why I, along with 43 other members of the agricultural and forestry community submitted testimony in January to support LD 2094, aka: the Ag Bond. I thank Commissioner Beal and the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry for making passage of that bond a top priority.

I continue to support that bond and strongly advocate for its passage. I also recognize that like the 131st

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 Unpublished Data.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

⁵ In 2022, the Governor's Agricultural Infrastructure Investment Program (AIIP) used a one-time allocation of federal dollars to make 64 awards in agricultural infrastructure totaling \$19.3 million. In total, 850 applications were received totaling approximately \$180M. Ron Howard of Brodis Blueberries, one of several wild blueberry awardees, used the investment to rebuild his business which is now a shining example of what success and viability in wild blueberries can look like.

Legislative Session, bonds and bond packages will be challenged to garner the 2/3 support they require. That is why I am respectfully asking members of the Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs, and members of the committee on Agricultural, Conservation and Forestry, to consider directly funding the components of the Ag Bond through a vehicle like the Governor's Supplemental Budget.

While I recognize and support other sectors that have critical needs addressed through various line items currently found in the ag bond, I would like to highlight two items that will go a long way to helping build viability in the *wild blueberry* industry, (1) investment in the Agriculture and Forest Products Infrastructure Investment Fund (AFPIIF) and (2) investment in the Farmer's Drought Relief Fund, soon to be renamed the Farmer's Drought Resiliency Fund.

1. We need to capitalize AFPIIF to deliver grants and low interest revolving loans to producers, allowing them to access capital needed to rebuild their business models to achieve viability. I ask you to consider allocating \$28M from the budget to capitalize this fund, with \$4M of that set aside for wild blueberry specific financing tools.
2. We need to capitalize the Farmer's Drought Relief Program. Supply stabilization is the number one issue that the wild blueberry needs to stabilize supply, stabilize markets, and grow value. Developing sustainable water sources and irrigation is the number one way to get there. We request adding \$8M to capitalize the Farmer's Drought Relief Program to the supplemental budget.

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

