



## TESTIMONY OF THE WILD BLUEBERRY COMMISSION OF MAINE

March 5, 2026

### **Re: Support for LD 299, An Act to Build a Viable Future for Maine Agriculture**

Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker and esteemed members of the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, my name is Eric Venturini, and I am the Executive Director of the Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine (WBCM).

I am here today to testify in strong support of LD 299, *An Act to Build a Viable Future for Maine Agriculture*. By delivering, year after year, up to \$5M for targeted farmer grants and low-interest loans, this bill will allow Maine farmers to make the critical business investments that are a prerequisite to a viable future for Maine's wild blueberry industry, and I believe for Maine agriculture more broadly.

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. That investment has created examples of profitability and viability—bright spots that demonstrate that State investment which puts dollars in the hands of our farmers, works. Wild blueberry recipients of AIIP funding have diversified their income streams, explored and invested in new product lines, expanded the scale of their businesses, built and maintained profitability at a time when so few wild blueberry businesses are. While AIIP did support the expansion of dozens of farm and food businesses, it was heavily oversubscribed, leaving approximately \$160M in requests unfunded—demonstrating a clear need for capital investment in Maine agriculture.

The Wild Blueberry Commission (WBCM) works on behalf of Maine's 512<sup>1</sup> farms who currently grow wild blueberries on approximately 40,000 acres across the state, contributing \$361 million dollars to the state's

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



economy annually.<sup>2</sup> Maine is the only state with significant commercial production of wild blueberries, producing nearly 100% of all US *wild blueberries*.

Unfortunately, real wild blueberry producer field prices have declined by more than 45% in 20+ years.<sup>3</sup> Nationally, the cost of agricultural production has increased more than 25% in just the last 5 years.<sup>4</sup> Wild blueberry farm and business profit margins have been starkly negative for most of our industry for at least the last 3 years.

### **Need for Strategic Investment**

How do we reverse this trend? With strategic investments and financial instruments to catalyze needed capitalization in Maine's wild blueberry industry. Most wild blueberry farmers are using harvesting and fresh pack processing equipment that was developed with the technology of the 70s and 80s. The WBCM is investing in technological innovation, and many producers are independently exploring the application of newer technologies like optical sorters that can detect defective berries and jettison them off of the belt. There are existing examples of profitability pathways in this industry—but they all require capital investment to get there. Capital is the one thing that my producers do not have, and which most cannot source from traditional lenders. This bill will create opportunities for investment year after year. It will rebuild our agricultural industry over the long term with sustained investment.

### **Where Did this Bill Come From?**

LD 299 is the result of an extensive and thoughtful stakeholder process carried out within the Agricultural Council of Maine (AgCOM) that we initiated in November of 2024. We initiated this effort because we were frustrated by the repeated failure to fund agricultural priorities including but not limited to the Agricultural and Forest Products Infrastructure Investment Fund (AFPIIF).

Early in 2025, AgCOM brought in a consultant who conducted a national investigation of how other states fund their agricultural programs, programs like farmland conservation, farmer grants, and low interest loans. AgCOM worked with this consultant throughout the process to provide input and guide next steps. After reviewing her final report, AgCOM set to work to adapt and develop ideas that we could bring here, to you, as viable vehicles to fund agricultural priorities and build viability in Maine farming on an ongoing basis. Finally, just a few weeks ago, AgCOM met to discuss and refine one of those ideas. Through that discussion the diverse members of AgCOM navigated through potential areas of disagreement and refined the idea into a version which, after 2 hours of discussion, generated unanimous support.

AgCOM, a group that represents almost all of Maine agriculture, after an involved process taking over a year, deliberated through potential areas of disagreement to deliver language to the sponsor, Representative Pluecker, with unanimous support.

### **Real Estate Transfer Tax (RETT)**

One of the constant threats to Maine agriculture is development. The story of the historic Maine farm sold for housing lots, converted into a beautiful home with "pastoral views" is commonplace. The wild blueberry industry has lost approximately 8% of its acreage each year since 2020<sup>5</sup> and Maine has lost 82,567 acres of

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<sup>2</sup> Camoine Associates. Unpublished Data. Economic and Fiscal Impacts of the Maine Wild Blueberry Industry. Wild Blueberry Association of North America – US, October 2023.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

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

<sup>5</sup> National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS). New England Berries, Tree Fruit and Grapes, 2024 Crop. News Release. Northeastern Regional Field Office. United States Department of Agriculture, NASS.



farmland from 2017 to 2022.<sup>3</sup> According to the American Farmland Trust, under “business as usual” projections, Maine could lose another 53,400 acres of farmland to development by 2040.<sup>6</sup>

With these rates of loss and constant threat of development, RETT is the perfect source of sustained funding to help prevent the next farm from being sold as housing lots.

Other portions of RETT are used to support housing programs and municipalities. This bill is not intended to reduce or redirect any funds that are used for these purposes. Based on the best information available to us, of the \$55-67M that RETT is projected to bring in annually, \$13.57M, \$11.29M, \$11.75, and \$12.34M will go into the general fund in 2026, 2027, 2028, and 2029, respectively. It is that portion, not tied to any specific programs, that 50% but not more than \$5M would be allocated to the purposes described in LD 299.

**The Agricultural Bond (LD 2094) and Sustained Investment (LD 299), a Paired Solution**

Taken together, the Agricultural Bond (LD 2094) plus this bill, will year-by-year build Maine’s agricultural economy to create a vibrant, stable, and viable wild blueberry and agricultural community. Where the bond represents the most significant funding allocation ever for Maine’s agricultural and forestry economic development, LD 299’s small allocation will sustain a key grant and loan program for the long term – allowing it to become the permanent tool it needs to be, to make a difference over the long term. To illustrate the complimentary nature of these two bills, I’ve outlined their differences below:

	<b>Ag Bond (LD 2094)</b>	<b>Sustained Investment (LD 299)</b>
<b>Size</b>	\$40-50 M	Up to \$5M
<b>Duration</b>	One-time allocation	Ongoing annual allocation
<b>Use</b>	AFPIIF (\$24-28M), Farmer’s Drought Relief Fund (\$4-8M), healthy soils (\$4M), farmland conservation (\$5M), Dairy Improvement (\$3M)	AFPIIF
<b>Source</b>	Bond	Existing tax base
<b>AFPIIF Guardrails</b>	Eligibility limitations advised by AFPIIF board, final authority rests with Commissioner. AFPIIF has had ongoing discussions about farmer eligibility and understands the importance of this topic. Eligibility would likely apply differently in different programs.	Eligibility broadened to explicitly include aquaculture.  Eligibility limited by a low gross income threshold (\$10k at least once in last 4 years) to help ensure funds are used to support active and viable businesses.

On behalf of Maine’s wild blueberry industry, I thank you for your time and for your support of our industry. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.

<sup>6</sup> American Farmland Trust. Accessed March 5<sup>th</sup> 2026 from [development2040.farmland.org](https://development2040.farmland.org).



<b>Real Estate Transfer Tax-December 2025</b>		FY24	FY25	FY26	FY27	FY28	FY29
(1)	Total Real Estate Transfer Tax Revenue	48,656,092	51,948,448	55,561,618	62,276,879	64,628,179	67,635,249
(2)	minus Section 4641-A sub 2 (controlling interest)	979,647	948,602	1,167,411	1,369,051	1,420,592	1,486,326
(3)	minus Deeds of Foreclosure - 100% to Professional Regulation	124,660	121,222	107,239	109,107	114,845	120,605
(4)	= Revenue to be split according to 4641-B sub 4B Part E, E-1, or E-2	47,551,785	50,878,623	54,286,969	56,481,514	58,775,536	61,711,111
(5)	MSHA - ME Energy, Housing & Economic Recovery Fund	-4,318,938	-4,316,535	-4,317,207	-4,317,207	-4,317,207	-4,317,207
<b>General Fund</b>							
(6)	50% of Row 4 Before FY 2026, 25% of Row 4 FY 2026, 20% of Row 4 FY 2027+	23,775,892	25,439,312	13,571,742	11,296,303	11,755,107	12,342,222
(7)	Controlling interest--100% to GF	979,647	948,602	1,167,411	1,369,051	1,420,592	1,486,326
(8)	General Fund Reduction for ME Energy, Housing & Economic Recovery Fund <sup>1</sup>	-4,318,938	-4,316,535	-2,158,604			
(9)	PL 2025, c. 388, Part QQ <sup>2</sup>			4,847,891	5,147,141		
(10)	PL 2025, c. 460 <sup>3</sup>			4,473,000			
(11)	Residual	1,158	97,939				
(12)	Total General Fund	20,437,759	22,169,317	21,901,441	17,812,495	13,175,699	13,828,549
<b>Housing First Fund (Starting FY 2026)</b>							
(13)	25% of Row 4 FY 2026, 18% of Row 4 FY 2027+			13,571,742	10,166,672	10,579,596	11,108,000
(14)	Housing First Fund Reduction for ME Energy, Housing & Economic Recovery Fund <sup>1</sup>			-2,158,604			
(15)	PL 2025, c. 460 <sup>3</sup>			-1,491,000			
(16)	Total Housing First Fund			9,922,139	10,166,672	10,579,596	11,108,000
<b>HOME Fund</b>							
(17)	50% of Row 4 through FY2026, 32% of Row 4 FY 2027+	23,775,892	25,439,312	27,143,485	18,074,084	18,808,171	19,747,555
(18)	PL 2025, c. 388, Part QQ <sup>2</sup>			-4,847,891	-5,147,141		
(19)	PL 2025, c. 460 <sup>3</sup>			-2,982,000			
(20)	Total Home Fund	23,775,892	25,439,312	19,313,594	12,926,943	18,808,171	19,747,555
<b>Housing Production Fund</b>							
(21)	30% of Row 4 FY 2027+				16,944,454	17,632,661	18,513,333
(22)	Total Housing Production Fund				16,944,454	17,632,661	18,513,333
<b>Other Special Revenue</b>							
(23)	HOME Fund	23,775,892	25,439,312	19,313,594	12,926,943	18,808,171	19,747,555
(24)	Professional Regulation	124,660	121,222	107,239	109,107	114,845	120,605
(25)	MSHA - ME Energy, Housing & Economic Recovery Fund	4,318,938	4,316,535	4,317,207	4,317,207	4,317,207	4,317,207
(26)	Housing First Fund	0	0	9,922,139	10,166,672	10,579,596	11,108,000
(27)	Housing Production Fund	0	0	0	16,944,454	17,632,661	18,513,333
(28)	Total Other Special Revenue	28,219,490	29,877,069	33,660,178	44,464,384	51,452,480	53,806,701

Notes: <sup>1</sup> Starting in FY27, ME Energy, Housing & Economic Recovery Fund reduction applies to all funds, so reduction is applied to Row 4.

<sup>2</sup> First \$4,847,891 of FY26 HOME Fund revenue and first \$5,147,141 of FY27 HOME Fund revenue to General Fund

<sup>3</sup> In FY26 only, first \$2,982,000 of HOME Fund revenue and first \$1,491,000 of Housing First Fund revenue to General Fund