



Wild Blueberry Commission OF MAINE

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Eric Venturini, Executive Director

Testimony in support of LD 568

An Act to Establish a Working Farmland Access and Protection Program within the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry and a Working Farmland Access and Protection Fund within the Land for Maine's Future Program

Senator Dill, Representative O'Neil, 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, the voice of Maine's wild blueberry farms and businesses.

Maine's wild blueberry farmers grow approximately 10% of all blueberries produced in our nation, and nearly 100% of *wild* blueberries in the US. Here in Maine we have about 485 farmers growing and harvesting blueberries on 38,000 acres across the state, but primarily in Washington and other coastal counties. Over the past five years we have, on average, grown 70.5 million pounds of Maine wild blueberries annually. The wild blueberry industry faces stiff competition from the ever-growing production of cultivated blueberries. These highbush varieties are developed in University labs for a number of characteristics, but primarily their firmness (aka: their ability to ship and hold on the shelf as "fresh" blueberries). Production of cultivated here in the US, plus imports into the US has increased 50% in just the last two years and is projected to be 1.4 Billion pounds in 2021. Compared the relatively stable production over the last few years of wild blueberries in Maine and eastern Canada (269 Million lb in 2019 and projected at 280 Million lb in 2021) cultivated is a major threat to Maine's iconic wild blueberry industry and a major factor in the declines seen over the last five years.

Although this industry is looking ahead at increased demand and promising market conditions, five years of low prices followed by a COVID-19 season was too much for many of our farms. Each year, the Maine Revenue Service collects and sends the Commission data on the taxes that fund the Commission (1.5 cents per pound of wild blueberries grown or produced in the state). For the past ten years, the number of businesses that contribute to the tax has been relatively stable, fluctuating up or down by just a few businesses each year. In 2020, we lost 33% of our taxpayers.

I see promise in Land for Maine's Future, and the work of Maine Farmland Trust, to help ensure that our valuable heritage wild blueberry lands stay wild blueberry lands into the future. Agricultural easements both keep farmland, farmland, into perpetuity, and as payment for future development rights can offer businesses with a cash injection that they can invest into their businesses to help them regain profitability.

We do, however, have some concerns with these programs that we hope this Committee, now or while considering future legislation around these programs, will consider.



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Farmers considering agricultural easements apply to these programs, and their applications are considered based on a number of merits, and a value is determined for the development rights of the property. That valuation is based, in part, on the assessed value of the property which acts as a proxy for the likelihood that the land will be lost to development. While the goal of using assessed value of the property is consistency and fairness, I argue that in reality the effects of using assessed value are anything but:

- Wild blueberry acreage in Maine is decreasing. In the late 90's we had over 50,000 acres of wild blueberries in Maine, today we have under 38,000. This decrease has little to do with development pressure. When a wild blueberry field is left unmanaged due to economic conditions or for any other reason, it reverts to forest and takes years of management with no return to bring back into wild blueberry production. Abandoned unmanaged fields are effectively lost, and the assessed value of the property does not capture this "threat of conversion of the working farmland property such that it would become unavailable for commercial production of agricultural products." (printed LD 568, §164, 3., B.)
- The value of the easement is functionally the incentive for participation in the program. By using assessed property value as the basis for this determination, LMF prioritizes farmers who operate in more urban parts of the state and undervalues agricultural land in more rural areas of the state like Washington County, the heart of Maine wild blueberry production. Considering that abandonment, by lack of management, does convert a wild blueberry field away from agricultural use, this is a major fault in this program and significantly limits its use in the rural areas of the state—traditionally the most active agricultural economies.

Wild blueberries are truly wild. Our berries are grown on fields ranging from just a few acres in Maine up to contiguous swaths of 1000's of acres in the heart of the Downeast region. Wild blueberry acreage lost to forest is a major threat to the resilience and economic future of this crop in Maine. I am hopeful that LMF can be part of the solution and support this bill. This legislation will strengthen the ability of LMF to preserve farmland and strengthen Maine's lasting commitment to the preservation of farmland. Please, however, consider the limitations of this program and seek to improve its utility to the important agricultural economies in the rural parts of the state, and to Maine's iconic wild blueberry industry.

Thank you for your time and consideration.