



Wild Blueberry Commission OF MAINE

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Eric Venturini, Executive Director

Testimony in Support of LD 1565

An Act To Strengthen Maine's Agriculture, Food and Forest Economy

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 Wild Blueberry Farms Harvesting and Growing Wild Blueberries from 1997 to 2017

	Operations with Area Harvested	Operations with Area Grown
1997	741	No Data
2002	482	No Data
2007	488	577
2012	416	510
2017	435*	485

Figure 1 – All data is from USDA NASS agricultural Census, which is conducted every 5 years.

This Committee is well aware of the importance of wild blueberries to Maine's economy. Our industry contributes an estimated 250 million annually through direct and indirect contributions to the State. Maine's 485 wild blueberry farmers annually grow approximately 70 million pounds of fruit which comprises nearly 100% of wild blueberries produced in the United States.

This Committee is also aware of the declines seen in recent years in the number of wild blueberry growers, and of their challenges in attaining profitability. Between 1997 to 2017 we lost approximately 300 wild blueberry farms (Figure 1). In 2020 alone we lost 25% of farm-business payees into the Maine Wild Blueberry tax, the largest single year drop in over 20 years.

You heard testimony from the Department of Agriculture referring to their recent heritage industry survey, which pinpointed processing infrastructure as a major need. I offer support to their statements, further justifying the need for this legislation. The concerns I hear from wild blueberry farms and businesses aligns with the Department's findings. Wild blueberry farms and businesses can sell all they can produce. What is lacking is on-farm processing infrastructure and on-farm freezer storage to hold it.

As the voice of Maine's farms and businesses, I support this bill and its intent, but offer several points that I hope you will consider.

First, Part 2. Goals; investment; inclusiveness, paragraph C of the bill reads, "Collaborate with...other key institutional partners to establish technical assistance programs to support the objectives of this chapter." And under Part 3. Powers, paragraph A, reads, "Hire or assign staff contractors, including community development financial institutions, economic development organizations, quasi-governmental entities or other capital or technical assistance providers."



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I am concerned that too much of these funds will go to contractors, technical service providers, and agricultural organizations. Investment in food processing infrastructure should go directly to farms and food businesses. I ask the Committee to ensure that the recipients of this fund are not organizations like mine, but rather, the farmers themselves.

Second, this bill creates a board of 11 charged with strengthening Maine's food, forest, and agricultural economy to provide oversight and determine expenditures. The board explicitly includes two members of the dairy industry and two members of the forestry industry but does not include a voice for any other major commodity sector of the food, forest, and agricultural economy. I suggest that the Committee reconsider the structure of the board to more fully represent the diverse voices in Maine agriculture.

Dana Doran of the Professional Logging Contractors of Maine suggested in testimony creating two boards, one for the forestry sector and one for agriculture and food producers. His proposal would create two separate, stronger, more comprehensive boards, better representing the diversity of Maine agriculture and food businesses and forestry.

Finally, I ask that the Committee consider adding to the list of board members a representative of the wild blueberry industry of Maine. Wild blueberries are a heritage industry, iconic to Maine, and an economic engine for the state. There is both great opportunity and great need in this industry and I am confident that without wild blueberry representation, this board would be ill informed to offer relevant solutions to our unique industry.

On behalf of the Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine, I urge this committee to:

- include a provision to ensure that the bulk of the funding generated from this bill will go directly to Maine farm, forestry, and food producers; and
- consider dividing the Maine Agriculture, Food System and Forest Products Infrastructure Investment Advisory Board into two, one representing forestry and another representing agriculture and food; and
- add representation of the wild blueberry industry to the advisory board.

Once amended, I urge you to support this bill and vote Ought To Pass.