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**Eric Venturini, Executive Director**

**Testimony in Support of LD 174. An Act To Implement the Recommendations of the Ending Hunger by 2030 Advisory Group**

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 Wild Blueberry Commission works on behalf of Maine’s almost 500 wild blueberry farmers and businesses who grow wild blueberries on approximately 40,000 acres across the state. Most of our annual production of up to 100 million pounds of Maine wild blueberries is grown in Maine’s most impoverished county, Washington County.<sup>1</sup> According to the report that this legislation refers to, *Ending Hunger in Maine by 2030*, over 5,000 Mainers living in Washington County, or 16.3% of the county’s population, are food insecure.

The Maine wild blueberry industry is in a needed growth period that follows 5 challenging years of climate change impacts, poor pricing, and COVID-19. Efforts are underway to increase basic access to production infrastructure, foster and support climate change research and resilience, and cultivate innovation in the wild blueberry sector. To grow this sector and support prosperity and sustainability in farming and address food insecurity, the economic challenges that hamper growth in Maine’s most rural communities must be addressed. *Ending Hunger in Maine by 2030* proposes to “Foster Economic Stability” and clearly recognizes and seeks to address not the symptoms of hunger in Maine, but the root causes—causes like a lack of economic opportunity. The report also suggests, as required by LD 1159 (Resolve, to End Hunger in Maine by 2030), to use existing resources to tackle the problem.

The Maine wild blueberry industry is an existing resource. Our farmers and businesses are a source of jobs and economic opportunity that bring 250 million directly and indirectly into the state’s economy, primarily in Washington County—and the industry is poised for growth. Yet the average age of the Maine wild blueberry producer is 64 ½ and the sector struggles to recruit new producers. Opportunities and innovation in this industry and in these regions, will foster economic opportunity and food security will follow.

This bill aligns with our mission of conserving and promoting the prosperity and welfare of this State, and of the wild blueberry industry of this state and we stand in support.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony and I welcome any questions you may have.

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<sup>1</sup> 19.4% of those residing in Washington County are below the poverty level, the highest rate of poverty in any Maine county. *Poverty in Maine*. Dec. 2011. Volume 3, Issue 1. Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center, the University of Maine and the Maine Community Action Association. Data from 2010 US Census.

