



Eric Venturini, Executive Director

Testimony in Support of amendment to LD 219. An Act To Enhance the Agricultural Marketing Loan Fund by Establishing a Variable Interest Rate for Loans and To Allow Participants in the Maine Farms for the Future Program To Borrow at That Rate.

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. I am here today to testify in support of the Department's proposed amendment to LD 219.

The Wild Blueberry Commission works on behalf of Maine's 485¹ wild blueberry farmers and businesses who grow wild blueberries on approximately 40,000² acres across the state. In 2021 Maine produced more than 100 million pounds of wild blueberries, representing over 10% of all blueberry production in North America. The Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine recognizes as one of our four long-term priorities for this industry, the need to *Improve the economic viability of Maine wild blueberry production*, by 1) growing demand for wild blueberries, 2) building and promoting the Maine wild blueberry brand through differentiation and diversification, and 3) stopping the loss of small farms and acreage. I commend the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF) for their work to improve this bill. The changes to LD 219 that DACF have presented will improve the economic viability of not only Maine wild blueberry producers, but all other sectors of Maine's agricultural community.

Over the last two years the Agricultural Development Grant (ADG) has funded projects to:

- Expand access to cold storage, wholesale packaging, and distribution networks.
- Offer Maine Farmland Trust business planning programs to producers, "the Business of Farming," which helps farmers access new markets and build resilience to market fluctuations to boost profitability.
- Grow the Maine wild blueberry sparkling wine category through strategic marketing, promotion,

¹ National Agricultural Statistics Service. 2017. Berries: 2017.

https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_2_County_Level/Maine/st23_2_0033_0033.pdf

² Based on 2019 and 2020 harvested acreage (appx. half of total acreage in any given year).

<https://extension.umaine.edu/blueberries/factsheets/statistics-2/crop-production-statistics-2019/>



and sales and distribution in eight national markets and three international markets.

- Develop nutrient-loaded biochar pellets using Maine produced biomass to improve wild blueberry production, with implications for drought resistance.
- Increase the market connectivity of Maine wild blueberry producers by encouraging and incentivizing adoption and testing two web-based marketing platforms for wild blueberry producers.

Every one of these projects has had a direct and positive impact on producers of Maine wild blueberries and has helped bring the Maine wild blueberry industry to where it is now: on the cusp of growth, driving for innovation, and increasing prosperity for family farms. And yet, as we heard from DACF, many excellent applications—projects to help drive growth and prosperity on Maine’s 7,600 farms³ (including 485 wild blueberry farms)—went unfunded. The ADG is popular because of its funding targets and the simplicity of the application process that make it more accessible to more farmers. DACF is suggesting tripling the size of the ADG program, which we strongly support.

DACF also acknowledges the declining utilization of the Agricultural Marketing Loan Fund (AMLF) and suggests several measures to make the program more accessible and competitive. These measures include an expanded and updated scope that includes, among other things, irrigation water resources.

The United States Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) offers programs, which are available to Maine producers to sustainably develop water sources, update inefficient irrigation systems, and install new efficient irrigation systems. These funding sources go under-utilized in an era when efficient irrigation systems can increase the climate resiliency of Maine farms. They go underutilized because a) NRCS funding covers only a percentage of project costs decreasing accessibility to funding for large projects, and b) if an NRCS-funded water source project does not meet the flow rate requirements in the farm’s irrigation management plan the farmer must eat the cost of the entire project introducing a high level of risk. Under the proposed expanded scope of AMLF, irrigation and water source development projects would be more accessible to more Maine farmers, helping to mitigate the impacts of drought and increase climate resiliency on Maine farms.

DACF is proposing to evolve the AMLF and increase the size of the ADG program to better meet the needs of Maine farmers. On behalf of the Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine, I fully support their proposal and urge you to support it as well.

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

³ NASS 2020 Maine Agricultural Summary.

https://www.nass.usda.gov/Quick_Stats/Ag_Overview/stateOverview.php?state=MAINE

