

April 12, 2023

Senator Ingwerson
Representative Pluecker
Members of the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

RE: Neither for Nor Against testimony to the Rep. Guerrette Amendment to LD 220, An Act to Support Maine's Potato Farmers and Processors

My name is Eric Venturini, and I am the Executive Director of the Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine. I appreciate this opportunity to present you with additional information as you consider the amendment to LD 220, which was released yesterday.

This amendment is meant to support Maine's potato industry, in particular their need for sustainable water source development and irrigation. I do not question the Maine potato industry's need for this funding, or their struggles with inflation, market pressures, labor challenges, and an ever-increasing risk of drought. Wild blueberry producers are struggling to cope with the very same challenges, as are other agricultural sectors in Maine.

The 2020 Maine Drought and Agriculture Report

In 2021, The University of Maine published *The 2020 Maine Drought and Agriculture Report*.¹ This report presents farmer surveys (n=253) that document the impact of the 2020 drought in Maine, using the five years prior to 2020 as baseline. The report includes respondents from across agricultural sectors and establishes that:

- Over 50% of Maine farms did not have sufficient water in 2020.
- All producer groups reported higher than normal losses in 2020, although **more wild blueberry producers were impacted by drought than any other group and lost the greatest proportion of their crop to drought.**
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- 68.3% of respondents indicated that they intend to invest in irrigation in the near future, but more than half stated that they do not have the financial resources needed for those investments.

¹ Schattman, R. E., Goossen, C., and Calderwood, L. 2021. The 2020 Maine Drought and Agriculture Report. University of Maine, Orono. 1-30. DOI: [10.6084/m9.figshare.14474055](https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.14474055)



2020 Drought Impacts on Yield by Ag. Sector

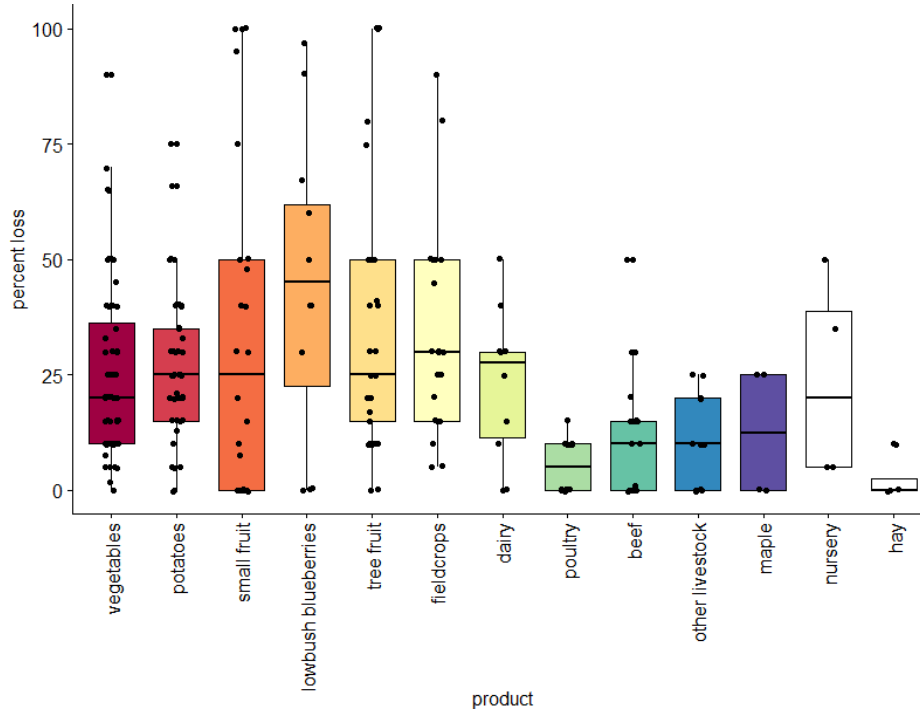


Figure from Schattman et al., 2021, 2020 Maine Drought and Agriculture Report. University of Maine.

Irrigated Acreages

There are an estimated 52,000 acres of potato² and 42,000 acres of wild blueberry³ in Maine. Current estimates indicate that 25% of Maine's potato acreage is irrigated, and we estimate that 35% of Maine's 42,000 acres of wild blueberry are irrigated. However, wild blueberries and potatoes are only a proportion of the total cropland in Maine. Based on the most recent US agricultural census, Maine has 472,508 total acres of cropland⁴ and considering the University of Maine's published report from 2020, we know that irrigation is a need across agricultural sectors.

Recommendation

The need for sustainable water source development and irrigation extends across agricultural sectors, therefore I ask that if this committee plans to move forward with \$3 million dollars for sustainable irrigation and water source development in potatoes, we ask you to consider:

1. **Allocating an additional \$10 million to the Farmers Drought Relief Fund** to help meet the critical need for irrigation for the rest of Maine agriculture.⁵

² National Agricultural Statistics Service. 2022. Maine Potato Report. US Department of Agriculture.

https://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/New_England_includes/Publications/Maine-Potatoes.pdf

³ National Agricultural Statistics Service. 2022. Maine Wild Blueberry Production Up Significantly from 2020. US Department of Agriculture. https://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/New_England_includes/Publications/ME-Wild-Blueberry-Release.pdf

⁴ National Agricultural Statistics Service. 2017. US Census of Agriculture.

https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Full_Report/Census_by_State/Maine/index.php

⁵ The Farmers' Drought Relief Fund was created through LD 1998 in the 130th Session. The legislature funded this program through the Governor's biennial budget this year as a \$2 million in one-time investment, with an additional \$300,000 per year going forward.



2. If potato growers have exclusive access to \$3 million through a fund established by this bill (LD 220), then the Farmers Drought Relief Fund should be reserved for farmers of other products.

Thank you for your time and for considering this additional information as you consider the amendment to LD 220. I would be happy to try and answer any questions that you may have today or in any future work sessions for this bill.

