

Dear Members of the Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee,

I write in support of LD 1670.

My partner and I have owned and operated Blue Barrens Farm, a family blueberry farm in Washington County, for 35 years. We have raised our children largely from the proceeds of our farm and our four children have all continued to work and reside in Maine, where in their various ways they enrich our lives and those of the broader community. They all help with the annual harvest and with the more difficult fieldwork.

Maine is a great place to be a family farmer, as we live in a socially rich community of small farmers who all share a dedication to the careful stewardship of our beautiful state and to hard work. And we feel amply aided in our efforts by the expertise readily available from extension agents at the University of Maine and from state and federal agriculture programs.

Although we love being Maine family farmers, we must acknowledge that farming in Maine can be extremely frustrating as we are continually held to a lower level of productivity than is possible for us owing to a lack of resources.

We grow, harvest, process and market organic wild Maine blueberries. We have ready markets throughout New England, access to productive blueberry land, a great capacity for hard work, and as much expertise as we require. What we've always lacked—until just last year—is access to the funds necessary to expand our operations.

To serve both local and distant markets with fresh and frozen wild Maine blueberries requires processing equipment, freezing equipment, and refrigerated delivery vehicles, all of which are too expensive to buy outright from farm proceeds. The situation for us has been similar to wanting to start a family and buy a house, but having to pay cash for the house up front—it makes for a much delayed start.

This has been our farming experience in Maine—year after year of frustratingly slow expansion of our efforts owing to lack of equipment and facilities to further them. We have felt hobbled, held back, all the while eager to shake off our fetters and broaden our efforts.

And just last year we have. We are the recipients of an AIIP grant and here's the difference it's making: we're installing a freezer, buying a refrigerated delivery van, and expanding our processing barn and worker housing. Because we will now have these facilities, we are bringing more blueberry land into production, we are hiring more workers to help us harvest and process our crop, and we are expanding our markets throughout New England. We are greatly ramping up our efforts at last, and this entirely because of AIIP.

The great thing about the AIIP grants is that they go directly to the farmers who need them and for the kind of processing equipment and facilities those farmers have identified as necessary. We urge that this aspect of AIIP be preserved, as this is the most direct way to have the greatest and most immediate impact.

Many Maine farmers would expand their efforts if they had access to better facilities and labor. AIIP could greatly benefit these farmers by funding facility enhancement and worker housing and for this reason we urge the committee to make AIIP permanent.

Thank-you for the opportunity to testify,
Mark Jacoby

Lisa Mushrall
Blue Barrens Farm