



# *Wild Blueberry Commission* OF MAINE

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**Eric Venturini, Executive Director**

**Testimony in support of LD 636**

**An Act to Encourage the Purchase of Local Foods for Public Schools**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and esteemed members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, 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's wild blueberry farmers grow approximately 10% of all blueberries produced in our nation, and nearly 100% of *wild* blueberries in the US. We have about 485 farms growing and harvesting blueberries on 38,000 acres across the State, but primarily in Washington and other coastal counties. Over the past five years we have, on average, grown 70.5 million pounds of Maine wild blueberries annually. The history of Maine wild blueberry production is culturally rich, first managed and harvested by the Wabanaki even thousands of years ago. This crop continues today to be a staple of the Maine economy. Maine wild blueberries are globally unique, sustainable, and are one of the healthiest foods you can eat.

In 2017 the Commission instituted a School Nutrition Program to educate school food purchasers across the country about the benefits of Maine wild blueberries. This program has been a major success, doubling the volume of Maine wild blueberries purchased by school institutions during its short life, to about 3 million pounds per year.

Additionally, in 2020 the Commission was awarded a grant through the State's Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry to increase wild blueberry farms' and businesses' usage of online web-based sales platforms. One of our project partners is Forager ([www.goforager.com](http://www.goforager.com)) a buyer-facing web-based sales platform. Through this platform we have successfully connected institutional buyers including the Maine Department of Corrections with local sources of Maine wild blueberries. As of January this year, this project has increased wild blueberry farmer and business use of the platform by 80%, resulting in a 24% YTD increase in volume of Maine wild blueberries sold through Forager.

These ongoing programs have provided us with insight into some of the barriers that institutions face in increasing purchasing of local produce, and insight into the challenges that growers face in supplying the same institutions.

Our testimony is in alignment with that of several others this morning. By allowing schools to purchase local foods from companies like Forager, rather than solely directly from farmers themselves, it enables institutions to increase their purchasing of local foods without having to coordinate and manage relationships with dozens of different small farmers just to maintain stock of a single product throughout the year.



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Additionally, this bill will increase state support to schools for the purchase of local food by an order of magnitude, from \$1,000 to \$10,000 per school administrative unit per year. It strengthens the incentive to schools to purchase local foods by providing a 25% match, effectively incentivizing the purchase of \$40,000 worth of local produce per school administrative unit per year.

On behalf of Maine's wild blueberry farmers and businesses, I thank Senator Vitelli and cosponsors for presenting this bill and encourage the Committee to vote Ought to Pass. Thank you for your time, I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.