

Testimony of Courtney Hammond in opposition to LD 1022

Senator Hickman, Representative Sylvester, and members on the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing, my name is Courtney Hammond and I am testifying in opposition to LD 1022. I am the third generation to work on our farm located in Harrington, a small coastal town in western Washington County, where we grow wild blueberries, cranberries, shiitake mushrooms, and produce balsam fir wreathes and decorations. I currently serve as one of the Co-Presidents of Maine Farm Bureau and I also chair the Maine Wild Blueberry Commission's Fresh Pack and Value Added Committee.

I have been involved in the wild blueberry industry from as far back as I can remember when my parents took me with them into the fields during the harvest and I remember when I was finally old enough to pick blueberries on my own and receive the payment for the work I had done. I picked fir tips in the fall for the wreath makers, and mowed lawns and sold nightcrawler worms in the summer to make money. I believe that this was the beginning of the strong work ethic that I have to this day. Harvesting wild blueberries, one of Maine's significant agricultural crops, is hard work and the season is short as often dictated by the weather. It is also a very lucrative job for the people who pick the berries, although as of late not so for the farmers themselves. Wild blueberry pickers are paid by the box whether they are hand raking or operating a mechanical harvester. An average hand raker can make \$150.00 in an 8-9 hour day with some making over \$500.00 a day if the crop is good. I often joke with the people who work for me that they are making double the pay that I am, although I guess that is not really funny. If I understand this bill as presented, it would eliminate the ability of farmers to pay by the piece, mandate overtime, and limit the number of hours a person can work. This would severely impact the ability of farmers to get their crops in on time and remove the incentive for the workers to work harder and make more money in the few weeks that they are here. I believe that without the ability to make the large amount of money that they do, the workers that come here from other areas will not come, further hampering farmers' ability to get the crops in before they expire.

The people who work on our farm are absolutely necessary to its' success and I consider them co-workers and friends. They range in age from 12-80+, male, female, resident, migrant, white, black, and Hispanic. Some work hourly loading, tending, and processing while others are paid by the piece. I provide housing for the migrant workers in a house that my wife and three children lived in earlier complete with the furniture, fully equipped kitchen, large screen TV, and amenities that were there when we lived there. We provide bathroom and sanitation facilities as well as ice water in the fields and the field workers set their own schedule with regard to hours worked and days off. At the end of the year we have a party complete with lobster and steak to celebrate a successful season. My philosophy has always been that I would not ask an employee to do something that I would not be willing to do myself. The migrant workers who come have been coming for many years and I maintain contact with them throughout the year in anticipation of them returning.

We are one of the few blueberry growers who still harvests all of our crops by hand due to quality demands and the condition of the fields. Most growers have transitioned to mechanical harvesting because of the difficulty of obtaining sufficient labor and the cost of providing housing so opportunities for our local youth and migrant workers have declined.

I have heard several allegations over the last years that farmers take advantage of migrant workers and exploit their vulnerabilities. It is not my experience that this is the current reality here in Maine. Worker housing is inspected and is required to meet federal standards, pay is typically well above minimum wage, and the workers return year after year. Farmers recognize that it is difficult to obtain workers so they treat the workers to a standard that will make them want to return. I believe that if the migrant workers were being exploited, that they would not return and would go elsewhere.

Maine has lost several wild blueberry farms over the last ten years totaling nearly 20,000 acres due to international market pressures. Further regulation that impacts availability of farm workers and farm profitability will accelerate that decline. There are no future generations entering the wild blueberry industry and I see in the near future only large corporate mechanized farms which will significantly affect the fabric of my little piece of this state that I call home.