



Wild Blueberry Commission OF MAINE

5784 York Complex, Suite 52, Orono, Maine 04469-5784

TEL: 207-581-1475

FAX: 207-581-3499

Eric Venturini, Executive Director

Testimony in OPPOSITION to LD 1022

An Act To Make Agricultural Workers and Other Workers Employees under the Wage and Hour Laws

Senator Hickman, Representative Sylvester, and esteemed members of the Committee on Labor and Housing, 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.

Our industry produces approximately 10% of all blueberries grown in the US, and near 100% of *wild* blueberries grown in the US. The Commission represents every farm that grows, and every business that processes wild blueberries in Maine. Wild blueberry farmers often own and manage lands that have been in their family for 5, 6, or 7 generations. Wild blueberry farming provides economic opportunities to hundreds of Maine families in the most rural parts of the state.

To speak simply, Maine's wild blueberry farmers cannot afford this bill. In 2017 the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service reported 485 wild blueberry farms in Maine. I expect this number is somewhat less today. In 2020 the Commission lost one-quarter of its taxpayers. Yes, according to the tax rolls, 25% of payees into the Maine wild blueberry tax did not produce wild blueberries in 2020, representing the single largest drop in at least the last 20 years. Due to market conditions affecting poor pricing over the last five years and several other challenges, Maine wild blueberry farms and businesses cannot afford this bill. This is the economic reality.

This bill was introduced last year. I believe it is unchanged. In last year's hearing 18 farmers provided testimony in opposition and that number included several small organic farmers, many small to medium vegetable farmers, apple farmers, wild blueberry farmers, dairy, and more. Only 1 farmer testified in support.

Please do not pass this legislation until we can successfully address the challenge of farm profitability. If you do pass this legislation, you will directly reduce the number of wild blueberry farms in Maine.

I believe that the intention of this bill is to provide farm workers with greater opportunity.

Unfortunately, it will do the opposite because it does not consider the current economic realities of farming. Because Maine's farmers cannot afford the higher labor costs proposed, most will cap their workers at 40 hours per week and hire additional workers to make up for the time if this legislation is passed. This means that farm workers who rely upon a seasonally high volume of hours to put bread on the table for their families, will take home less money per person at the end of the season. I repeat, this bill will reduce the per capita earned income of farm workers in Maine.



Wild Blueberry Commission OF MAINE

5784 York Complex, Suite 52, Orono, Maine 04469-5784

TEL: 207-581-1475

FAX: 207-581-3499

Consider the hypothetical scenario where a wild blueberry farmer caps her workers at 40 hours per week. On many wild blueberry farms, a worker will work 1900 to 2000 hours, which is a full year's work, over a period of 7 months from April to November. If that employee instead works that same period at only 40 hours per week:

- They would lose 600 to 690 hours of work per year, which equates to approximately 1/3 of their pay.
- For workers earning minimum wage (a conservative estimate) this is a pay cut of over \$7,000 per year. At farms with a higher wage scale, which is not uncommon, an employee could be looking at a loss of \$10,000 - \$14,000 per year.

The proposed changes would therefore:

- Decrease the attractiveness of farm work by decreasing the potential for earnings, making it even more difficult for farms to find labor than it is today
- Incentivize farms to invest in mechanization (e.g., switch from hand-raking to machine harvesting) to cut costs and remain competitive in the long-term

The bill before you today does not solve labor issues and it does not create opportunities for farm workers. Instead, it would worsen labor issues and decrease the earnings of farm workers.

I am a member of The Agricultural Council of Maine (AGCOM), which is also testifying on this bill. AGCOM does not often testify. There are very few bills that come forward that garner the broad agreement that AGCOM requires to take action. In this case, there was overwhelming support in the agricultural community to oppose this bill. I urge you to listen to AGCOM's testimony.

Thank you for your time and I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.