

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

July 15, 2019

Honorable Undersecretary Bill Northey
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Undersecretary Northey:

As the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) considers providing assistance to farmers who have suffered from trade retaliation and disruptions, we strongly urge you to include wild blueberry growers within the USDA's Market Facilitation Program. The wild blueberry industry has been an integral part of Maine's agricultural heritage since the mid-1800s. Due to the crop's proclivity to grow in rocky, acidic soils and cool climates, Maine is the largest commercial producer of wild blueberries in the world. The majority of farms that grow and process wild blueberries are family-owned. However, recent economic pressures and reduced prices have placed a significant burden on wild blueberry growers, resulting in many growers drastically cutting back on harvesting their crops within the last two years.

Prior to 2018, wild blueberries had been making steady headway into the Chinese market, as China's imports of all blueberries increased from 1.5 million pounds in 2012, to 19.2 million pounds in 2016. In 2017, Maine exported nearly two million pounds of wild blueberries to China.

Due to recent trade disputes, the Chinese export market for Maine wild blueberries has all but vanished. Maine only exported around 75,000 pounds of wild blueberries to China in 2018. Compounding these ill effects from trade disputes, wild blueberries have faced extremely difficult circumstances in recent years, including: critical oversupply following several record crop sizes, large carry-over, steeply declining prices paired with steady production costs, and global competition due in large measure to increased cultivated blueberry production. Reliable and open access to foreign markets is critical in order to enhance global demand for wild blueberries and drive positive growth.

In recent years, the wild blueberry industry has received assistance from the USDA through the Section 32 Bonus Buy program. The program was utilized to relieve oversupply of wild blueberries in the market. Wild blueberries purchased through the program were then distributed through the USDA's Food Purchase and Distribution Program. Due to the crop's previous inclusion in USDA's relief program and due to the effects that trade disruption has had on farmers, we believe that wild blueberries should be eligible for assistance under the Market

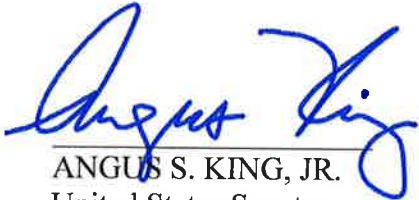
Facilitation Program. The USDA has already identified producers of other fruits for inclusion in the 2019 Market Facilitation Program, including fresh sweet cherry producers, cranberry producers, and fresh grape producers.

Wild blueberry producers have faced tremendous strain due to ongoing trade retaliation and disruption. We strongly request that the USDA take every appropriate action, in accordance with all applicable laws and regulations, to include wild blueberries within the Market Facilitation Program.

Thank you for your careful review and consideration of this request. We ask that your staff notify Olin Hartkopf with Senator King (202-224-5344), Cameron O'Brien with Senator Collins (202-224-2523), Kelliann Blazek with Congresswoman Pingree (202) 225-6116, and Will Woodworth with Congressman Golden (202) 225-6306 when a final decision is made.

Thank you again for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,


ANGUS S. KING, JR.
United States Senator


CHELLIE PINGREE
Member of Congress


SUSAN M. COLLINS
United States Senator


JARED F. GOLDEN
Member of Congress