



Series 4: Issues in Maine's Natural Resource Industries

The Wild Blueberry in Maine

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The wild blueberry is the official Maine berry, designated by the State legislature and the governor. Maine produces the most blueberries of any State or Province in North America, with an average production of more than 75 million pounds a year, which represents about 50% of the wild blueberry crop. The wild blueberry is unique in that it occurs naturally in Maine. The plants are managed to improve production on over 500 farms on 64,000 acres. Maine wild blueberries have a long history of commercial production beginning with the berries that were sent by railroad to support the Union troops in the Civil war. Maine produces 99% of the wild blueberries in the United States, with only minor commercial production occurring in New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Michigan. However, Atlantic Canada and Quebec produce about the same amount of wild blueberries as Maine growers.

Wild Versus Cultivated Berries

Wild blueberry growers in Maine and Canada must compete with the cultivated blueberry, which is grown in every state and province and imported from Chile in the winter months. The wild blueberry is smaller than the cultivated highbush blueberry and is used more as an ingredient in muffins, pancakes yogurt, etc. versus the cultivated blueberry where more than half of the crop is sold as fresh fruit. Most wild blueberries are processed as frozen berries in Maine so that the added value of \$75 million dollars contributes to the economy in rural Washington and Hancock counties. Additionally, many Maine based companies produce specialty wild blueberry products such as jams, chutneys and wines in addition to developing new products for the larger grocery stores such as juices, frozen products and toppings.

Major Challenge

The major challenge of wild blueberry growers is to remain competitive with the cultivated blueberry and the wild blueberry from Canada. Research efforts at the University of Maine have provided the information and educational outreach to growers that have enabled our growers to more than triple the crop in the past 20 years, from 20 million to over 75 million pounds. In addition to the base funding that is given by the Maine legislature through the support of the University of Maine budget, this effort has been funded by the wild blueberry tax and a special grant from the USDA. University researchers have also contributed to the knowledge base on the health benefits of the blueberry. A USDA study determined that the blueberry had the highest antioxidant level of 40 fruits and vegetables tested and wild blueberries has twice the level of the anthocyanins, the blue pigment in the fruit that neutralize the effects of harmful free radicals and protect against disease and age related health-risks. Studies looking at the possibility that blueberries can also help protect against cancer and diseases such as Alzheimer's are currently underway.

Future Health of the Industry

Concerns for the future health of the wild blueberry business in Maine include regulations involved in obtaining a suitable labor to harvest and process the crop, which involves about 10,000 people of which 60% are migrant professional harvesters, mostly Hispanic workers. Maine also relies on importing 50,000 or more honeybee hives into the state to pollinate the crop, making sustainable pollination a grower priority. The increasing dry summer conditions over the last 10 years coupled with federal agricultural policy moving producers in a direction to take more responsibility in the area of risk management is requiring farmers to make the investment in supplemental irrigation to reduce their risk and to insure against crop failure. The capital cost of irrigation systems and the development of a sustainable water source,

including regulations, makes this a difficult challenge for growers small and large. There is a growing concern among Maine's wild blueberry growers and processors in their ability to compete with their Canadian counter parts as the value of the Canadian dollar, electrical rates, benefit costs for employees and Canadian government support of expansion of the industry has resulted in large economic advantages for Canadian wild blueberry growers in the world market place. The unknown restrictions associated with the federal listing of the Atlantic salmon as an endangered species has had a chilling effect on the investment in new processing capacity in Maine since the mid 1990's.

Remaining Competitive

To remain competitive, the wild blueberry industry will need the support of the university for its research and outreach efforts, and the state legislature to provide support that allows the companies to continue environmental and economically sustainable production and to develop the expansion of value added opportunities for this unique natural resource, the Maine wild blueberry.

Key Words: wild blueberry, cultivated blueberry, management practices

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