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Maine's Wild Blueberry Growers Build Demand in Face of Increasing Blueberry Supply

Back-to-Back Bumper Crops, a Weak Canadian Dollar, and Increased Cultivated Blueberry Production Pushes Maine's Wild Blueberry Growers Toward Expanded Innovation, Increased Marketing, and a Request for Federal Support

PORTLAND, MAINE — July 6, 2017 — Maine's 150-year-old Wild Blueberry industry is working to build demand for the state's fruit while facing oversupply pressures and price competition resulting from a combination of factors, including a significant growth in cultivated blueberry production; several years of bumper Wild Blueberry crops in Maine and Canada; and a weak Canadian dollar that is giving Canadian Wild Blueberries a price advantage.

In response, Maine's growers have launched a multi-tiered counter-offensive, which includes a more aggressive marketing campaign targeting consumers, food manufacturers, and food service channels, and a national public school food service initiative. Simultaneously, with support from Maine's Congressional delegation and Maine Governor Paul LePage, the industry will receive up to \$10 million for a "Bonus Buy" from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, approved today. The program is designed to support American agriculture and encourage domestic consumption by purchasing products and diverting them to programs such as the Child and Adult Care Food Program. The USDA program is not funded through taxpayer dollars.

"Maine's wild blueberry industry has been an important part of Maine's economy and culture for centuries. In recent years, however, the wild blueberry industry has faced increasing challenges from global oversupply of cultivated berries and steeply declining prices," said Senators Collins and King and Representatives Pingree and Poliquin in a joint statement. "Earlier this year, we urged the USDA to provide relief to Maine growers through a bonus buy of surplus frozen wild blueberries, and we are pleased that the Department has agreed to take action. This investment to alleviate the supply issue, combined with the industry's efforts to boost demand, will help create new opportunities for wild blueberry growers and support a bright future for this unique Maine crop."

"Maine's Wild Blueberry growers appreciate the USDA's support and are optimistic about the future of the industry," said Nancy McBrady, Executive Director of the Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine. The Bonus Buy helps to lessen the surplus and can help stabilize prices, she added.

“Maine Wild Blueberry growers are a resilient group, but global supply and pricing pressures are seriously impacting our business today, said Roy Allen, a fourth-generation Wild Blueberry grower and processor in Ellsworth. “The Bonus Buy will help alleviate some short-term pressures while we pursue a more aggressive long-term strategy. In the last three years, we’ve experienced an oversupply issue, but prior to that, it was not uncommon for our freezers to be virtually empty before the new harvest arrived.”

“Maine’s Wild Blueberry industry is beginning to embrace the enormous opportunity that bigger crops can deliver,” McBrady adds. “We are shifting our strategy to target more large-scale food service, restaurant chains, and manufacturing businesses, and because of our abundant supply, we are better positioned than ever.”

A differentiation strategy

The Wild Blueberry industry’s primary marketing strategy is to educate consumers about the power of wild foods and the significant advantages of Wild over cultivated blueberries.

“Wild Blueberries have more genetic diversity, a unique origin story, they deliver two times the antioxidants, more fiber, and have a more intense flavor than the watery cultivated ones,” McBrady stated. “We also conducted consumer research that showed that once people understand the taste, health, and ‘real foods’ advantages of Wild Blueberries, they are more likely to purchase them,” she continued. “It is our job to convey this powerful information to food manufactures and food service companies so that they incorporate Wild Blueberries into new products that consumers will enjoy. Our robust supply and ingredient versatility enables us to enter more product categories than ever before,” McBrady noted.

Kashi’s Wild Blueberry Waffles, Panera’s Wild Blueberry Scone, Stonyfield’s Wild Blueberry Yogurt, and Clif’s Wild Blueberry Almond Bar are a few examples of products now featuring and stating Wild Blueberries on their packaging.

The campaign also positions frozen Wild Blueberries as a leading superfruit ingredient in a growing smoothie craze, which constitutes the most significant way Americans consume frozen fruit. According to the Dole Food Company, home smoothie consumption accounted for 21 percent of all U.S. retail frozen fruit sales in 2006, and increased to 60 percent by 2014.

Results from the Wild Blueberry campaign include:

- Website traffic expanded fourfold since 2013. Last year www.wildblueberries.com received over 1 million visits up from 250,000 in 2013.
- Mentions in national mainstream media outlets nearly tripled, with 2,624 mentions in 2015 to 6,228 in 2016, with a total potential reach of 4.8 billion impressions in 2016.
- Facebook likes have increased six-fold, from 50,000 in 2013 to 322,000 today.
- In early 2017, the industry launched a national school foodservice program aimed at increasing Wild Blueberries sales in public schools. Preliminary estimates show that in

June 2017, Wild Blueberry sales exceeded 2.25 million lbs. in 22 states (up from 1.18 million lbs. in only 13 states for all of 2016).

- A significant increase in [published scientific studies](#) now documents the health benefits of Wild Blueberries. In 1998, 5 studies were published compared to 150 studies published in 2015. Many of these studies reveal groundbreaking science about brain health, gut health, disease fighting properties, and antioxidant capacity of Wild Blueberries.

“American consumers are demanding healthier food and pure ingredients that are closer to nature,” said McBrady. “Given the market forces at work and our healthy supply of berries, we are working aggressively to tell our unique heritage, taste, and health story. We have seen that when consumers and food manufacturers understand the difference between Wild and cultivated blueberries, they almost always opt for Wild because it offers a more delicious taste and denser nutritional value. Through our commitment to better and greater outreach to key customer groups, I’m confident that Maine’s Wild Blueberry industry has a bright future.”

About the Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine

The Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine was established to promote the ongoing prosperity of the Maine Wild Blueberry industry. It works on behalf of Maine’s 500+ growers and processors of Wild Blueberries in the areas of research and education, promotion, and policy. For more information visit wildblueberries.com.