

MAINE STATE LEGISLATURE

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T H E M A I N E B L U E B E R R Y I N D U S T R Y

MAINE FOOD AND FARMLAND STUDY COMMISSION HEARINGS
HIGHLIGHTS AND WRITTEN TESTIMONY
MACHIAS, MAINE
APRIL 14, 1978

The following are highlights of the Maine Food and Farmland Study Commission Hearings on the Blueberry Industry. I have highlighted all verbal testimony.

Charles Stewart, A. L. Stewart & Sons, (Processor and Grower)

Fluctuations in availability due to yield differences make it hard to expand market.

Did not feel that land availability was a problem. The problem appears to be in increasing yields per acre through technological advances.

All growers hurt with extremes in market and yield conditions. "What we need is a fair price with a good yield". Yields on his barrens have gone from 124,000 boxes to 25,000 boxes in 2 years. This drives the cost per box to harvest up over 3 times.

The laborers who work the barrens are mostly local. Some come from Aroostook, and a few Micmac Indians from Canada.

The Government should support research and watch taxes on land, remembering that blueberry land only produces every other year. Stewart's taxes have gone up 800% in the last seven years. Barren land valued at about \$50/acre now. This seems low until you consider that all the swampland is included in the same number.

O.S.H.A. was called a costly joke. One ruling which particularly upset Mr. Stewart was the rule that children could not stay with parents but had to be bussed to Milbridge (a 4-hour bus ride). Another ruling which irritated Mr. Stewart was the ruling that showers had to be provided.

Tremendous losses are suffered yearly by people stealing berries. Perhaps a law increasing the fine for "accepting stolen berries" would be effective.

Gary Raymond, ASCS, USDA

Mr. Raymond suggested that the ASCS crop insurance program be implemented in Washington County.

Ed Piper, Experiment Station

Also stressed problem of market consistency. He quoted a range of 9 - 30 million pounds per year.

Mr. Piper gave a brief history of the industry which started about 100 years ago. He feels that yields could be increased if better weed control could be implemented thus allowing a more effective fertilization program. He felt that yields could be doubled.

Canada is increasing its industry by paying incentive payments to create blueberry lands, i.e. Nova Scotia \$50/acre; New Brunswick \$40/acre; Prince Edward Island \$400/acre.

Canada also is researching clone selection and cultivation of low bush blueberries.

National consumption of blueberries only 1 cup/person/year, could expand market. Canadians expanding into Europe.

Maine low bush gets premium market because of better flavor, but mainly due to size ("more blue impressions per pound").

Maine is #1 in Northeast and will stay that way since the industry is already established, with processors and handlers.

What is needed now is technical advances in harvesting, irrigation, environmental problems, reductions in winter injury, increased populations, weed control, disease control, and insect control.

Lincoln Sennett, Machias (small grower)

Small growers cannot compete because they cannot afford equipment and therefore, are at the mercy of "The Stewarts and Wymans" (2 of

6 packers).

Small growers have less harvest costs, i.e. 5-6¢/lb. while larger growers pay as much as 10-12¢/lb., and the "barrens cost even more to harvest".

O.S.H.A. and other laws require that the growers babysit for the kids. The withholding tax and unemployment tax are going to hurt the little guy. We need a lot less government interference.

Amr Ismail, Extension Blueberry Specialist

There are 40,000 - 50,000 acres grown by 900+ growers, with the following breakdown:

27% - less than 10 acres
25% - 10 to 25 acres
22% - 25 to 50 acres
26% - 50+ acres

There are 25,000 acres in Washington County, 10,000 in Hancock County and the balance scattered across Southwestern Maine.

Most are part time. The smallest have high yields and use their own family for labor so they make a little money. The large growers have low yields but can afford their own equipment and enjoy an economy of scale which allows them to be profitable. The medium size operator (50 - 200 acres) is the guy who suffers the most.

Harvesting costs vary. Some years the cost/lb. is 3 times the cost in good years. The psychology of the picker is that he likes a lot of berries and would rather rake for less in good crop than for more in poorer crops.

The barrens are unique areas because they are far from towns so that help must come in. These people prefer a straight box rate. In South and Western Maine most of the picking is by young laborers who usually are organized by a school teacher or someone like that. These are usually bussed to and from the site and are paid on either an hourly

or piece meal rate.

The price in 1976 was 32¢/lb. which was an all-time high. In 1977 the price soared to 60¢. The five-year average is about 52¢/lb.

The big woods area of Washington County could make good irrigated vegetable land if commodity price allowed.

Bill Hardy, Hope, Maine (grower)

He has a good situation in that his fields are flatter and he can use harvesting machines. Unemployment tax laws are forcing Mr. Hardy to convert more to machines. He felt strongly that we should analyze this effect on agriculture's future in Maine. Because "if we don't fight" these laws will cover small farms over, as 1½-man dairy farms.

He does use the farm and open space tax law to his advantage. He has no problem with the taxes now.

Biggest problem is labor laws. Secondly, the pesticide regulations, he feels, are hard on the smaller growers.

Dick Howard, SCS, USDA

Blueberries grow on all kinds of soils. Complete area not yet soil surveyed, so amount of future potential unknown.