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MAINE STATE LEGISLATURE  
GOVERNMENT OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE

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Date: March 5, 2021

To: Senator James Dill, Senate Chair  
Representative Margaret O'Neil, House Chair  
Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

From: Senator Nathan L. Libby, Senate Chair *Nate Libby*  
Representative Genevieve McDonald, House Chair *Genevieve McDonald*  
Government Oversight Committee

RE: Wild Blueberry Commission

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At its February 26, 2021 meeting, the Government Oversight Committee (GOC) considered a request for review of the Wild Blueberry Commission, which was presented by Senator Marianne Moore on behalf of a group of 6 legislators. A copy of the written request for review, submitted by letter to the GOC on February 28, 2020, is attached for your reference.

We are writing to request the assistance and input of the ACF committee regarding the requested review of the Wild Blueberry Commission from your standpoint as the policy committee with oversight of the commission. To assist us in our decision regarding the review request, we would appreciate receiving your input and any recommendations by March 26, 2021.

To inform your input on this matter, the GOC recommends you consider the following actions:

1. Holding a meeting with the ACF committee chairs, Senator Moore and other Legislative sponsors of the request, as appropriate; and
2. Inviting the Legislative sponsors of the request and representatives of the Wild Blueberry Commission and its staff to brief the committee and provide relevant documents related to the questions posed in the request. Documents may include, but are not limited to: contracts between the Wild Blueberry Commission and Wild Blueberries of North America; audits of the commission pursuant to 36 MRSA §4312-C, sub-§9; and reports of the commission required under 3 MRSA §959, sub§1, paragraph (A).

82 State House Station, Room 104 Cross Building  
Augusta, Maine 04333-0082  
TELEPHONE 207-287-1901 FAX: 207-287-1906

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to receiving your response.

Attachment

cc: Members, Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry  
Members, Government Oversight Committee  
Senator Marianne Moore  
Representative William Tuell  
Representative Anne Perry  
Representative Kathy Javner  
Representative Robert Alley  
Representative Rena Newell  
Karen Nadeau, Legislative Analyst, Office of Policy and Legal Analysis  
Lucia Nixon, Director, Office of Program Evaluation and Government Accountability

*129th  
Legislature  
Of Maine*

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3 State House Station  
Augusta, ME 04333-0003  
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February 28, 2020

Senator Justin Chenette, Chair  
Representative Anne-Marie Mastraccio, Chair  
Government Oversight Committee  
c/o Office of Program Evaluation and Government Accountability  
82 State House Station  
Augusta, ME 04333

Senator Chenette, Representative Mastraccio, Distinguished Members of the Government Oversight Committee:

We are writing today to formally request a review of the Wild Blueberry Commission (WBC), its stewardship of state blueberry taxes earmarked for marketing, and its relationship to an industry marketing group, Wild Blueberries of North America (WBANA), following a mid-February meeting of the Washington County Legislative Delegation with small wild blueberry growers and harvesters in Washington County.

At that meeting, the growers, Courtney Hammond of Lynch Hill Farm and Greg Bridges of Calais expressed concern that neither the WBC nor WBANA are being transparent with the manner in which they handle state blueberry tax revenues, have established a complex and seemingly incestuous relationship to steer tax monies toward larger producers, and have resisted internal reform efforts.

Given the short nature of this current legislative session, the lack of clarity around the issues at hand, and the need for further investigation before submitting legislation, we would ask that you authorize a review of the operations of both entities – WBC and WBANA and issue a report within the calendar year. We also believe that submitting any legislation at this time is preemptory, and ill-advised, but that there are several key questions that must be answered.

These are as follows:

1. Where is the blueberry tax money going? Is the WBC using WBANA to steer it back to themselves and not for marketing?
2. Is the relationship between the industry, WBC and WBANA transparent? If not, what specific actions must be taken to ensure that business is conducted in the public realm?


3. Who provides oversight of both WBC and WBANA, and is oversight adequate?

In the coming months, we would ask that you investigate the above concerns and issue a report on your findings. With all of the problems facing the wild blueberry industry, members should have the fullest confidence that tax dollars raised and appropriated for its future success are fully transparent and wisely managed.

Thank you,

  
Senator Marianne Moore

  
Representative William Tuell

  
Representative Anne Perry

  
Representative Kathy Javner

  
Representative Robert Alley

  
Representative Rena Newell