

United States Senate

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COMMITTEES:
APPROPRIATIONS
CHAIR
HEALTH, EDUCATION,
LABOR, AND PENSIONS
SELECT COMMITTEE
ON INTELLIGENCE

The Honorable Brooke Rollins
Secretary
Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Rollins:

Thank you for your continued advocacy on behalf of our farmers and rural communities. I know you have seen firsthand the challenges facing our agricultural producers and appreciate your commitment to ensuring that they have the resources needed to remain operating during these trying times. As the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) considers providing financial assistance, I urge you to consider the needs of Maine producers who have experienced hardships this year, especially growers of our specialty crops such as wild blueberries and apples, as well as farmers growing hay for their livestock.

Maine specialty crop producers are now facing tremendous challenges, such as increased costs of production, high labor costs, and extreme weather. On October 30, the U.S. Drought Monitor reported that the entire state of Maine is in a drought. Currently, 42.65 percent of Maine is an extreme drought, while 47.15 percent of the state is in a severe drought. These conditions have dramatically affected the apple and wild blueberry producers. These crops are vital to Maine's agricultural economy, yet they are often overlooked when USDA considers providing economic relief to producers.

Specialty crops represent a significant share of Maine's agricultural output, supporting thousands of jobs and boosting farmers and small business owners across the state. The wild blueberry industry has been an integral part of Maine's agricultural heritage since the mid-1800s, and due to its favorable rocky, acidic soils and cool climates, Maine grows almost 100 percent of all US produced wild blueberries. As a result of a rainy spring that interfered with pollination and the drought this summer that greatly hampered growth, the wild blueberry industry is facing losses of more than \$28 million. I spoke with one farmer who has lost 28 of her 32 wild blueberry acres due to the weather conditions this year. Her experience has been echoed by other wild blueberry farmers across Maine.

New England farmers also began cultivating apples in America nearly 150 years before our country gained its independence and have had a proud apple-growing tradition ever since. While the quality of Maine apples has been good this year, the quantity of the harvest has been greatly reduced, causing significant losses because of this year's drought. The Maine Pomological Society informed me that in a survey of farmers representing approximately 80 percent of the state's total apple production, all but one farm surveyed had crop production of 50-60 percent less than in 2024.

Finally, livestock producers in Maine are also being affected by increased drought conditions, with many having to purchase feed for their livestock from places as far away as Colorado. I urge the USDA to act swiftly in distributing the Livestock Forage Program (LFP) funds, as some Maine producers risk losing their farms due to these increased costs and drought conditions. It is important that these funds are released quickly so that farmers can purchase hay to sustain their livestock through the cold winter months, which are fast approaching.

Inclusion of specialty crops from Maine in any relief funding and the distribution of LFP funds to livestock producers are critical to ensuring many producers' futures. The drought conditions in Maine this year have been exceptional and have continued into the fall. Without help, Maine's wild blueberry and apple growers risk losing their acreage, and those losses will hurt rural communities across the state. I look forward to working with you to support these vital agricultural operations.

Sincerely,



Susan M. Collins
United States Senator