



The Blueberry Hill Climb

March 2-4, 2026

Briefing Book

Table of Contents

Keynote Speakers	3
Kickoff Breakfast (March 3)	3
Luncheon and Keynote Address (March 3)	4
Inspiring Possibilities Dinner (March 3).....	4
The Blueberry Hill Climb Breakfast (March 4)	5
Blueberry Pinnacle Award Presentation on Capitol Hill (March 4)	6
Education Sessions (March 3)	7
Patrick Penn, Deputy Secretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services, USDA	7
Panel Discussion: What’s Next for Agriculture Labor Reform.....	7
Update from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)	8
USDA Meetings (March 3)	9
Marketing and Regulatory Programs (MRP)	9
Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC)	10
Risk Management Agency (RMA).....	10
Trade and Foreign Agriculture Affairs (TFAA)	11
Agriculture Research Service (ARS)	11
Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).....	12
Issues Briefs & Talking Points	13
Farm Bill	13
Disaster Assistance Programs	15
Crop Insurance	16
Research	17
Export Market Development	17
Agricultural Workforce.....	17
Economic Assistance.....	18
Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) and Nutrition Policy	19



The Blueberry Hill Climb

March 2-4, 2026

Schedule Overview

Monday, March 2

5:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m.

Hill Climb Welcome Reception

Tuesday, March 3

7:30 a.m. – 9:30 a.m.

Kick-Off Breakfast

Congressman Moolenaar (R-MI-02)

Keith Sonderling, Deputy Secretary, U.S. DOL

10 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

Education Sessions

- Patrick Penn, Deputy Under Secretary, Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services at USDA
- Panel Discussion - Agricultural Labor Reform: What's Next
- Update from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

12:00 p.m. – 1:00 p.m.

Lunch & Learn

1:30 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.

USDA Meetings

- Marketing and Regulatory Programs (MRP)
- Farm Programs and Conservation (FPAC)
- Risk Management Agency (RMA)
- Trade and Foreign Agricultural Affairs (TFAA)
- Agricultural Research Service (ARS)
- Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

6:00 p.m. – 7:00 p.m.

Cocktail Reception with Special Guests

7:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m.

Inspiring Possibilities Dinner

Luke Lindberg, USDA Under Secretary for Trade and Foreign Agricultural Affairs

Wednesday, March 4

7:30 a.m. – 9:00 a.m.

GABOB Breakfast

Christy Seyfert, President, Farm Credit Council

10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

Hill Meetings

5:30 p.m. – 7:00 p.m.

Red, White, and Blueberry Reception



Keynote Speakers

Location: Moretti ABCD Ballroom, B1 Level

Kickoff Breakfast (March 3)

Representative John Moolenaar (R-MI-02)

Kick off your Hill Climb experience with insights from one of the blueberry industry's strongest champions in Congress. U.S. Representative John Moolenaar will provide an inside look at what's happening on Capitol Hill and discuss the outlook for H-2A reform and economic assistance for specialty crop producers — two top priorities as we meet with lawmakers.

Congressman Moolenaar serves on the House Committee on Appropriations, including both the Agriculture, Rural Development, FDA Subcommittee and the Labor, Health and Human Services Subcommittee — positions that give him direct influence over funding and oversight affecting agricultural labor and specialty crop programs. He has been a leading advocate for meaningful agricultural labor reform, introducing the bipartisan Supporting Farm Operations Act to freeze the Adverse Effect Wage Rate (AEWR) at 2023 levels and pressing USDA to address wage formulas that have driven unsustainable labor costs for farmers. He has also worked to secure economic relief and strengthen federal support for growers facing rising input costs, supply chain disruptions, and international competition.

Keith Sonderling, Deputy Secretary, U.S. Department of Labor

Deputy Secretary Sonderling will share efforts to modernize the H-2A agricultural guestworker program including regulatory improvements, streamlined processes, and initiatives to enhance program integrity while meeting U.S. agriculture's labor needs. As the United States Deputy Secretary of Labor, Sonderling is the second highest-ranking official and serves as the Department's Chief Operating Officer, overseeing the agency's \$14 billion dollar budget and 16,000 employees.

Prior to becoming Deputy Secretary, he was previously confirmed by the United States Senate to serve as the Commissioner of the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) from September 2020 until August 2024. He also served as the Commission's Vice-Chair from 2020-2021. Sonderling previously served at the US Department of Labor as the Acting and Deputy Administrator of the U.S. Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division from 2017-2020.



Before his government service, Sonderling was a partner at one of Florida’s oldest and largest law firms, Gunster. At Gunster, he counseled employers and litigated labor and employment disputes. In 2012, then-Governor Rick Scott appointed Sonderling to serve as the Chair of the Judicial Nominating Committee for appellate courts in South Florida.

Luncheon and Keynote Address (March 3)

Alveda King, PhD, Senior Advisor on Faith and Community Outreach, USDA

Join us for a special luncheon keynote featuring Dr. Alveda King — author, speaker, pastoral associate, and niece of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Drawing on her personal testimony and lifelong work in faith-based engagement, Dr. King will reflect on the promise of the American Dream and the values that strengthen families and communities.

She will also highlight the vital role farmers play in sustaining local economies and rural life, and discuss the mission of the USDA Faith Center, which partners with faith-based and community organizations to expand access to USDA resources and support resilient farms and communities.

An inspiring conversation on faith, opportunity, and the enduring impact of America’s agricultural leaders.

Inspiring Possibilities Dinner (March 3)

Luke Lindberg, USDA Under Secretary for Trade and Foreign Agriculture Affairs

At this year’s *Inspiring Possibilities Dinner*, Under Secretary Lindberg will discuss how USDA’s Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) programs are working to reduce the agricultural trade deficit, strengthen market access, and unlock new export pathways for U.S. agriculture. His remarks will connect directly to our industry’s broader vision of making blueberries the world’s favorite fruit and the strategic partnerships needed to turn that vision into reality.

Under Secretary Lindberg’s recent trade mission to Mexico alongside the Secretary of Agriculture proved exceptionally valuable for advancing meaningful opportunities to expand U.S. blueberry exports in one of our most important markets. His leadership on



that trip and the ongoing work to develop and grow demand there, demonstrates USDA's commitment to opening doors for American growers and delivering tangible export gains.

Attendees will also gain perspective on the upcoming Agricultural Trade Mission (ATM) schedule and the Administration's strategic approach to expanding exports. With longstanding market access requests pending for fresh blueberries in Australia and New Zealand - and encouraging recent progress on the New Zealand front - this is a pivotal moment for our industry's global growth strategy.

Before joining USDA, Lindberg served as Chief of Staff and Chief Strategy Officer at the Export-Import Bank of the United States during President Trump's first term. Most recently, he led South Dakota Trade, a public-private partnership focused on expanding international market access for regional exporters. He holds degrees in Government & Politics, Public Policy, and Business Administration from the University of Maryland.

The Blueberry Hill Climb Breakfast (March 4)

Christy Seyfert, President, Farm Credit Council

Join us for the Blueberry Hill Climb Breakfast, featuring insights from Christy Seyfert, President of the Farm Credit Council. The Council represents the Farm Credit System's interests in Congress and with regulatory agencies, with a focus on the farm bill, crop insurance, and rural infrastructure.

For blueberry growers, access to capital and crop insurance is essential for the long-term sustainability of the industry. In this session, Seyfert will provide an overview of the Council's advocacy priorities, share analysis of the farm economy, and offer practical tips to amplify your voice on Capitol Hill. Don't miss this opportunity to gain valuable guidance on key policy areas and prepare for a day of effective advocacy.

With more than 25 years of experience in Washington, D.C., Seyfert has shaped agricultural policy at the national level and led high-impact advocacy efforts for the farm economy, markets, infrastructure, and rural development. Prior to joining Farm Credit Council, she was Executive Director of Government Affairs for the American Soybean Association, where she led the organization's Washington team and was repeatedly recognized on The Hill's list of Top Lobbyists. Seyfert's background also includes corporate advocacy focusing on crop insurance and financial services and roles serving leaders of



the U.S. House and Senate Agriculture Committees. She holds a degree in agriculture and food science from the University of Georgia and maintains close ties to her family farms in Georgia and Kansas with her husband and two daughters.

Blueberry Pinnacle Award Presentation on Capitol Hill (March 4)

Representative Glenn “GT” Thompson (R-Pa-15), Chair, House Agriculture Committee

Representative Glenn “G.T.” Thompson is a leading voice for U.S. agriculture and a steadfast champion for policies that support the specialty crop industry, rural communities, and family farms. As Chairman of the U.S. House Committee on Agriculture, Thompson has delivered key policy wins, including strengthening crop insurance through increased premium subsidies and expanded coverage options in major legislation such as H.R. 1, and enhancing the Tree Assistance Program to better support growers recovering from natural disasters.

With deep roots in Pennsylvania agriculture and decades of public service, he continues to advocate for a comprehensive farm bill and meaningful agricultural labor reform that address the unique needs of specialty crop producers, including blueberry growers. Under his leadership, the Committee has worked to elevate specialty crop priorities and secure critical investments in risk-management tools and research support that help growers remain competitive and resilient.

A graduate of Pennsylvania State University and Temple University, Thompson represents Pennsylvania’s largest congressional district and brings a lifetime of dedication to advancing federal agriculture policy.

The Blueberry Pinnacle Award is presented each year during the Blueberry Hill Climb to a distinguished member of Congress who has demonstrated outstanding leadership in advancing policies that enhance the competitiveness of U.S. blueberry growers. The honoree is selected by the NABC Government Affairs Committee.

Past award recipients:

- 2025 - Representative Kat Cammack (R-FL-03)
- 2024 - Senator Debbie Stabenow (D-MI)



Education Sessions (March 3)

Location: Moretti ABCD Ballroom, B1 Level

Patrick Penn, Deputy Secretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services, USDA

USDA Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services Deputy Under Secretary Patrick Penn will unpack the latest scientific evidence informing the 2025–2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans and how these recommendations are shaping federal nutrition policy, procurement, and school food standards. Following his remarks, he will be joined on stage for a fireside chat with North American Blueberry Council Senior Director of Government Affairs and Public Policy Alyssa Houtby to explore opportunities to improve childhood nutrition, increase fruit consumption through USDA programs, and strategically position blueberries within school meals under evolving sugar limits and nutrition standards.

About FNCS: The mission of the FNCS mission area is to increase food security and reduce hunger by providing children and low-income individuals access to nutritious food and nutrition education. The mission area operates 16 federal nutrition assistance programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and National School Lunch Program.

Panel Discussion: What's Next for Agriculture Labor Reform

John Hollay, *President and CEO, National Association of Agriculture Employers*

Lynn Jacquez, *Principal, CJ Lake*

Kristi Boswell, *Counsel, Alston & Bird*

This panel will examine recent regulatory changes in agricultural labor and the legislative efforts underway to make those changes permanent. This session will equip you with the knowledge to navigate the evolving agricultural labor landscape and advocate for practical reforms that support both farmers and workers. You will leave prepared with key insights and talking points for their meetings on the Hill.



**The Blueberry
Hill Climb**

March 2-4, 2026

Update from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

Kyle Kunkler, Deputy Assistant Administrator, Office of Chemical Safety and Pollution Prevention, U.S. EPA

Mr. Kunkler will discuss EPA’s approach to implementing the Endangered Species Act (ESA) mitigation options for pesticides and how these efforts are evolving to balance species protection with growers’ need for reliable crop protection tools. Drawing on his experience in agricultural policy and crop protection advocacy, Kunkler will explain the agency’s pesticide ESA strategies — including herbicide, insecticide, and other mitigation frameworks that aim to reduce risks to listed species while providing flexibility for producers — and outline how growers can engage with EPA as these mitigation programs are implemented and refined.



USDA Meetings (March 3)

Location: Moretti ABCD Ballroom, B1 Level

Marketing and Regulatory Programs (MRP)

Under Secretary Dudley Hoskins

Under Secretary Hoskins will provide updates focused on federal procurement and the administration of programs that support specialty crop growers. Overseeing the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) and the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), he will highlight USDA's purchasing priorities, program delivery, and ongoing efforts to strengthen USDA Market News through improved data collection, reporting, and transparency to better serve producers and the marketplace.

About Dudley Hoskins: Prior to his confirmation, Hoskins served as counsel on the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry and previously held several leadership roles at USDA, including Chief of Staff for Marketing and Regulatory Programs **and** Senior Advisor to the Secretary. His career also includes policy work with industry and state agriculture organizations, and he holds a law degree and extensive experience in agricultural policy and regulatory affairs.

About MRP: MRP is focused on supporting U.S. agriculture by facilitating the domestic and international marketing of agricultural products, protecting plant and animal health, and ensuring humane care and fair practices in regulated markets. MRP's work helps strengthen markets, safeguards the agricultural sector from pests and diseases, and provides infrastructure and standards that benefit both producers and consumers.

Discussion Topics:

- Market News
- Procurement
- Oversight of Research and Promotion Programs



Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC)

Under Secretary Richard Fordyce

Under Secretary Fordyce, a fourth-generation Missouri farmer and former Farm Service Agency (FSA) Administrator, will discuss USDA support for producers, with an emphasis on economic assistance, disaster programs such as the Tree Assistance Program, and FSA farm loans. Drawing on his experience serving farmers both in his own row-crop and cattle operation and in government roles, including leading FSA's nationwide network of county and state offices and directing the Missouri Department of Agriculture, Under Secretary Fordyce will share how these programs help growers manage risk, access credit, and respond to natural and economic challenges. He will also highlight how FPAC and FSA are working to better serve specialty crop growers and strengthen the long-term resilience of U.S. agriculture.

About FPAC: Created in 2017, the FPAC mission area is the central hub for providing voluntary, farm-focused programs to American producers, ranchers, and foresters. FPAC unites the Farm Service Agency (FSA), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Risk Management Agency (RMA), and the FPAC Business Center to support disaster assistance, conservation, and risk management.

Discussion Topics:

- Tree Assistance Program
- Economic Assistance
- Delivery of disaster and economic aid

Risk Management Agency (RMA)

Bryan McQuary, Senior Risk Management Specialist (Virtual)

Bryan McQuary will discuss recent and upcoming crop insurance improvements supporting blueberry growers. As a senior risk management specialist with USDA's RMA Valdosta Regional Office, Bryan provides technical expertise and leadership to expand access to federal crop insurance programs. His team recently extended blueberry coverage into 16 new counties, giving growers greater flexibility and reducing administrative barriers. An Air Force veteran, Bryan applies his attention to detail and commitment to service to help producers navigate crop insurance options and strengthen the safety net for blueberry operations.



About RMA: RMA oversees the Federal Crop Insurance Corporation (FCIC) and works through a public-private partnership with Approved Insurance Providers (AIPs), which sell and service federal crop insurance policies nationwide. RMA shares risk with AIPs to protect farmers and ranchers against catastrophic losses from major weather events.

Trade and Foreign Agriculture Affairs (TFAA)

Peter Laudeman, Senior Policy Advisor

USDA plays a central role in expanding global markets for U.S. agricultural products, including blueberries. This session will highlight the agency's efforts to strengthen exports through market development and trade promotion programs such as the Market Assistance Program (MAP), the Technical Assistance for Specialty Crops (TASC) Program and the new America First Trade Promotion Program.

The discussion will also cover how producers and cooperators can use USDA Agricultural Trade Missions to build relationships in priority markets, as well as USDA's role in upcoming USMCA renegotiations and its coordination with the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) on trade issues affecting U.S. agriculture.

About TFAA: TFAA is the lead U.S. agency tasked with promoting exports of U.S. agricultural products through market intelligence, trade policy, trade capacity building, and trade promotion programs.

Discussion Topics:

- Market Access Program
- Technical Assistance of Specialty Crops Program
- Trade Mission plans

Agriculture Research Service (ARS)

Jeff Silverstein, Ph.D., Associate Administrator

Michael Arnold, Assistant Administrator

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Research Service (ARS) plays a central role in advancing blueberry research – from breeding and genetics to production systems



that support growers nationwide. In this session, ARS leadership will highlight the agency’s current and ongoing work in blueberries, with a focus on how long-standing research investments have shaped the modern U.S. blueberry industry.

The discussion will also explore the USDA’s broader reorganization efforts and what they may mean for key ARS research stations across the country. Attention will be given to the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center, a cornerstone facility for USDA blueberry breeding and specialty crop research. You’ll gain insight into how structural changes could impact research capacity, collaboration and the future direction of public agricultural science.

About ARS: ARS is one of four agencies within USDA’s Research, Education, and Economics mission area. As the USDA’s chief scientific in-house research agency, ARS’ mission is to deliver scientific solutions to national and global agricultural challenges.

Discussion Topics:

- Future of the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center and the USDA Reorganization Plan

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

Colton Buckley, Associate Chief

Mr. Buckley will discuss how NRCS is working to make conservation programs – such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) – more accessible to specialty crop producers. The session will also highlight the newly announced Regenerative Pilot Program, including how it will support growers in adopting regenerative practices and how producers can get involved through NRCS.



Issues Briefs & Talking Points

Topline: U.S. blueberry producers are experiencing declining profitability due to rapidly escalating costs that put them at a competitive disadvantage. Congress should support policies and programs that keep the domestic producer sustainable and profitable.

- The U.S. blueberry industry contributes \$6.7 billion in annual economic impact, translating to more than \$18.3 million flowing into the U.S. economy and local communities every day.
- U.S. blueberry growers alone create and sustain more than 49,260 full-time equivalent jobs each year.
- Nearly \$2.4 billion in labor income is generated by the business activities of growers – equating to more than \$6.7 million each day.

Farm Bill

The Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 has been extended again through September 30, 2026, after Congress incorporated the extension into the FY 2026 appropriations package that reopened the federal government and funded USDA programs for the year. While a full, standalone Farm Bill has not yet been enacted, H.R. 1, the “One Big Beautiful Bill,” signed into law in 2025, included targeted agriculture provisions that strengthened the farm safety net, enhanced crop insurance, invested in research and mechanization, and increased funding for nutrition and export programs important to specialty crop growers. NABC supports building on these provisions through farm bill legislation to ensure growers have a predictable safety net and the tools needed to remain competitive.

Chair GT Thompson (R-PA) and House Ag Committee Republicans introduced the [Farm, Food, and National Security Act of 2026](#), with committee markup scheduled for March 3. The process is expected to be partisan, as many Democrats plan to offer amendments targeting SNAP cuts and opposing provisions like uniform pesticide labeling.

From NABC’s standpoint, the Farm, Food, and National Security Act of 2026 is [overwhelmingly positive](#).



Key provisions include:

- Tree Assistance Program
 - Creates a prepayment option
 - Clarifies that fields that are no longer economically viable are eligible
 - Extends the period to complete the project from 12 months to 2 years
 - Requires FSA to respond to an applicant within 120 days
 - Allows for replacement with alternative varieties, stand density, or location
- Creates a permanent assistance program framework for specialty crop growers
- Crop Insurance
 - Creates a Specialty Crop Committee that reports to the Federal Crop Insurance Corporation
 - Creates a Specialty Crop Coordinator position
 - Directs RMA to conduct research and development for a blueberry revenue policy
 - Directs RMA to conduct research and development of an index policy for frost and freeze
- Export Market Development
 - Increases funding for the Market Assistance Program (MAP) and the Technical Assistance for Specialty Crops (TASC)
 - Directs USTR and USDA to produce a biennial report on export market barriers affecting specialty crops
- Specialty Crop Research Initiative
 - Earmarks \$30M per year in SCRI funding for mechanization and automation
 - Waives the matching fund requirement for SCRI grants
- Specialty Crop Block Grant (SCBG) Program
 - Requires State administrators to consult with specialty crop growers and associations in their state when determining program priorities
- Nutrition
 - Makes the Local Foods Procurement Program permanent

NABC's top Farm Bill priorities:

- Disaster Assistance Programs (Tree Assistance Program)
- Crop Insurance
- Research & Mechanization
- Export Market Development



Disaster Assistance Programs

Tree Assistance Program

The 2014 Farm Bill authorized the [Tree Assistance Program \(TAP\)](#) to provide financial assistance to qualifying orchardists and nursery tree growers to replant or rehabilitate eligible trees, bushes and vines damaged by natural disasters.

We support the following improvements to TAP:

- Extend assistance to trees, bushes, and vines no longer capable of production.
- Allow prepayment and alternative variety or stand density replanting.
- Require FSA to respond within 120 days.
- Extend time for replacement and rehabilitation activities.

Talking Points:

- TAP is critically important for producers who must rehabilitate or replant a field following a natural disaster or pest/disease outbreak.
- Sometimes, a bush may no longer be capable of producing a viable crop, even if the bush is not dead. In this situation, a grower should be able to use TAP to replant.
- The current 12-month timeframe is insufficient to remove and replant a blueberry orchard, especially in response to plant disease infection. At least 24 months is needed to complete standard horticultural practices and prevent reinfection of plant diseases.
- Producers need the ability to replant with a different variety to be competitive following a loss. For instance, a different variety may be available that is more resistant to loss (i.e., drought, pest/disease, freeze), better suited for a changing climate, conducive to mechanical harvesting, or produces greater yields.

Permanent Specialty Crop Disaster Framework

- Establish a permanent, specialty crop-specific emergency framework based on CFAP-2 and MASC.
- Support producers through economic crises, natural disasters, and market disruptions (see Economic Assistance section).



Talking Points:

- High economic value: Specialty crops generate over \$75 billion in farm-gate value—more than a third of all U.S. crop sales—yet farmers don't have the same risk-management tools as commodity crops.
- Unique risks: Specialty crops are perishable and sensitive to specific weather events like flash freezes, heat waves, or smoke, so farmers need faster, targeted disaster relief.
- Gaps in coverage: Relying on programs like WHIP+ or ERP is uncertain and slow. A permanent safety net would provide predictable and fair support.
- Market challenges: Specialty crops often have fewer buyers and less price transparency, making standard insurance difficult to design.
- High production costs: These crops are labor- and input-intensive. A single disaster can threaten the farm's survival and local economies.
- Diverse operations: Farmers grow many different crops and maintain specialized infrastructure. Coverage must protect against losses that standard insurance often misses.

Crop Insurance

- The available crop insurance products for blueberries could be improved and expanded to better serve producers and reduce the overall risk pool.
- To ensure blueberry growers have access to effective crop insurance products, congress should:
- Create a Specialty Crop Advisory Committee to counsel RMA on issues related to specialty crop insurance policies.
 - For example, better data is needed to set an accurate established price and T-Yield.
 - For example, USDA should be able to expand existing products to nearby counties using the nearby county's data. There are some blueberries producing counties that are not covered by the existing blueberry APH policy.
- Direct RMA to carry out research and development of a Revenue policy for blueberries.

Additional Talking Points:

- Crop insurance participation by blueberry producers vary widely state-by-state. For example, in Washington State only 31% of blueberry acreage is insured compared to 70% in Michigan and 88% in Georgia.



- A reason for this discrepancy is the general effectiveness of the current blueberry policy.
- The available crop insurance products for blueberries could be improved and expanded upon to better serve producers and reduce the overall risk pool.

Research

- The Farm Bill should set aside funds within SCRI dedicated to mechanization and automation.
- The Farm Bill should require that State program administrator to establish for the program in consultation with specialty crop growers and producer groups in that state.

Talking Points:

- U.S. agriculture must have access to advanced technologies to compete in the global market, particularly with rising input and labor challenges.
- It's critical to ensure the agriculture industry has the necessary resources to modernize and not fall behind.

Export Market Development

- Double Market Access Program (MAP) funding from \$200M to \$400M.
- Additional funding for the Technical Assistance for Specialty Crops (TASC) program and other trade programs to expand blueberry exports.

Agricultural Workforce

Key Policy Ask: Congress must codify the H-2A AEWR Interim Final Rule into statute to provide certainty for blueberry growers, protect rural jobs, preserve long-term agricultural investments, and ensure continued domestic fruit production.

The 2025 IFR modernizes wage calculations by using state-specific Bureau of Labor Statistics data, establishing entry-level and experienced skill categories, and accounting for employer-provided housing. On average, the IFR reduced AEWR rates by approximately \$3 per hour in 2026 compared to 2025 in blueberry-producing states.



The Blueberry Hill Climb

March 2-4, 2026

		<i>Statewide Hourly AEWRs Determined Under the DOL IFR</i>		
State	2025 FLS-Based AEWR	Skill Level 1 (Entry-Level)	Skill Level II (Experienced Level)	H-2A Adverse Compensation Adjustment
California	\$19.97	\$16.45	\$18.71	-\$3.00
Florida	\$16.23	\$12.47	\$15.06	-\$2.29
Georgia	\$16.08	\$12.27	\$16.22	-\$1.75
Indiana	\$19.57	\$14.93	\$19.22	-\$1.27
Michigan	\$18.15	\$13.78	\$17.47	-\$1.32
Mississippi	\$14.83	\$9.74	\$14.92	-\$1.15
New Jersey	\$17.96	\$16.05	\$19.41	-\$2.28
North Carolina	\$16.16	\$12.78	\$16.39	-\$1.69
Oregon	\$19.82	\$15.25	\$17.62	-\$2.11
Washington	\$19.82	\$16.53	\$19.00	-\$2.49

Talking Points:

- Fresh blueberries must be hand harvested and carefully pruned to meet quality standards.
- While growers continue investing in mechanization, skilled hand labor remains essential.
- Labor represents more than 40% of total farm expenses, and blueberry fields are long-term capital investments that produce for decades.
- Prior AEWR calculations rose sharply year after year, reaching an average of \$17.86 in 2025 across blueberry-producing states and outpacing major economic indicators.

Economic Assistance

Congress must pass a supplemental funding package that provides no less than \$5 billion for specialty crops. Any aid package for agriculture should set aside not less than 1/3 of total funds for specialty crop producers.



Key elements from prior successful specialty crop assistance programs like CFAP II and MASC should be incorporated:

- Payment limitations of not less than \$900,000
- Exemption from AGI limitations if at least 75% of income is derived from farming activities
- Payments calculated based on a grower's individual aggregate specialty crop receipts (sales or revenue)
- Allow growers to select a base year from at least three predetermined years
- Require minimal paperwork and allow self-attestation subject to audit

Talking Points:

- A report by the American Farm Bureau Federation found that higher labor, input, and packing costs are outpacing pricing gains, leaving many blueberry growers unable to recover their long-run economic costs.
- A recent Michigan State University cost-of-production study shows that the average blueberry farm is barely breaking even.
- Growers are covering short-term operating expenses but falling short of achieving long-term economic viability.
- Additional aid will keep family farms in business, sustain rural jobs, preserve domestic production, and preserve nutrition securing through American-grown specialty crops.

Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) and Nutrition Policy

NABC supports continuation and improvement of federal nutrition programs that drives consumption of blueberries including the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP), WIC, the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program within SNAP, Food Is Medicine and produce prescriptions, and school meal programs.

The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2026 included \$15 million in grants for community-based organizations to provide produce prescriptions to pregnant women.

Policy Recommendations:

- Support the [Produce Prescriptions for Veterans Act](#) which allows the VA to classify produce prescriptions as a medical service for veterans.



The Blueberry Hill Climb

March 2-4, 2026

- Include guidance for berries or anthocyanin-rich fruits in SNAP, WIC, and school meals
 - Recommend at least one daily serving of berries to improve nutrient intake

Talking Points:

- Past DGAs divided vegetables into color- and type-based subgroups, but current editions no longer provide this level of specificity.
- Fruit has never been divided into subgroups, despite wide variation in nutrient content and bioactive compounds.
- Blueberries are:
 - Rich in anthocyanins & flavonoids – bioactives with anti-inflammatory and antioxidant activity that support heart and brain health
 - High in fiber – helps digestion, keeps you full, and supports healthy blood sugar and cholesterol
- Most other commonly consumed fruit have very little anthocyanins.
- Poor diet contributes an estimated \$50 billion annually to U.S. healthcare expenditures
- Food is Medicine (FIM) is now a key component of federal and state level strategies aimed at improving population health while reducing healthcare spending.