



# **The Blueberry Hill Climb**

*Attendee Briefing*



## Hill Climb Briefing



**Alyssa Houtby**  
**NABC**



**Lilia McFarland-Horder**  
**Monument Advocacy**



**John Weber**  
**Monument Advocacy**



# The Blueberry Hill Climb

## *Attendee Briefing*

### Schedule at a Glance

#### *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

10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. Education Sessions

12:00 p.m. – 1:30 p.m. Lunch & Keynote

1:30 p.m. – 5:00 p.m. USDA Meetings

6:00 p.m. – 7:00 p.m. Cocktail Hour

7:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m. Inspiring Possibilities Dinner

#### *Wednesday March 4*

7:30 a.m. – 8:45 a.m. The Hill Climb Breakfast

9:00 a.m. Bus Departs

10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. Hill Meetings

5:00 p.m. – 5:15 p.m. Group Photo

5:30 p.m. – 7:00 p.m. Red, White, and Blueberry Reception



# The Blueberry Hill Climb

*Attendee Briefing*

## Kick-off Breakfast



**Representative John Moolenaar**



**DOL Deputy Secretary Keith Sonderling**



# The Blueberry Hill Climb

## *Attendee Briefing*

### Tuesday Morning – Education Sessions

*10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.*

- Patrick Penn, Deputy Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services at USDA
- Panel Discussion: What's Next for Agricultural Labor Reform
- Kyle Kunkler, Deputy Assistant Administrator, Office of Chemical Safety and Pollution Prevention, U.S. EPA



# The Blueberry Hill Climb

*Attendee Briefing*



**Luncheon and Keynote  
Address**

**Alveda C. King, PhD**

**Senior Advisor on Faith and  
Community Outreach, USDA**



# The Blueberry Hill Climb

## *Attendee Briefing*

### Tuesday Afternoon

*1:30 p.m. - 5:00 p.m.*

#### **USDA**

- Dudley Hoskins, Under Secretary for Marketing and Regulatory Programs
- Richard Fordyce, Under Secretary for Farm Production and Conservation
- Bryan McQuary, Senior Risk Management Specialist, Risk Management Agency
- Peter Laudeman, Senior Policy Advisor, Trade and Foreign Agricultural Affairs
- Jeff Silverstein, Ph.D., Associate Administrator & Michael Arnold, Assistant Administrator, Agriculture Research Service
- Colton Buckley, Chief, Natural Resources Conservation Service



# The Blueberry Hill Climb

*Attendee Briefing*



**Inspiring Possibilities Dinner**

**Luke Lindberg**

**USDA Under Secretary for Trade and  
Foreign Agricultural Affairs**



# The Blueberry Hill Climb

*Attendee Briefing*

# Wednesday Hill Climb





# The Blueberry Hill Climb

*Attendee Briefing*



**Breakfast Keynote Address**

**Christy Seyfert**

**President,  
Farm Credit Council**



# The Blueberry Hill Climb

## *Attendee Briefing*

### Small Group Meetings

9 Groups, assigned by Region:

- West 1 (CA, BC)
- West 2 (CA)
- West 3 (OR)
- West 4 (WA, BC)
- Eastern (NJ, International)
- Midwest 1 (MI)
- Midwest 2 (MI)
- Southeast 1 (FL, NC)
- Southeast 2 (GA)





# The Blueberry Hill Climb

## *Attendee Briefing*

### The Issues

- Labor
- Farm Bill
- Economic Assistance for Specialty Crop Growers
- Federal Nutrition Programs





# The Blueberry Hill Climb

## *Attendee Briefing*

### Top Line

**Labor** – Congress must codify the H-2A AEWR Interim Final Rule to provide certainty for blueberry growers, protect rural jobs, preserve long-term agricultural investments, and ensure continued domestic fruit production.

**Farm Bill** – The North American Blueberry Council (NABC) supports a full five-year farm bill that strengthens the safety net, enhances competitiveness, and builds on the investment made by H.R. 1.

**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.

**Nutrition Programs** – Including specific berry recommendations, especially for blueberries, in the DGAs and federal nutrition programs would promote healthier choices and improve Americans' overall diet.



# The Blueberry Hill Climb

## Attendee Briefing



### Top Five Farm Bill Priorities

The North American Blueberry Council (NABC) supports a full five-year farm safety net, robust export competitiveness, and builds on the investment

#### Disaster Assistance Programs

##### Tree Assistance Program

- Expand eligibility to include fields that are no longer economically viable.
- Provide a prepayment option.
- Extend the period of time to carry out replacement and rehabilitation act.
- Allow for growers to replant using an alternative variety and/or stand dens.
- Require FSA to respond to an application for assistance within 120 days.

##### Permanent Disaster Program Framework

- Establish a permanent, specialty crop-specific, emergency framework based on support producers through economic crises, natural disasters, and market programs should be incorporated.
- Payment limitations of not less than \$100,000
- Exempt from AGI limitations of at least 75% of income derived from farming activities.
- Payments calculated based on a grower's individual aggregate specialty crop receipts (with a cap).
- Allow growers to select a base year from at least three prior emergency years.
- Require minimal paperwork and allow self-certification under penalty of perjury (subject to audit).

#### Research

- Continue Specialty Crop Research Initiative and Block Grant Program.
- Set aside dedicated SCF funds for re-education and automation research.

#### Crop Insurance

- Create a Specialty Crop Advisory Committee within RMA.
- Add flexibility in 505(b) standards for specialty crops.
- Enhance data collection and codify improvements to Whole Farm Revenue.
- Develop review a policy for blueberries and an index policy for cold weather.

#### Export Market Development

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

#### Nutrition

- Support Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (SNIP) to increase purchasing power for fruits and vegetables, including Produce Prescription programs.

NABC is a proud member of the Specialty Crop Farm Bill Alliance - a national coalition of more than 200 organizations representing specialty crop producers - and strongly supports the Alliance's policy recommendations.

### Economic Relief for Blueberry Growers:

#### The Situation

Blueberry farmers are facing a critical economic moment. Years of rising input and labor costs and repeated natural disasters have placed excessive strain on farms - yet specialty crop producers are routinely left out of federal farm safety net programs designed for commodity crops.

Recent data confirms the severity of the challenge:

- 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 farms barely breaking even.

Many growers are covering short-term operating expenses but falling short of achieving long-term economic viability.

#### The Request

Congress must pass a supplemental funding package that provides at least \$5 billion for special crop packages for agriculture that are not covered by crop programs.

- To ensure the program meets effectively for growers, key elements from prior successful specialty crop programs should be incorporated.
- Payment limitations of not less than \$100,000
- Exempt from AGI limitations of at least 75% of income derived from farming activities.
- Payments calculated based on a grower's individual aggregate specialty crop receipts (with a cap).
- Allow growers to select a base year from at least three prior emergency years.
- Require minimal paperwork and allow self-certification under penalty of perjury (subject to audit).

#### Why It Matters

Blueberry farms need targeted economic support now. Additional aid will keep family farms in business, sustain rural jobs, preserve domestic production, and preserve nutrition securing their American specialty crops.

Congressional action will help ensure specialty crop producers receive support during this period of economic stress.



#### The Broader Spillover

Specialty crop operations are often small businesses and account for an all too small percentage of total revenue.

Yet, out of the recently announced Farmer Bridge Program and assistance for specialty crops growers unable to recover their long-run economic costs.

The amount of funding available is economic stress to crop's sector.



### Protect American Blueberry Farms Codify the H-2A AEWR Interim Final Rule

#### Blueberries are a Labor-Intensive, Permanent Crop

Fresh market blueberries must be hand harvested and carefully pruned to meet quality standards. While growers continue investing in mechanization, skilled hand labor remains essential. Labor costs more than 40% of total farm expenses, and blueberry fields are long-term capital investments that produce for decades.

#### The Challenge: Escalating AEWR Rates

The H-2A program allows growers to hire temporary seasonal workers only after the federal government certifies that sufficient U.S. workers are available. However, 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.

#### The Solution: AEWR Interim Final Rule (IFR)

The 2025 IFR modernizes wage calculations by using state-to-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 53% per hour in 2026 compared to 2025 in blueberry-producing states.

#### Statewide Hourly AEWRs Determined Under the DOL IFR

State	2025 PLS-Based AEWR	2026 Level I (Entry-Level)	2026 Level II (Experienced Level)	H-2A Adversely Comparison Adjustment
California	\$16.97	\$19.75	\$19.97	7.04%
Florida	\$16.23	\$16.77	\$16.23	13.26%
Georgia	\$16.04	\$14.62	\$16.04	17.63%
Indiana	\$16.57	\$16.12	\$16.57	13.64%
Kentucky	\$16.30	\$16.30	\$16.30	4.67%
Massachusetts	\$14.43	\$14.33	\$14.43	6.43%
New Jersey	\$17.54	\$17.30	\$17.54	6.53%
North Carolina	\$16.16	\$15.61	\$16.16	6.21%
Oregon	\$16.42	\$16.25	\$16.42	10.30%
Washington	\$16.42	\$16.25	\$16.42	10.30%

#### Economic Impact

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, correcting inflated wage calculations is expected to save agricultural employers approximately \$2.48 billion annually and more than \$7 billion over ten years, while maintaining statutory protections for U.S. workers.

Research conducted by a former member of the White House's Council of Economic Advisors found using an AEWR that more closely reflects the economics of an agricultural industry that competes in a global market would better protect U.S. workers, support domestic food production, increase Americans' consumption of domestically grown fruits and vegetables, create jobs, and strengthen rural economic growth.

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.



### Public Health with the Power of Blueberries

for a Berry Subgroup in the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA)

Fast DGA details vegetable into color- and top-based subgroups, but current editions no longer provide the level of specificity.

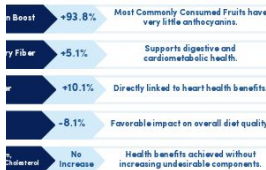
Fruit has never been divided into subgroups, despite wide variation in nutrient content and bioactive compounds.

Targeted fruit subgroups, especially for berries, could improve diet quality and reduce chronic disease risk.

Rich in anthocyanins & flavonoids - bioactives with anti-inflammatory and antioxidant activity that support heart and brain health.

#### DA Dietary Pattern Impact:

versus Common Fruit with Berries in a 2,000-Calorie Diet



### Use of Blueberries

are essential nutrients to support health and well-being

Research indicates that poor diet quality, including insufficient fruit and vegetable intake, accounts for almost 20 percent of healthcare costs associated with cardiovascular disease, cancer, and diabetes. Overall, poor diet contributes an estimated \$50 billion annually to U.S. healthcare expenditures.

Food is Medicine: An Evidence-Based Solution to improve health across the country one planting program at a time. These programs offer provide participants with prescriptions for fruits and vegetables, nutrition education, and regular clinical follow-up. Blueberries are a natural fit for FIM interventions: they are widely available year-round in fresh and frozen forms, easy to incorporate into meals and snacks and supported by a growing body of research demonstrating positive health outcomes. Early results indicate that these programs can improve patient outcomes while generating healthcare cost savings, particularly for populations at high risk of diet-related disease.

More than 1 million FIM pilots were created with support from Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) and momentum is growing at the federal level to expand and sustainably fund FIM initiatives. Together with existing nutrition assistance programs, these efforts can help ensure that nutrient-rich foods - such as blueberries - are accessible to all.

1 million annual of poor U.S.





# The Blueberry Hill Climb

## *Attendee Briefing*

### Tips for an Effective Hill Meeting

- Be Brief & Direct – Meetings often last 20–30 minutes. Get to the point quickly.
- Introduce Your Group – State who you are, the organization, and why you're there.
- Tell a Story – Personal anecdotes make the issue more relatable and memorable.
- Expect to Meet with Staff – Even if a Member is scheduled to attend, you may end up meeting with their staff.
- Stay Nonpartisan & Professional – Focus on facts and solutions, not political arguments.



# The Blueberry Hill Climb

## *Attendee Briefing*

### Know Before You Go!

- On-Site Resources Page
- Hill Meeting Schedules will be sent out later this week.
- Check your email for updates!





# The Blueberry Hill Climb

## *Attendee Briefing*



Click the Link for Your Hill Climb Schedule!

[View Schedule](#)

This link will take you directly to your Hill Climb schedule for Wednesday, March 26. You can click on each meeting to learn more about the Member of Congress, who the other meeting participants are, and the suggested issues to discuss.

### Registration Instructions

The first time you click on the link, you may be asked to complete a short registration form. Once you have registered, come back to this email and click the link again to be taken directly to your meeting schedule.

To view your schedule, you must register (or log in) using the email address that received this email! If you use a different email address, you will not see your meeting schedule.



### OVERALL SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

[View Schedule](#)

### HILL CLIMB ATTENDEE RESOURCES

[Briefing Book](#)

[Policy One Pagers](#)

[Attendee Briefing Webinar](#)

[Attendee Briefing Webinar Slides](#)

[Capitol Hill Navigation Guide](#)

[2026 Hill Climb Master Schedule](#)

[2026 Hill Climb Group Assignments](#)

<https://nabc.blueberry.org/blueberry-hill-climb-industry-meetings-onsite-resources/>



# The Blueberry Hill Climb

## *Attendee Briefing*

### Leave-Behind Folders

- NABC Policy Platform
- One Pagers
- National EIR Infographic
- State EIR Infographic
- Commemorate blueberry license plates!

### Attendee Padfolios

- Briefing Binder
- Hill Meetings Group Assignments
- Hill Meeting Master Schedule