

# Top Five Farm Bill Priorities

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.

## 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 activities.
- Allow for growers to replant using an alternative variety and/or stand density.
- 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 CFAP-2 and MASC.
- Support producers through economic crises, natural disasters, and market disruptions.

## Research

- Continue Specialty Crop Research Initiative and Block Grant Program.
- Set aside dedicated SCRI funds for mechanization and automation research.

## Crop Insurance

- Create a Specialty Crop Advisory Committee within RMA.
- Add flexibility in 508(h) standards for specialty crops.
- Enhance data collection and codify improvements to Whole Farm Revenue Insurance.
- Develop revenue policy for blueberries and an index policy for cold weather events.

## 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.

## Nutrition

- Support Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP) 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.**



# Protect American Blueberry Farms Codify the H-2A AEWL 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 represents more than 40% of total farm expenses, and blueberry fields are long-term capital investments that produce for decades.

## The Challenge: Escalating AEWL Rates

The H-2A program allows growers to hire temporary seasonal workers only after the federal government certifies that insufficient U.S. workers are available. However, prior AEWL 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: AEWL Interim Final Rule (IFR)

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 AEWL rates by approximately \$3 per hour in 2026 compared to 2025 in blueberry-producing states.

## Statewide Hourly AEWLs Determined Under the DOL IFR

State	2025 FLS-Based AEWL	Skill Level I (Entry-Level)	Skill Level II (Experienced Level)	H-2A Adverse Compensation Adjustment
California	\$19.97	\$19.75	\$19.97	7.08%
Florida	\$16.23	\$14.77	\$16.23	13.26%
Georgia	\$16.08	\$14.68	\$16.08	17.63%
Indiana	\$19.57	\$18.18	\$19.57	13.98%
Michigan	\$18.15	\$18.50	\$18.15	4.67%
Mississippi	\$14.83	\$14.53	\$14.83	8.49%
New Jersey	\$17.96	\$17.20	\$17.96	8.52%
North Carolina	\$16.16	\$15.81	\$16.16	8.38%
Oregon	\$19.82	\$19.25	\$19.82	10.29%
Washington	\$19.82	\$19.25	\$19.82	10.29%

## Economic Impact

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, correcting inflated wage calculations is expected to save agricultural employers approximately \$2.46 billion annually and more than \$17 billion over ten years, while maintaining statutory protections for U.S. workers.

Research conducted by a former member of the White House Council of Economic Advisers found using an AEWL 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 AEWL 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.**

## 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 enormous strain on farms — yet specialty crop producers are routinely left out of traditional 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 farm is 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 **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.

To ensure the program works effectively for growers, key elements from prior successful specialty crop assistance programs 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 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 through American-grown specialty crops.

### The Broader Specialty Crop Context

Specialty crop operations **contribute more than \$75 billion annually** in cash receipts to the U.S. economy and account for more than one-third of all crop sales nationwide.

Yet, out of the recently announced \$12 billion Farmer Bridge Program, **only \$1 billion has been reserved for specialty crops** through the Assistance for Specialty Crop Farmers (ASCF) and other crops not included in the original list of 13 program commodities.

This amount of funding **does not** reflect the scale, value, or economic stress facing the specialty crop sector.

**Congressional action will help ensure specialty crop producers receive fair and meaningful support during this period of economic strain.**

# Boosting Public Health with the Power of Blueberries

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



- Past DGAs divided vegetables into color- and type-based subgroups, but current editions no longer provide this level of specificity.

## Why It Matters

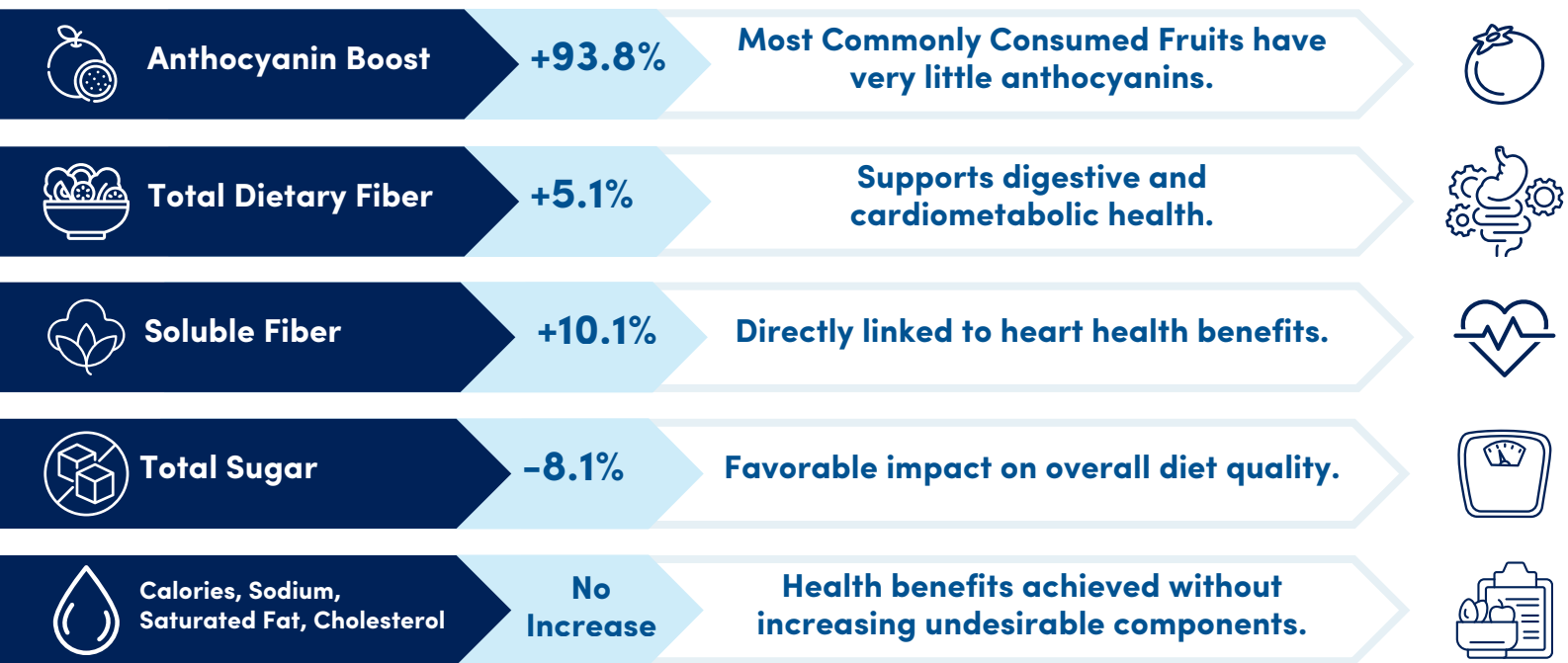
- Fruit has never been divided into subgroups, despite wide variation in nutrient content and bioactive compounds.
- Targeted fruit subgroups, especially for berries, could improve diet quality and reduce chronic disease risk.

## Berries: A Nutrient Powerhouse

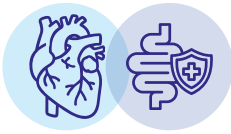
- Rich in anthocyanins & flavonoids – bioactives with anti-inflammatory and antioxidant activity that support heart and brain health.
- High in fiber – helps digestion, keeps you full, and supports healthy blood sugar and cholesterol.

## Modeled USDA Dietary Pattern Impact:

*(1 Serving Replacement of Common Fruit with Berries in a 2,000-Calorie Diet)*



**The inclusion of a single serving of berries a day yielded a nearly 94% increase in anthocyanin intake and other favorable shifts in fiber and sugar content.**



# Blueberry Bioactives: Gut and Heart Health

- Anthocyanins & Flavonoids: Reduce oxidative stress, improve blood vessel function, and support heart health.
- Prebiotic Effects: Promote healthy gut bacteria, improving digestion, immunity, and metabolism.
- Anti-Inflammatory Benefits: Reduce inflammation linked to heart disease, diabetes, and obesity.
- Evidence in Infants: Early blueberry consumption improves infant gut microbiome, strengthens immunity.

## Why a Berry Subgroup Matters

Encourages diverse fruit consumption beyond commonly eaten fruits

Supports targeted nutrient intake, including anthocyanins and fiber

An easy and delicious way to improve diet quality and public health

## ✓ Key Recommendations for Federal Nutrition Programs

- 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.
- Promote variety in fruit intake to support long-term health.

Recognizing berries as a distinct DGA fruit subgroup is a **science-backed** way to boost fiber and bioactive intake, support gut, heart, and immune health, and lower chronic disease risk. **Including specific berry recommendations, especially for blueberries, in the DGAs and federal nutrition programs would promote healthier choices and improve Americans' overall diet.**

### Sources:

Kim S. Stote , Kristi Crowe-White & Leslie Wada (2025) **Effect of replacing commonly consumed fruit in the United States with berries in the USDA healthy Dietary Patterns: a modeling analysis**, *Annals of Medicine*, 57:1, 2517817

Stull AJ, Cassidy A, Djousse L, Johnson SA, Krikorian R, Lampe JW, Mukamal KJ, Nieman DC, Porter Starr KN, Rasmussen H, Rimm EB, Stote KS and Tangney C (2024) **The state of the science on the health benefits of blueberries: a perspective**. *Front. Nutr.* 11:1415737

Venter C, Boden S, Pickett-Naime K, O'Mahony L, Glime GNE, Matzeller KL, Frank DN, Kotter C, Kofonow JM, Robertson CE, Campbell WW, Krebs NF, Tang M. (2025) **Blueberry consumption in early life and its effects on allergy, immune biomarkers and their relations with the gut microbiome**. *Nutrients*. 17:2795



**FOOD** *as*  
**MEDICINE**



# A Daily Dose of Blueberries

Fruits and vegetables provide essential nutrients to support health and well-being

“Let food be thy medicine,” a proverb commonly attributed to Hippocrates, reflects a concept that has regained prominence in modern healthcare. Today, this idea is embodied in ‘Food is Medicine’ – a growing set of evidence-based interventions that integrate the prescription of healthy foods into healthcare settings to prevent, manage and treat diet-related chronic diseases.<sup>1</sup> Food is Medicine (FIM) is now a key component of federal and state-level strategies aimed at improving population health while reducing healthcare spending.

The need for these interventions is urgent. Nearly 3 out of 4 American adults have at least one chronic disease,<sup>2</sup> many of which are exacerbated by poor nutrition.

**\$50 Billion**

The estimated annual healthcare cost of poor diets in the U.S.<sup>3</sup>



## The Escalating Cost of Poor Nutrition

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.<sup>3</sup> Overall, poor diet contributes an estimated \$50 billion annually to U.S. healthcare expenditures.<sup>3</sup>

## Food is Medicine: An Evidence-Based Solution

In response, states across the country are piloting FIM programs with bipartisan support. These programs often 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.<sup>4,5</sup> Many FIM pilots were created with support from Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS)<sup>6</sup>, 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.

## Types of Food is Medicine Programs

“Food is Medicine” is an umbrella term that encompasses a spectrum of treatments from produce prescriptions (PRx) to medically tailored meals (MTM) to medically tailored groceries (MTG), all prescribed through referrals from healthcare providers.

- PRx programs allow healthcare providers to prescribe produce, such as blueberries, to eligible patients due to diet-related health risks or conditions, or challenges in accessing nutritious foods. Produce prescriptions are typically provided as vouchers or debit cards for free or discounted produce, distributed by healthcare providers, and can be redeemed at various locations.
- MTM are prepared meals delivered to patients with severe, complex or chronic conditions that are customized to treat individuals’ specific health conditions.
- MTG are prepackaged boxes or bags of perishable and nonperishable grocery items designed to address specific health conditions.

## Nutrition Spotlight: Blueberries

Consuming a variety of nutrient-dense fruits and vegetables is a cornerstone of health. Blueberries are a prime example, delivering meaningful nutrition in a modest serving.

One serving of blueberries (about 1 cup or a handful):

- Counts as one full serving of fruit
- Contains just 80 calories and is a good source of fiber
- Naturally sweet with zero added sugar
- Contributes essential nutrients including vitamin C, vitamin K, manganese, dietary fiber and phytonutrients called polyphenols.
- Contains anthocyanins (163.3mg/100g), the flavonoid compounds responsible for blueberries’ vibrant blue color
- Delivers a good source of fiber (~4 g) and vitamin C (~14 mg)
- Provides an excellent source of manganese (0.5 mg) and vitamin K (0.25 mcg)



## USHBC is Leading the Charge for Produce

- Proud member of the National Produce Prescription Collaborative, an organization that leverages Produce Prescriptions as prevention & intervention for diet-related diseases
- Exploring opportunities to reach health professionals and organizations at the cutting edge of Food is Medicine programs and integrate blueberries into Food is Medicine interventions
- Supporting research investigating the effects of blueberry consumption on brain health, heart health, diabetes and supporting good health throughout the lifespan

Key areas of health research include:



Cardiovascular Health



Brain Health



Healthier Living



Insulin Response



Gut Health

### References

<sup>1</sup> ‘Food is medicine’ shows potential for improving diet quality and food security | American Heart Association

<sup>2</sup> About Chronic Diseases | Chronic Disease | CDC

<sup>3</sup> Americans poor diet drives \$50 billion a year in health care costs | NHLBI, NIH

<sup>4</sup> Medicaid Nutrition Supports Associated With Reductions In Hospitalizations And ED Visits In Massachusetts, 2020–23 | Health Affairs

<sup>5</sup> Medicaid Spending and Health-Related Social Needs in the North Carolina Healthy Opportunities Pilots Program | Health Care Economics, Insurance, Payment | JAMA | JAMA Network <sup>6</sup> Select Policy Pathways for Food Is Medicine Interventions | odphp.health.gov