

To: The Montana State Senate Agriculture Committee

From: Ariel Bleth, Lauren S. Caldwell, Mecca Jackson Lowe, and Kevin Moore

Date: Friday, January 26, 2007

In Support of SB 328: "An Act establishing an optional procurement exception applicable to the purchase of Montana-produced food products by public agencies amending section 18-4-132, MCA; and providing an immediate effective date and an applicability date."

Dear members of the Senate Agriculture Committee:

This letter of support for SB 328 is presented to you from four Americorps*VISTA volunteers currently working across the state of Montana in order to increase the purchasing of locally produced food at four educational institutions: Missoula Community Schools (K-12), Salish Kootenai College, Montana State University and the University of Montana-Western. Beginning six months ago when we were sworn in as Americorps*VISTA volunteers by Lieutenant Governor John Bohlinger, we have dedicated ourselves to bridging the divide between the significant institutional purchasing power and the often struggling enterprises of Montana's farmers and ranchers.

Because so much of Montana's heritage and land use is agricultural, it would seem that this would be an easy bridge to build, but it is not. Allowing our state institutions to make a preference for Montana products not only benefits the farmers and ranchers that produce them, but also the greater Montana economy. In addition, it will simultaneously decrease our state's reliance on imports while serving fresher and healthier foods to our students and campus communities.

Despite these benefits, there are significant barriers that we face in our work. These barriers include seasonal and climatic limitations, limited distribution infrastructure, a lack of processing facilities, price inequities which favor low-quality imported foods over local foods, and *a state law which currently precludes state institutions from choosing anything but the lowest bid for a food contract*. Although we, as Americorps*VISTA volunteers are working to address all of the above challenges, we cannot address this final one without your help-without your support for SB 328.

Currently, it is often difficult for state institutions to spend any amount of their budgets on locally-produced items because local producers cannot meet the same artificially reduced food costs that large international corporations can. Even if a state institution is committed to buying some Montana products which may be only slightly more expensive, the current law forces the purchaser to choose the cheapest, and almost exclusively imported item. *In effect, the current law helps to ensure that the money spent by Montana's state institutions on food, leaves Montana immediately.*

This could be improved if SB 328 is passed, permitting institutions the non-binding option of focusing some of their spending on Montana agricultural products. SB 328 does not require that state institutions buy locally, but it offers them a choice to do so when and if their budgets allow for it. Even if this bill ends up affecting only a small percentage of institutional purchases, the impact for Montana could be great. *This bill would permit state institutions to spend their state dollars in-state.* We four Americorps*VISTA volunteers are

uniquely acquainted with the gap between Montana's producers and purchasers. Please help us bridge this gap and bring more local foods to Montana consumers and help to direct Montana dollars to Montana farmers by passing SB 328.

Thank you for your consideration of this bill and our comments on it. Please feel free to contact any of us for further information.

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