

SENATE COMMITTEE
ON
AGRICULTURE, LIVESTOCK, AND IRRIGATION

Senate Bill 126

Testimony of Greg Ames
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Montana Department of Agriculture

Chairman Steinbeisser and members of the Senate Agriculture, Livestock, and Irrigation Committee my name is Greg Ames, Agricultural Sciences Division Administrator for the Montana Department of Agriculture. I am here to testify in support of Senate Bill 126. Nursery is a multi-million dollar industry comprised of over 1,100 licensed nurseries in Montana. The nursery program is entirely fee for service and does not receive any general fund.

The nursery legislation before you represents the horticultural industry's interest in restoring out of state nursery licensing reciprocity and adjusting the framework of the program that will best serve the industry in Montana. Since the implementation of out of state nursery licensing, both the industry and the department received a tremendous response from nurseries, state nursery associations, other state departments of agriculture, and the American Nursery and Landscape Association requesting the reinstatement of out of state nursery reciprocity. There are benefits in re-establishing the reciprocity, particularly in terms of maintaining good neighbor relations. Montana nurseries that market products out of state would incur substantial license fees from those states if reciprocity is not restored.

In addition to the out of state nursery licensing issue, the industry has also discussed with us their concerns regarding nursery inspections. While the department has increased inspections from 10% to nearly 24% in the last two years, inspection rates are still too low. In addition, there is a need for more risk based, comprehensive inspections focusing on risks that pests and diseases pose for nurseries. The focus of inspections will be on the high risk nurseries that import nursery stock from out of state and handle a large volume of nursery stock. This will minimize the impact on small nurseries and farmer market activities; we anticipate that these small nurseries will receive an inspection once every three to five years.

It is critically important that all nurseries be licensed to facilitate communication and regulatory measures that may be needed. For example, the department needs to know how many and where nurseries are located in order to conduct necessary trace work. By increasing nursery inspections we better protect the nursery industry and agricultural industries from unwanted pests and diseases. For example, late blight may impact the potato industry, black stem rust has the potential to impact the grain industry, and Asian long horned beetle could impact our forests.

This bill will also result in a more favorable image of the quality of Montana products and improve the state's credibility, particularly in regard to nursery and export certification. This bill addresses those concerns by establishing a framework that will support a more responsive, risk based program. The department sees this as a sound approach. The Department of Agriculture supports the proposed legislation as submitted by Senator Larsen on behalf of the industry and we ask your support in passage of Senate Bill 126.