EXHIBIT 6
DATE 3/21/13
HB 471

local is delicious!

Western Montana Growers Cooperative
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Representative Duane Ankney,
Chair House Appropriations Committee
Montana State Capitol, 1301 E. 6th Ave.
Helena, MT 59601

RE: Please support HB 471

Dear Representative Ankney and House Appropriations Committee Members,

The Western Montana Growers Cooperative (WMGC) is a coalition of growers in the Flathead, Jocko, Mission and Bitterroot Valleys whose goal is to provide the market in our region with fresh, quality products from our farms. On behalf of myself and our members, I ask that you support HB-471, which provides support for school districts to purchase local products for their school lunches. HB-471 would help the farmers and ranchers of WMGC by providing increased market opportunities, diversification, and stability.

For our growers, school lunches represent an opportunity for a stable, consistent, year-round market. This is especially important for beginning farmers and those hoping to diversify their customer base. While we still have more work to do in the commercial- retail market, schools represent a new, and potentially very large, customer for our producers, both young and old. Last year, our cooperative sold about $30,000 worth of products to Montana K-12 schools, with positive results. This represented about 4 percent of our sales, but was miniscule compared to the over $19 million that Montana schools spend on food annually. By retaining more of those dollars within MT, we will support more local farms and ranches and spur job growth in food processing and distribution here at home. As we plan for the future of our Coop, we hope to increase the work we do with K-12 schools, and believe local purchasing by these schools will play a critical role in our growers' success.

When we work together with local processors to produce value-added products for schools such as pre-sliced apples and frozen produce for use in winter, there is an even larger economic gain, which is multiplied throughout the community. However, it takes a little bit of time and investment to establish these types of relationships, facilitate the partnerships between school districts and local producers. We have learned that getting these buying partnerships going usually takes more resources at the initial stages, which can be a big hurdle for schools. That is why HB 471 is so important. It would give school districts the extra little bit of help they need as they adjust their programs to procure more locally produced food and create something that can be self-sustaining in the long term.

To put it succinctly, HB-471 is a jobs bill. The small amount of money requested will be leveraged exponentially to improve markets for Montana Farms and Ranches, create more job opportunities in food processing and distribution, and spur overall improvements in our regional food system.

I thank you for your time considering my comments, and I encourage you to vote in support of HB-471. It is a smart investment that would yield long-term stability and gains for Montana's producers and for our school children.

Sincerely,

Dave Prather
General Manager