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From: donotreply@legmt.gov
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To: LEG Cmte-EAICcomment
Subject: Public Comment for EAIC

Public Comments for Economic Affairs Interim Committee

Date: 10th July 2023 11:48

First Name:
Bob

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Email Address:
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Subject:
SB30 Study bill on Viticulture and Enology

Comment:

Good afternoon. I'm the former president of the Montana Grape and Wine Association and have been growing grapes and making wine in Montana for 19 years. My wife and I own and run the only commercial vineyard-winery combination east of Missoula. We have been successful only because we were in our 60s when we started the winery and had years of personal funds to draw upon and started small. After almost 13 years, my wife and I still don't take any income from the winery other than an annual lease payment— it works for us because we have a steady retirement income. But it won't provide even a modest living wage for anyone of working age unless they are wealthy or have ready access to commercial capital. As you look at this exciting potentially hugely important value-added specialty crop for Montana, please pay attention to the many impediments that prevent this relatively new ag/manufacturing arena to succeed: 1. We had to fight for the right to sell wine directly to state liquor stores. 2. We pushed the legislature to grant us the right to sell wine by the bottle at special permitted events. This is finally happening starting this October. 3. We submitted a farm winery bill to make it possible for fledgling wineries to succeed. One of the biggest challenges is that good affordable agricultural land for grapes may be located in terrible sales area— 60 miles or more from a major highway or metro area. These isolated wineries which rely on great Montana grown grapes in their own vineyards desperately need the opportunity to open an off-site tasting room in order to have a steady income while building their relationship with retailers or distributors. All serious wine-producing states allow for off-site tasting rooms and it would be an enormous boon to our growing industry. 4. The legislature last session passed a bill allowing distilleries to sell directly to state liquor stores. Although wineries can now sell to liquor stores, it is limited to wines under 16%. We make a port-style wine which would be popular in our local liquor stores, but we can only sell it directly at the winery or send it to the state liquor warehouse, even if we only plan to have it sold in a store three miles away. If the Montana Alcohol Beverage Control folks can make this possible for distilleries, it surely cannot be difficult to make it possible for wineries too. The biggest impediment even to established wineries with vineyards is the paucity of available grapes grown in Montana. When Mother nature throws us a tough year, we often have to search for grapes out of state. Our winery has purchased and transported grapes from Wisconsin, Minnesota, North Dakota and Nebraska. We wish we could always make 100%

Montana grown wines. Many state legislatures provide funding for the establishment of viticulture in their states, since the grape and wine industry can greatly increase tourism, tax dollars and other revenue streams. Can Montana grown, Montana made wines successfully compete? Absolutely! Studies show that especially Gen Y & Z wine drinkers (21-42 years old) are much more likely to search out new and interesting wines that are representative of genuine Montana wines. As our self-proclaimed state motto — the last great place— emphasizes, products which shout “genuine Montanan” to consumers have great appeal to locals and visitors alike. So in summary, I strongly urge you to solicit feedback from grape growers and commercial wineries in Montana to be clear about the most significant impediments we commercial wineries face in establishing, maintaining and growing our businesses.

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