

November 12, 2023

Economic Affairs Interim Committee
SJ30 Interim Study on Montana Viticulture

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee,

Thank you for taking the time to study viticulture in Montana. This is a rapidly growing agricultural commodity. I personally have over 1470 vines on my property just outside of Laurel. All my vines are cold hardy varieties. Our first set of vines were planted in 2014 and we recently added a few more vines in 2023. So far, our vines have produced over 11,700 pounds of wine quality grapes since 2019. We have our struggles with what Mother Nature throws at us just like any other farmer would. We have sold our grapes to wineries across Montana. Our location in Laurel is just off the Yellowstone River. Our vines have thrived in our location. Viticulture is very feasible in Montana.

As a small producer it would be nice to have more options for getting our product on the market. The vineyard is run by myself, my wife and 12-year-old daughter. We have financial obligations that require us to maintain full-time jobs outside of the vineyard. The ability to have a Farm Winery license would allow us to explore the winery business without having to forego our full-time jobs that support our family. We aren't quite big enough to be a full-scale winery, however we would be able to produce wine and offer samples on a smaller scale with the Farm Winery license. Allowing a Farmers Market permit would also help develop a small-scale winery into something larger given the time and exposure to people at markets. Farmers markets are very popular and active in the Laurel and Billings area.

Selling grapes is not as profitable for us compared to selling a finished wine product. Our grapes have produced over 4500 bottles of wine since 2019. That would amount to over \$90,000 in bottle sales. We have realized only a small portion of that by selling the grapes. Help fellow Montanans like us keep more of the profit for themselves by seeing the value in the Farm Winery license and the Farmer Market permit. Both give small scale farmers like us the opportunity to contribute to the economy of Montana.

Thank you for your time, open minds, and understanding.

Aaron Felder
F Bar 3 Vineyard, LLC
1434 McMullen Ln
Laurel, MT 59044