Representative Palsrok:

I am writing to oppose House Bill 4959 and Senate Bill 600, as written, which I understand include a provision to prohibit licensed small winemakers from selling their wine directly to retailers.

I am the sole proprietor of Jomagrha Vineyards and Winery in Mason County. If approved, this legislation would be devastating to my young business.

I know that a portion of these bills include a provision related to direct shipping, and understand the concern this brings for larger wineries, although it is not currently an issue for Jomagrha. We have a long way to grow, and see that growth in the local market first, if the laws continue to allow.

I have planted the grapes in my vineyards, tended them, harvested them, crushed and pressed them. I have made the wine, watched it work through the winters, tested, bottled and labeled it, one bottle at a time. I built the winery building and I operate the tasting room and retail sales. Jomagrha is my only employment and I work at this 365 days per year.

In its sixth year, Jomagrha is beginning to look like some day it may contribute to our family income, and hire employees.

Currently, one of our sons would like to participate in the business more, but I am financially able to hire him to assist with the farming only on an extremely part-time basis in the summer.

My family and I are doing on our own what the state has spent lots of money promoting — we are "value added agriculture."

We could not afford to farm this small piece of land if we were not able to take our agricultural product directly to the consumer.

Now, we see that situation threatened.

In order for the wholesalers to the be winners, either the customers, wineries or retailers must take a beating.

How could I afford a wholesaler to distribute my wine when I can't even afford to pay my son to pull weeds?

And if I were able to afford a wholesaler, why should I have to give up this final step and reward of seeing my product delivered, when I have accomplished all the other phases myself?

Of the approximately 500 cases of wine I produce each year, I sell approximately 40 cases to local stores, in Oceana and Mason counties. This sale would amount to almost nothing to a wholesaler, yet it is important to Jomagrha because it gives needed cash flow pre-tourist season, and it lets our customers have access to wine the two days of the week we are closed so that we can tend the vines and grapes.

Winegrowing is just beginning in this region. Three small landowners have planted a few acres of grapes to supply the growing wine demand in this area. There are also three other growers considering working toward establishing wineries. Please don't make a move detrimental to these new endeavors.

It seems unreasonable that while the Michigan Wine Council is aggressively promoting Michigan wine overseas, Jomagrha will not be able to sell wine to the local store one-quarter mile down the road.

I ask that you maintain Michigan's commitment to value added agriculture by dispatching any idea of requiring licensed small winemakers to take wholesalers into their business.

I am available for additional comments or to address any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

John Sanford
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