

To:

Representative Paul Holvey, Chair

House Committee on Business and Labor

3/29/2021

Re: HB 2358 – Support

Dear Members of the House Committee on Business and Labor,

I am pleased to support HB 2358, which will prohibit employers from permitting or requiring agricultural workers to work in excess of 40 hours in one workweek unless workers are compensated for overtime hours worked.

I am a winery professional who has worked harvest in several American Viticulture Areas and has seen first-hand just how skilled agriculture work in the vineyard is. Despite my experience, interns and those of us untrained in vineyard work specifically were not allowed the chance to participate in the task of hand harvesting grapes, as only highly experienced, trained specialists were allowed to work with and handle the vines.

In my experience, agricultural work involves highly skilled, specialized labor and laborers, who are, in turn, decidedly in-demand for their coveted abilities. If a grape bunch were clipped improperly, the vine becomes extremely disease-susceptible, and the death of a single vine accrues financial losses ranging from the hundreds of thousands into the millions of dollars, for those successful enough. As you can see, these positions demand development of human capital. This is not a task to be given to any Tom, Dick, or Harry who wanders in looking for work.

There is also a great deal of labor saved in the winery by these viticulture workers. They are the ones initially sorting the grapes; separating quality bunches and berries while leaving the detritus behind. Not only can lowered grape quality affect the final quality of the resulting wine, but it can also create problems during fermentation and storage that can be very costly to mitigate. Furthermore, it takes about 2 hours of labor in the winery to sort through a single bin of grapes – and that’s after skilled hand harvesting. Imagine the amount of labor it would take to hand-sort the entire harvest inside the winery, not to mention the added financial costs.

The last point I’d like to address is regarding the alternatives to harvesting & sorting by hand. There are, of course, machines that do this labor for us now. Some machines can harvest the grapes from the vines and others use lasers to measure every grape, allowing only what the winemaker desires into the final product. They are impressive devices; as such, they come with commensurate price tags. Beyond cost are myriad other problems that accompany such machines: the harvesters are bulky and can lead to overly compacted soils; they harvest the grapes by aggressively shaking the vines, which can be damaging to those highly valuable older vines, as well as expensive and hard-to-repair trellising systems. In short, these machines are simply out of reach for the average winemaker and undesirable for many top-line brands. These viticultural jobs are not going away. We should ensure those of us in these positions are treated with dignity and compensated appropriately for their time, knowledge, and skills.

I strongly support HB 2358 and urge you to vote in favor of passing this bill out of the House Committee on Business and Labor.

Sincerely,

Annika Collins