

Texas State Legislature
Senate Committee on Agriculture and Rural Affairs
Interim Committee Hearing May 24, 2010 at 9 a.m.

Charge: Study the impact of windblown herbicides on grape growing and other agricultural production. Make recommendations for improving the safety and quality of Texas agricultural products

Testifier: Cliff Bingham
Owner, Bingham Family Vineyards
President, Texas Wine and Grape Growers Association

Testimony:

For the record, my name is Cliff Bingham, owner of Bingham Family Vineyards & Farm in Meadow, Texas located 40 miles southwest of Lubbock. I grew up farming on the High Plains; and my wife Betty and I have chosen to raise our eleven children in the same small town agricultural lifestyle. I am proud to report that all of our adult children have chosen to continue in agriculture, primarily in wine grape production.

Currently the Bingham Family Vineyards & Farm includes 130 acres of planted grapevines. We also farm 1,000 acres of organic cotton, 350 acres of organic peanuts, and 700 acres of high residue crops. We are very committed to conservation of our natural resources.

Our decision to enter the grape industry seven years ago was based on the declining water levels of the Ogallala Aquifer. Although our organic crops have been very profitable over the last twenty years, we were looking for a better way to use the ever more precious resource of Texas water. Grapes became the answer. Twenty acres of wine grapes have the profitability of 500 acres of a typical row crop.

Last February I was honored when the industry elected me the president of the Texas Wine and Grape Growers Association, the only statewide organization representing the industry for legislative and regulatory purposes. The Association represents the largest to the smallest commercial vineyards and wineries.

Included in your binder is economic data for the industry over the last five years, showing steady growth, which is in large part due to the good work of this legislature. In the last ten years, you have created a market place allowing wineries to foster multi-dimensional relationships with consumers. Thank you, Senator Estes, for your leadership in that area. Furthermore, the popularity and increasing demand for the value-added product produced by wine grapes is continually on the rise.

Our vineyard's profitability reflects the positive environment created by the Texas State Legislature. I'm glad to report that our vineyard's balance sheets have attracted outside investors from Chicago, Dallas, and Houston, each with a minimum investment of \$250,000. These investments will encourage growth in the Texas economy by generating in-state, as well as out-of-state dollars. However, the one concern from outside investors is our inability to minimize man-made hazards as we co-exist with other members of the Texas agricultural industry.

Many of the larger grape growers also farm other crops and fully understand the necessity of maintaining current agricultural practices for the profitability of those other crops. Conversely, we have become intimately familiar with the necessity of preventing windblown herbicides from damaging our

grape crops. Specifically the herbicide we would like to address today is 2,4-D. Until we better prevent damage as a result of this man-made risk to our wine grape crop, the true economic impact of the Texas wine and grape industry and the highest quality of the agricultural product we produce will not be realized.

I'll let additional Association testimony establish further need to prevent damage to the Texas wine grape crop as a result of 2,4-D damage. You will also hear from Greg Bruni of Llano Estacado Winery in Lubbock, one of the best examples of a profitable winery in the state; and Lou Bright, the Association's general counsel regarding our suggestions to prevent and minimize damage to the Texas wine grape crop.

In summary, if more grapes are successfully grown in Texas, there will be a decrease in the pressure on the Ogallala Aquifer, while the wine grape industry can increase in-state and out-of-state investment dollars in agriculture, increase local job opportunities to keep small rural towns alive, increase Texas tourism, increase Texas land values, and allow more Texans to be able to drink local wine.

On a final note, I would very much like to thank the Texas Department of Agriculture for their role in using the current regulatory structure to minimize damage to the Texas wine grape crop as a result of windblown herbicides.