

Testimony on H.65 for the House Agriculture and Forest Products Committee

My name is Will Stevens, and my wife Judy and I are the owners/operators of Golden Russet Farm in Shoreham, a certified organic vegetable and greenhouse operation. 2015 will be our 35th year of commercial organic vegetable production, and Gilfeather turnips are one of the 50-plus types of vegetables we grow for our wholesale, retail, and CSA accounts.

I am truly sorry that I am unable to present this testimony in person, since I had a number of props that I thought you might appreciate. I am glad that the children from Wardsboro will give you their presentation, and I wish I could have met them. (I'm also sorry that John Moran and I hadn't teamed up on this many years ago!)

Why do I support making the Gilfeather turnip Vermont's State Vegetable? Several reasons immediately come to mind:

1. It has economic development implications for the state and its communities

- a. Many communities use singular events or home town heroes as excuses to kick off celebrations that can serve as economic development vehicles, fundraisers, and/or community-building events. Wardsboro's Gilfeather Turnip Festival benefit for the Town Library is one example.
 - i. Vermonters and out-of-staters alike visiting events like this always leave something behind – money – and the designation of the Gilfeather as our State Vegetable could provide marketing support *in general* for our agri-tourism efforts.

2. It has economic development implications for our farm

- a. We have been growing it commercially for more than a decade.
- b. Sales of Gilfeather have increased more than five fold since 2011 (sales now top \$5,000 from our little patch).
- c. Several of our store and restaurant accounts have already mentioned that they are aware of this proposal, and have expressed a willingness to promote its new status (should it be signed into law), because they see the upside marketing value of such a designation. More sales for them mean more sales for us.
- d. The Gilfeather is essentially a mild Rutabaga; more white than yellowish, but in all other practical ways it is the same thing. Its milder flavor seems to be more popular with younger folks, which over time means more market share than its more pungent cousin, and this is reflected in our year-over-year sales data. Demand seems to be on the rise.

3. It builds on this committee's Seed Sovereignty Resolution, which passed the House on Feb. 1, 2012. From that day's House Journal (p.137), **Bold** emphasis added:

Whereas, the Vermont Constitution declares that all persons are born equally free and independent, and have certain natural, inherent, and unalienable rights, amongst which are the enjoying and defending of life and liberty, and acquiring, possessing, and protecting property, and

Whereas, the Vermont Constitution declares that the foregoing rights ought not to be violated on any pretense whatsoever, and

Whereas, the basis of human sustenance rests on the Constitutional right of every person to acquire, possess, save, grow, and protect seeds, and

Whereas, the Vermont House of Representatives, the people's house, has an obligation to protect and advance these rights, and

Whereas, the state of Vermont has a proud agricultural heritage of its citizens' acquiring, possessing, growing, saving, and protecting seeds essential for their food security, and

Whereas, protection and advancement of these rights are essential to the liberties and independence of our citizens and the welfare and integrity of our nation, state, and society, now therefore be it

Resolved by the House of Representatives:

That this legislative body declares seed acquiring, possessing, saving, growing, and protecting are the inherent and inalienable rights of each Vermonter, and that these rights shall not be violated on any pretense whatsoever.

- a. The Gilfeather is an open pollinated vegetable, which gives anyone the opportunity to raise their own seed without paying royalties or licensing fees, which in its own modest way, enhances food security and independence.
- b. We've been raising our own seed on the farm since at least 2006.

4. It supports Vermont's cultural heritage

- a. I'd like to remind the committee that the energy behind H.65 is consistent with efforts that have come out of this room in previous years that have honored and built on our cultural heritage, including the Farm to Plate and Working Lands initiatives. This heritage includes: our historic link to agriculture, self-reliance and our ability to make opportunity out of adversity, our entrepreneurial spirit, and the usefulness of mindful branding (i.e. effective self-promotion).
- b. The Gilfeather turnip has a story behind it, and since John Gilfeather died in 1944, his story is not too many generations removed from our own. That, and the fact that he was apparently in the VT Legislature (although I haven't had the time to verify that assertion . . .) create compelling reasons to support this proposition.

5. It supports Slow Food's "Ark of Taste" concept

- a. Slow Food is an international movement dedicated to the preservation of heritage plants, animals, and foods that have been closely defined with regions and/or cultures around the world. The "Ark of Taste" is Slow Food's catalogue of these foods and their respective ecoregions.
- b. The counterintuitive strategy behind this campaign is that consumption will incentivize increased and sustainable production of these edibles. This goes

beyond the “terroir” and Taste of Place concepts because it focuses specifically on regionally adapted, typically endangered, plant and animal varieties and processed foodstuffs, and their respective contributions to biodiverse and sustainable food systems.

- c. The Gilfeather Turnip is on the United States’ Ark of Taste list.
- d. Other Ark of Taste items relevant to Vermont include: the shagbark hickory nut, the Green Mountain potato, and the Randall Lineback cattle breed, which was named Vermont’s state cattle breed in 2006 (1 V.S.A. Sec. 515) (for more background on this, see http://www.netstate.com/states/symb/livestock/vt_randall_lineback.htm).

I’ll go a little bit esoteric for my last point: To me, the goal of H.65 is consistent with – and contains elements of – what I think defines “sustainable” economic development in Vermont: 1) our people, 2) our image (or brand), and 3) our natural resource base. These three aspects are things:

- over which we have much influence and/or control,
- that we have, or can do better than any other state, and
- that are worthy of nurturing, perpetuating, and/or maintaining.

Don’t you think that John Gilfeather had all of this going on, as he was raising turnips on his hill farm more than 100 years ago?

I urge you to support H.65 and send it to the floor with a unanimous vote.

Thank you!

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