



**House  
Legislative  
Analysis  
Section**

House Office Building, 9 South  
Lansing, Michigan 48909  
Phone: 517/373-6466

## CHERRY BURGER AS STATE BURGER

### House Bill 4943 as introduced First Analysis (5-25-00)

**Sponsor: Rep. Jason Allen**  
**Committee: Agriculture and Resource  
Management**

#### ***THE APPARENT PROBLEM:***

Cherries play an important role in the agricultural economy of Michigan, growing especially well in the mild climate of the Leelenau Peninsula in the northeastern part of the Lower Peninsula. Reportedly, a Presbyterian missionary named Peter Dougherty is credited with planting the first cherry orchard in the Midwest when he planted a cherry orchard in 1852 on the Old Mission Peninsula, a narrow strip of land that juts out into Grand Traverse Bay near Traverse City. The area proved to be ideal for growing cherries because Grand Traverse Bay and nearby Lake Michigan help to moderate winter temperatures and to cool the orchards in the summer. The first commercial cherry orchard was planted in 1893 near the site of the original Dougherty orchard, and by the early 1900s the tart cherry industry was firmly established, with cherry production surpassing other major agricultural crops. Today, according to one estimate, there are about 36,000 acres of cherry trees in Michigan, with about 40 percent of the cherry orchards located in the Grand Traverse region. Traverse City, in the heart of the region, has been dubbed the "Cherry Capital of the World," and hosts the annual July National Cherry Festival (which traces its origins back to a spring ceremony known as the "blessing of the Blossoms" that started in 1924). Michigan is the leading producer of tart cherries, producing 70 to 75 percent of the crop each year (the next largest producer is New York, with about 5 percent of the crop, followed by Wisconsin with about 4 percent), with an average of 200 to 250 million pounds of tart cherries each year (though the amount varies each year, depending on factors including the age of the trees and weather conditions). Tart cherries, which sometimes are called pie or sour cherries, are highly perishable and so are seldom sold fresh; they generally are canned or frozen shortly after harvesting for use in products, especially bakery products, throughout the year. Although sweet cherries are grown primarily in the Pacific coast states, Michigan also is one of the four top producers of sweet cherries, producing about 50 million pounds or 20 percent of the national crop annually.

The idea for combining meat and cherries originated in 1987 with the National Cherry Queen, who happened to be the daughter of a family based in Cedar, Michigan, in the heart of Michigan's cherry country. The Pleva family has been in the meat-products business since 1946, and was especially noted for its premium sausages. The daughter came up with the idea as a way to help the struggling cherry industry, and since 1988 the family business has come up with over 30 cherry-blended meat products. The first product, cherry pecan sausage, reportedly became a local hit, and along with the cherry burger, created in 1992 and reportedly the most popular of the cherry-blended meat products, both won Michigan's New Product of the Year Awards.

#### ***THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:***

The bill would create a new act to designate the "cherry burger" as the "official burger" of Michigan.

#### ***FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:***

According to the House Fiscal Agency, the bill would have no fiscal implications. (6-10-99)

#### ***ARGUMENTS:***

##### ***For:***

Given the developmental pressures on the Grand Traverse area, which not only has pleasingly mild weather but sometimes spectacular scenery (including the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Shoreline), and the vicissitudes of the agricultural market, any efforts to strengthen and continue the production of cherries in this part of the state is well worth making. The marketing value of designating the "cherry burger" would help not only the cherry industry, but also the livestock industry, as cherries can be added to meats other than beef (and the creator of the cherry burger has used cherries with other meats, including pork, and poultry). The concept of "value-added products" in

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agriculture is one of the bright spots on the agricultural horizon, and the cherry burger is a prime example of how an innovative approach to food production can encourage other manufacturers to look at cherries in value-added products. Cherry burgers are a prime example of a product that adds value to two industries, the cherry industry and the meat industry, a value-added partnership that is good for both industries by providing a new, low-fat, high fiber food product that tastes good and creates a new market. In fact, the product's uniqueness is such that it has been featured in various media, including television (with the originator of the product appearing on TV programs as varied as Oprah Winfrey, Tim Allen's Home Improvement situation comedy, and the news channel CNN, and features on ABC, CBS, NBC, and PBS) and "cherry-enhanced" meat products have been featured in a number of magazines, including *Food & Wine*, *Cooking Light*, *Eating Well*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Men's Health*, and *Fitness Magazine*.

Moreover, Michigan State University has conducted research on the product which indicates that cherries improve certain marketing and food safety aspects of ground beef – for example, the antioxidant properties of cherries retards spoilage, thereby improving the stability, safety, and shelf life of cherry-blended meat products – as well as improving the flavor of these products (there reportedly is no "warmed over" taste to cherry burgers, unlike conventional hamburgers) and having potential health benefits. The addition of cherries to ground beef or pork significantly reduces the fat content and increases the fiber content of the product, while at the same time resulting in a juicer, tastier product that appeals to even the notoriously picky palates of teenagers and younger elementary school children. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has recommended the cherry burger as part of its National School Lunch Program, and cherry burgers now appear on school lunch menus in 16 states. Anecdotal reports further indicate that this product is very well received by school children, whether as a burger, on pizza, in salads, or in submarine sandwiches. The natural antioxidants in cherries reduces the formation of suspected cancer-causing compounds, which suggests the potential for antioxidant protection to consumers comparable to that provided by commercially available vitamin B and C supplements. In addition, although studies have not yet been done on humans, because the same chemicals that give tart cherries their color appear to inhibit inflammation-causing enzymes at a rate more than ten times that of aspirin, there is the possibility that cherry products could relieve inflammatory pain better than aspirin or

ibuprofen (and without the stomach irritation that these medications sometimes cause).

The fact that the cherry burger not only is tasty and healthy, but also uses a prominent Michigan product and was created in Michigan, as well as being a prime example of an innovative "value-added" agricultural product, all support the contention that it should be designated as the state burger. Such a designation would serve to further raise this unique Michigan product's profile, benefitting not just the state's agricultural sector, but the state's economy as a whole.

### ***Against:***

While the cherry burger does seem to be an innovative and exciting product, surely there are ways of promoting this unique, and uniquely Michigan, product without designating it as a state symbol. Of the current list of 11 state symbols – an official state tree (the white pine), gem (chlorastrolite, or "greenstone"), stone ( the Petosky stone), soil (the Kalkaska soil series), flower (apple blossom), bird (robin), fish (the Brook trout), reptile (the Painted turtle), game mammal (the White-Tailed Deer), wildflower (the Dwarf Lake Iris) and flag – none are a commercial product, and it may be questioned as to whether the state should adopt as an official symbol a commercial product, however worthy the product. Moreover, as the number of state symbols has proliferated, the governor has indicated his unwillingness to agree to adding to this number, so the bill, even if passed, may well never be enacted. The Department of Agriculture has as part of its mission statement the promotion of Michigan agricultural interests, and has a track record of vigorously promoting Michigan agriculture and agricultural products. The department has a Marketing and Communications Division, which combines the former Market Development Division and Communications & Emergency Management Division, and which, in part "serves as a catalyst, coordinator and resource to provide promotional, marketing and economic development opportunities for Michigan's food and agricultural industry." Surely the MDA, and, possibly, this particular division, would be the appropriate agents for promoting the unique Michigan agricultural product known as the "cherry burger," rather than designation of this product as a state symbol.

### ***POSITIONS:***

The Traverse City Area Chamber of Commerce supports the bill. (5-18-00)

The Cherry Marketing Institute (a national, nonprofit promotion organization for tart cherries) supports the bill. (5-18-00)

Weight Watchers (which is headquartered in Farmington Hills) supports the bill. (5-19-00)

The Sutton's Bay Rotary Club supports the bill. (5-19-00)

The Michigan School Foods Association supports the bill. (5-19-00)

Analyst: S. Ekstrom

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■ This analysis was prepared by nonpartisan House staff for use by House members in their deliberations, and does not constitute an official statement of legislative intent.