

Testimony of Edward Lorenz, HB. 5127/HB. 5128, July 30, 2009

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before the committee as you consider H.B. 5127 and H.B. 5128.

My name is Edward Lorenz. I direct the Public Affairs Institute at Alma College. Also, of relevance to today's meeting, I have run the Common Table Project at Alma, a bi-national dialogue on rural sustainability that brought together farmers from Mexico and the U.S. Of course as a resident of Gratiot County, I am from rural Michigan.

To be direct, I believe these bills are fatally flawed from the perspective of rural communities and the family farmers who have been their economic base. Furthermore, they send a terrible message to the citizens of our state about civic disempowerment and the privileged position of special interest.

As so much current agriculture policy, these bills are part of the process of undermining family farms and vibrant rural communities for the benefit of a tiny number of agricultural industrialists. Worst, many of these industrialists have moved here from outside the U.S. to take advantage of our weak food, environmental and animal protection regulations. Forbidden by home governments in countries such as the Netherlands to follow the practices they use here, they come to the U.S. and pass on to the communities in which they operate the negative externalities of their practices: excess pollution, exploitive wages and working conditions, ruined rural roads, and contempt for our civic traditions. The worst is the last. As is not surprising for bills backed by global interests, H.B. 5127/5128 limit the ability of local governments - the ones that are most in touch with the citizens. Instead, this legislation would create an Animal Care Advisory Council controlled by special interests to set policy.

Theodore Lowi, today, arguably the most respected American political scientist - and I should add a Michigan State grad and presently the John Senior Professor of Government at Cornell - warned exactly 40 years ago that our government was being undermined by the accommodation to special interests exemplified in this legislation. By forbidding local government to act in place of special interests, you are doing exactly what Lowi feared. As he warned, "You are tightened the grip of interest groups on the machinery of government." Far more than bribery or overt theft from the public treasury, such legislation corrupts the very structure of American government. For all the mistakes made by local government, it is the one form of government most easily controlled by citizens. Its mistakes are the easiest to correct.

Furthermore, this legislation undermines the citizen's "right to know." You make the audits of industrial farms, done by the special interest controlled Advisory Council, exempt from the Freedom of Information Act. Then you would make the certification of the farm "last indefinitely." How can we have such legislation proposed by the representatives of the people?

Now special interests, such as the industrial agriculturalists behind these bills will claim they need state standards not local control and a multitude of varied regulations around the state. They claim they cannot function with different standards in one community and other standards many miles away. At a minimum, such arguments betray the fact the agricultural industrialists like to conceal. They are not humble family farmers. They are internationally based agricultural industrialists. If they were really family farmers, they would function only in one region and could live with the standards set by their neighbors.

As an academic, I must reference other authorities. James Scott, the head of Yale University's Agr...

Studies Program, has described globally the practice of powerful global interests - such as the many foreign agricultural interests behind this legislation – dominating rural family farmers. However, he has given most of his attention to farmers in the developing world. What is distressing in the case of this legislation is it is being imposed on family farmers and rural communities in the world's greatest democracy. The only thing of value in these bills is that they prove the accuracy of Lowi's prediction in 1969 that the special interest process threatened the very legitimacy of government.

I must add one more set of facts to challenge the economic arguments of the supporters of agricultural industrialists. They will say you must allow them to implement their preferred processes because it is the only way to have agriculture survive and feed the hungry. In fact, the processes they propose to use are both unsustainable, have distorted global food prices, and directly undermine the economic viability of rural Michigan (and other rural regions of the U.S.). John Ikerd, Professor of Agricultural Economics at the University of Missouri has documented this process well in a number of studies. Go to any of our rural communities and what do you find – abandoned houses, shuttered schools, and declining “Main Streets?” Why is there this decline in the midst of the “progress” promised by the industrial agriculturalists? It is because their methods pass costs to others, while they reap the profits. They don't bring wealth or other benefits to rural Michigan. They are purely extractive. Allegedly, they don't even employ documented workers for the few jobs they “create” exploiting their animals [animal units]. Worse they lobby heavily for breaks from the regulations they fear through the creation of ‘regulation’ through special interest controlled ‘advisory councils’ and secrecy.

There is no justification for this legislation. It is neither good agricultural policy nor good civic policy. Please oppose H.B. 5127 and H.B. 5128. I thank you for your time and attention.

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