

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 1556

As Reported by House Committee On:
State Government & Tribal Affairs

Title: An act relating to designating the Walla Walla sweet onion as the official Washington state vegetable.

Brief Description: Designating the Walla Walla sweet onion as the official Washington state vegetable.

Sponsors: Representatives Walsh, Grant, Haler, Sells, Springer, O'Brien, Seaquist, Ahern, Takko, Williams, Ericks, Roberts, Strow, Linville, Ormsby and McDermott.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

State Government & Tribal Affairs: 1/30/07 [DP].

Brief Summary of Bill

- Designates the Walla Walla Sweet onion as the state vegetable.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON STATE GOVERNMENT & TRIBAL AFFAIRS

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 9 members: Representatives Hunt, Chair; Appleton, Vice Chair; Chandler, Ranking Minority Member; Armstrong, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Green, Kretz, McDermott, Miloscia and Ormsby.

Staff: Colleen Kerr (786-7168).

Background:

The Walla Walla Sweet onion is grown in Walla Walla County, but finds its origins on the island of Corsica. Over a century ago, a retired French soldier named Peter Pieri found a sweet onion seed there and brought it to the Walla Walla Valley. The sweet onion had impressive winter hardiness well-suited for the climate of southeastern Washington. Soon Pieri and many Italian immigrants in the area began harvesting the seed. Over several generations of careful hand selection, the sweet onion developed greater sweetness, size, and shape. Today, there are approximately 40 growers producing Walla Walla Sweet onions on

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1,200 acres of farmland in the Walla Walla Valley. Sweet onion season is mid-June through September and, since 1984, Walla Walla has celebrated the Sweet Onion Festival every July.

Onions have been a food source for at least 5,000 years. There are ancient Chinese, Sumerian, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian references to the cultivation of onions. The onion was also an essential part of the Ancient Roman and Greek diet. In more recent times, the onion has been an essential part of classical French cooking in the *bourgeoise*, *nivernaise*, and *soubise* sauces. Today the onion crop is a \$400 million crop in the United States. Other sweet onion varieties are the: Texas Yellow Bermuda, White Bermuda, and Crystal Wax; the Vidalia Sweet from Georgia; Hawaii's Maui Sweet; and the Nevada Sweetie Sweet.

Summary of Bill:

Designates the Walla Walla Sweet onion as the official state vegetable.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Not requested.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) The Walla Walla Sweet is from Walla Walla and only from Walla Walla. Indeed, this sweet onion is only grown properly in the Walla Walla Valley. Because of that it deserves the notoriety of being designated the state vegetable. Last year there was some resistance from the potato community, but this year they have gotten behind the bill and are giving the Walla Walla Sweet their full support. This bill will also give a shot in the arm to the Walla Walla Sweet onion farmers who have fallen on tough times. Designating the Walla Walla Sweet as the state vegetable will assist in marketing this gourmet delicacy across the nation.

(Opposed) None.

Persons Testifying: Representative Walsh, prime sponsor.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.