

# SENATE BILL REPORT

## HB 1964

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As Reported By Senate Committee On:  
Government Operations & Elections, February 20, 2006

**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, McIntire, Conway, Hankins and Chase.

**Brief History:** Passed House: 2/13/06, 95-1.

**Committee Activity:** Government Operations & Elections: 2/20/06 [DPA].

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### SENATE COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS & ELECTIONS

**Majority Report:** Do pass as amended.

Signed by Senators Kastama, Chair; Berkey, Vice Chair; Roach, Ranking Minority Member; Fairley, Kline and Pridemore.

**Staff:** Cindy Fazio (786-7405)

**Background:** The onion is believed to have originated in Asia, and the ancient Egyptians worshiped the onion as a physical representation of eternity. Numerous Egyptian tombs had onions painted on the interior walls, and King Ramses was entombed with onions over his eyes.

In the late 1800s a French soldier, Peter Pieri, found a sweet onion seed on the Island of Corsica and brought it to the Walla Walla Valley. Pieri and his neighbors were impressed by the new onion's winter hardiness and began harvesting the seed.

Walla Walla Sweet onions are grown in Walla Walla County in southeastern Washington and a part of Umatilla County in northeastern Oregon. Walla Wallas are available mid-June through September.

Six other states have official state vegetables, three of which are onions. Georgia designated the Vidalia onion as the state vegetable, Texas has the Texas Sweet onion and Utah has the Spanish Sweet onion.

Washington has a number of state symbols designated by the Legislature, including a state tree (Western Hemlock), flower (Coast Rhododendron), grass (Bluebunch Wheatgrass), fruit (Apple), bird (American Goldfinch), gem (Petritified Wood), fish (Steelhead Trout), marine mammal (Orca), and insect (Green Darner Dragonfly).

**Summary of Amended Bill:** The Walla Walla Sweet onion is designated the official edible bulb of Washington. The russet potato is designated the official tuber of Washington.

**Amended Bill Compared to Original Bill:** The onion designation is changed to that of edible bulb; the russet potato designation is added.

**Appropriation:** None.

**Fiscal Note:** Not requested.

**Committee/Commission/Task Force Created:** No.

**Effective Date:** Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

**Testimony For:** The Walla Walla sweet onion is unique to Washington. By federal law, an onion cannot be called a Walla Walla unless it is grown in the Walla Walla valley. This onion has been grown since the 1890s. I know the potato has been suggested, but Idaho already has that vegetable for its official vegetable. This designation will complement that. My favorite recipe is fried onions and potatoes. The Kirkland kids have been working on this project for three years. They saw it through committee last year and it then went on to pass the house this year. Now they are in the senate. This is an example of our civics class in action. Walla Wallas are served in many restaurants. There are many methods for preparing the onions. Many other states share some of our other official designations, like the state dance, for example. But no other state has the Walla Walla valley. We understand the concern that the onion will overshadow other Washington vegetables. This is not the case. Look at the apple, for example. Having that designation does not overshadow other types of apples. We don't want to copy another state's designation. The onion is confirmed as a vegetable, unlike some others. Onions have layers, like the different layers of people in Washington. Vegetables are a symbol of Washington farms. They are nutritious. This designation will draw awareness that will lead to popularity and profitability. This project started with the 2004 session. We began by contacting Senator Finkbeiner. In 2005 we sent letters to legislators. We then testified in the house committee and Representative Walsh passed the bill through the committee. We are approaching the last steps.

**Testimony Against:** None.

**Testimony Other:** The Walla Walla is a great onion and the kids have done a great job advocating for it. However, under the federal Walla Walla marketing order, the designation as Walla Walla also includes northeastern Oregon. So the onion is not just unique to Washington. Washington potatoes are a three billion dollar industry and the production and processing create approximately 28,000 jobs in Washington.

**Who Testified:** PRO: Representative Toby Nixon, for Representative Nixon, Sponsor; Representative Larry Springer; Chelsea Thrush, Taylor Standish, Angelique Alonzo, Evelyn Walker, Kelsey Phillips, and Katey Callegari, all from Kirkland Junior High.

OTHER: Jim Jesernig, Washington State Potato Commission.