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MOREL MUSHROOM AS OFFICIAL STATE FUNGUS

House Bill 4805 as introduced First Analysis (3-17-98)

Sponsor: Rep. Penny Crissman
Committee: Agriculture

THE APPARENT PROBLEM:

Last session, a class of fourth-graders from Niles, Michigan, successfully campaigned to have the painted turtle designated as the official state reptile (Public Act 281 of 1995), while earlier this session, a group of fourth-graders from Zeeland successfully campaigned to have the white-tailed deer designated as the official state game animal (Public Act 15 of 1997). Another group of fourth-grade students -- this time from Stadium Drive Elementary School in Lake Orion -- has worked hard on a project, as part of their study of Michigan and its state government, to have the morel mushroom be adopted as the official state fungus. With the help of their state representative, legislation has been introduced to do just this.

THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:

The bill would create a new act designating the morel mushroom (*Morchella esculenta*) as the official state fungus.

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:

Fiscal information is not available.

ARGUMENTS:

For:

Campaigns by schoolchildren to gain designation of a plant or animal are a highly effective, concrete way of teaching children not only about the plant or animal in question, but also about the legislative process. In general, moreover, state symbols can be used to promote civic pride in the state, to heighten the general public's awareness of Michigan's outstanding, vital, or unique resources, to promote tourism, and to enhance the marketing of the state's products. The state has a one-hundred-year long tradition of designating state symbols, dating from the 1897

designation of the apple blossom as the state flower and to the 1997 designation of the white-tailed deer as the state game mammal. Michigan also has a state bird, the robin; a state fish, the brook trout; an official gem, chlorastrolite (commonly known as greenstone); an official soil, the Kalkaska Soil Series; a state stone, the Petoskey stone; and an official state tree, the white pine.

As information provided by the Stadium Drive Elementary School fourth-graders points out, "of the plants we classify as mushrooms, perhaps none is more highly sought after than *Morchella esculenta* -- the morel [mushroom]," a tasty edible mushroom which also is known as the common, yellow, tan, true, or white morel, the "sponge mushroom," the "pine cone mushroom," the "honeycomb," and the "dry land fish" that reportedly fetches more than \$20 or more per pound. The morel grows in many parts of the state, as Nancy Smith Weber points out in her book, *A Morel Hunter's Companion: A Guide to the True and False Morels of Michigan*: "The common morel occurs in a wide variety of habitats including hardwood forests (beech-maple and oak-hickory in Michigan), under mature to old fruit trees (especially apples), around dead American elms, under white pines, on sand dunes and many other places." There is an annual morel mushroom festival in Boyne City, which reportedly attracts 10,000 people who come not only from all around the state but from other states as well. Finally, also attesting to the desirability of the morel mushroom as a food, in 1995 Michigan State University reportedly developed a morel that can be grown commercially.

In recognition of all of the hard work of the Lake Orion schoolchildren, the gustatory value of the mushroom itself and its widespread distribution around the state, and its commercial value, the morel mushroom deserves to be designated as the official state fungus.

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Against:

As some members of the House Agriculture Committee pointed out, one can ask just how many state symbols should be officially designated. Should there be a limit? Or should this be an open-ended proliferation? In this legislative session alone, bills have been introduced to designate the Dwarf Lake Iris as the official state wildflower (House Bill 4923), the cherry as the official state fruit (House Bill 4658), the green darner dragonfly as the state insect (House Bill 4901), the spring peeper as the state amphibian (House Bill 4919), and the "cherry burger" as the state burger (House Bill 5577). Somewhat more ambitiously, House Bill 4733 would repeal the 1897 designation of the apple blossom as the state flower and the 1955 designation of the white pine as the state tree, and instead designate the trillium as the state flower and the crab apple tree as the state tree. And while no bills have been introduced so far this session that address the perennially contentious issue of a state song, Senate Bill 506 would establish the "Wolverine Waltz" as the state waltz, while House Bill 4119 would establish a commission to select a state song. Perhaps more controversially, House Bill 4100 would establish English as the official state language. Recent past legislative sessions also have had bills that would have established a state color (blue), a state dog (the golden retriever), state minerals (hematite and native copper), a state poem ("Michigan"), and even a state folk dance (square dance), not to mention another candidates for state insect (the tiger swallowtail butterfly). Would it make sense to adopt all of these as official state symbols? If not, then at what point should the legislature decide to stop? And should a state symbol be adopted just because it is adopted as an educational project by a group of schoolchildren? Given that every year sees a new group of schoolchildren entering school, this criterion presumably would mean generating a literally endless list of official state symbols. Finally, as one House Agriculture Committee member pointed out, in 1992 one of the world's largest living things -- dwarfing even blue whales and sequoia trees -- was discovered in Michigan's Upper Peninsula: a 38-acre giant underground fungus, the *armillaria bulbosa*. If the state is to adopt an official state fungus, why not adopt this extraordinary fungus instead of an edible mushroom that grows in many areas of the country?

POSITIONS:

Schoolchildren and their teacher from Stadium Drive Elementary School in Lake Orion testified in support of the bill. (3-12-98)

Analyst: S. Ekstrom

■ 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.