

Dear Members of the Joint Policy Committee and North Dakota Legislative Assembly, I want to begin by apologizing that I am unable to attend the hearing in person. Please understand that my absence is not because this issue is unimportant to me. It is incredibly important. I live nearly five hours from Bismarck, making attendance a ten-hour round trip before even accounting for the length of the hearing. With my chronic pain, that simply is not physically or practically feasible.

I respectfully ask you not to use the number of people physically present in the room as a measure of how many North Dakotans care about this issue.

I am a 42-year-old North Dakota mother of six and a grandmother. My husband and I also spent 15 years serving as foster parents. I share these things not because they make my voice more valuable than anyone else's, but because people

who use natural kratom are too often reduced to statistics or stereotypes. We are mothers, fathers, grandparents, sons, daughters, caregivers, workers, and neighbors. We are members of your communities.

Many of the people most directly affected by this decision live with chronic pain, disabilities, limited mobility, financial constraints, or other health conditions that make traveling across the state extremely difficult. Now, because natural-leaf kratom has been temporarily banned, some of us are already experiencing significantly increased pain. The ban itself has made it even more difficult for affected people to travel to Bismarck and speak before you.

An empty chair at the Capitol does not mean there is no person behind it. It may represent someone at home in pain who desperately wishes they could be there.

I have used natural whole-leaf kratom

responsibly for nearly five years to help manage chronic pain and complex PTSD. It allowed me to stop using opioid pain medication and gabapentin. I continue to receive annual laboratory testing, and my liver and kidney results have been better than they were while I was taking my previous medications. Natural kratom has not destroyed my life. It has helped make my life manageable and allowed me to remain present for the people I love.

I also want you to understand why natural-leaf kratom was an acceptable option for me when other options were not. I do not drink alcohol, use medical marijuana, or use illicit substances. I do not like feeling intoxicated, impaired, or as though I am not fully in control of myself. I share that not as a judgment of anyone else, but to explain that I am not seeking a high or an escape.

I can speak only from my own experience, but

natural-leaf kratom does not make me feel high or disconnected from myself. It allows me to feel like myself, with enough relief from my pain to function. I do not take it to escape my life; I take it so that I can participate in my life.

I recognize that kratom is not risk-free, and I am not asking you to ignore legitimate safety concerns. I support banning isolated or synthetic 7-OH, pseudoindoxyl, MGM products, and similar highly potent derivatives. I also support reasonable age restrictions, accurate labeling, independent laboratory testing, contaminant standards, and responsible regulation.

What I cannot support is treating natural leaf as though it is the same product as these manufactured derivatives. They are not the same, and the harm associated with concentrated synthetic products should not be used to criminalize responsible adults who use

traditional natural leaf.

Please preserve the regulatory approach for natural kratom contained in HB 1628, and reject any amendment to SB 2408—or any other proposal—that would schedule ordinary mitragynine or create a complete ban on natural kratom.

As a conservative North Dakotan, I believe in personal responsibility and appropriate safeguards. I do not believe responsible adults managing chronic pain should be treated as criminals because some companies manufactured and irresponsibly marketed dangerous concentrated products.

Please do not mistake our physical absence for indifference, silence, or a lack of opposition.

Many of us care deeply. We are simply too far away, too unwell, or now in too much pain to place ourselves physically in front of you.

I am asking you to see us as the people we are

and to hear us anyway.

Respectfully,

Jessica Sabo

Langdon, North Dakota