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## Lawmakers lauded for taking step to protect working lands

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American Farmland Trust and its Campaign for Wisconsin's Farm and Forest Lands is applauding action taken this week by the state Legislature's Joint Finance Committee to protect Wisconsin working lands.

Committee members voted to approve the Wisconsin Working Lands Initiative (WLI), advancing it to the full Legislature for a vote later this year. State Sen. Julie Lassa, D-Stevens Point, State Sen. Mark Miller, D-Madison, and state Rep. Jennifer Shilling, D-La Crosse, drew praise for shepherding the legislation through the committee.

The WLI, included in Gov. Jim Doyle's budget proposal, seeks to strengthen working lands protection in Wisconsin with a statewide purchase of agricultural conservation easements (PACE) grant program to support local farmland preservation efforts, modifications to the existing farmland protection program and voluntarily established agricultural enterprise areas.

"Lawmakers on the influential Joint Finance Committee showed that they understand the importance of strategically protecting Wisconsin's working lands," said Vicki Elkin, campaign and policy associate with AFT's Campaign for Wisconsin's Farm and Forest Lands. "Senators Lassa and Miller and Representative Shilling led the effort to strengthen the proposal, based on discussion between stakeholders and representatives of the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection. Their motion to improve aspects of the package related to PACE, Agricultural Enterprise Areas, and farmland preservation zoning was approved unanimously."

Elkin noted that the lawmakers represent both urban and rural areas. "Clearly, they understand that healthy cities need healthy, sustainable farms," she said.

"The committee's action reinforces the importance of agriculture and working lands to the Wisconsin economy," added Bob Wagner, AFT's senior director for Farmland Protection Programs. "Wisconsin is poised to stem the loss of working lands with this legislation. It will provide new tools for local governments and incentives for landowners who agree to voluntarily protect these crucial lands."

Gov. Doyle announced the Working Lands Initiative in his budget message earlier this year. It is budget-neutral, a point the governor made when he announced the package.

The proposal is the product of grass-roots input from thousands of citizens across the state who participated in workshops, forums and listening sessions sponsored by DATCP, American Farmland Trust and other groups in recent years.

A number of state groups have rallied to support the Working Lands Initiative. They include the Wisconsin Counties Association, Wisconsin Towns Association, agricultural groups, land trusts and other citizen organizations.

At the request of several of these groups, American Farmland Trust (AFT) initiated an effort called the Campaign for Wisconsin's Farm and Forest Lands, an outreach and education campaign that supports elements of the Working Lands Initiative. AFT is a nonprofit membership organization dedicated to protecting America's strategic agricultural resources.

More information on the Working Lands Initiative can be found at [www.wisconsinfarmland.org](http://www.wisconsinfarmland.org).