

Ben Brancel: Walker's budget works for rural Wisconsin

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As a 5th generation farmer living in Marquette County, I know firsthand the importance of having strong, vibrant rural communities when it comes to Wisconsin's future. When speaking with farmers, business owners and consumers across rural Wisconsin, I consistently hear the need to address the same issues: broadband, education, transportation and water quality. Governor Walker's budget makes it clear that he heard that message as well. Governor Walker's recently introduced budget is good for Wisconsin's farm families, our rural communities and our future.

Unfortunately, farmers do not all have internet access, or even if they have internet, it may not be fast enough or dependable enough to complete farm business. Our rural communities need broadband. Farms and businesses need to be able to advertise and sell products online. Students need internet to complete homework and seek information. Governor Walker's budget will expand broadband funding, an increase of \$34.5 million over the biennium. This is good for all of us.

In Wisconsin, our students' success today is fundamental to our state's future growth. Governor Walker's budget increases Sparsity Aid by \$20 million and provides 100% reimbursement for rural school districts in the High-Cost Transportation Aid program, increasing this support by \$10.4 million. His budget allows school districts to enter into agreements to share or jointly provide services or specialists in areas such as attendance officers or lifesaving skill instruction, reducing the burdens on rural schools.

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Farms and businesses depend on a solid transportation system to market its products across the region, state and country. Governor Walker's budget also makes key investments when it comes to transportation in rural areas. His budget contains the most funding ever provided to local governments for local road aids. Local governments will receive a total increase of \$76,966,700 in state aid and assistance over the 2015-17 biennium from the combined increases in general transportation aids, local road improvement program payments and state funded local bridge improvement assistance program payments.

Water quality is essential for the long-term success of agriculture and Wisconsin's rural communities. Farmers care deeply about the land they work and rely upon to make a living. Governor Walker's budget emphasizes his commitment to Wisconsin farmers. It includes a number of initiatives to address land and water resource management, including \$7 million in cost sharing grants for farmers implementing conservation practices with the assistance of county land conservation departments. We continue to support county land and conservation staffing as we always have. Governor Walker's budget also includes a 24% increase, an additional \$825,000 each fiscal year (or \$1.65 million over the biennium) in funding for nutrient management planning, which helps farmers determine when to apply manure and other nutrients at the proper rate and location. Continuation of the Producer-Led Watershed Protection Grants program in the budget will help farmers work together to develop solutions to prevent runoff. These producer-led efforts maintain or improve water quality through improved or new approaches to farming practices.

After a thorough review of the fees and surcharges on farmers and businesses that are used to manage the agriculture chemical program and the Agriculture Chemical Cleanup Program, Governor Walker included in his budget proposal a reduction of fees to farmers and businesses of \$2 million per year. His proposal will still fully fund the cleanup efforts managed by the DATCP as well as oversight of product uses and regulations.

I am optimistic for the future of Wisconsin's rural communities. I believe Governor Walker's budget makes a strong investment in our rural communities and Wisconsin's future. It is clear the Governor is investing in our state's priorities and moving Wisconsin forward.

— *Brancel is secretary of the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection.*