

Rep. Spreitzer: Announces new program to attract new farmers

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MADISON- Today, Rep. Mark Spreitzer (D-Beloit), along with Senator Janis Ringhand (D-Evansville) introduced legislation to create a student loan reimbursement program for new farmers. The average age of a farm operator in Wisconsin is 54.5 years. As Wisconsin's current farmers age, our economy must find new farmers to take their place.

"Agriculture is central to Wisconsin's heritage and to our economy, largely due to the efforts of our farmers," Rep. Spreitzer said. "We must look for ways to encourage a sustainable future for farming in Wisconsin. In order to continue Wisconsin's strong tradition of family-supporting farms that feed our state and beyond, we must recruit and retain new farmers from diverse backgrounds."

Whether through an associate's or bachelor's degree, a technical college diploma, or the Farm & Industry Short Course, higher education is essential to the success of today's new farmers. In Wisconsin, 70% of students graduating with a bachelor's degree borrow to fund their education. Upon graduation, the average debt is between \$30,000 and \$32,000 for those attending public and private institutions, respectively.

"I haven't met a single farmer that has disagreed with the idea that we need to get young people back on the land and carry our ag legacy forward in Wisconsin," said Monticello native and young farmer, Jacob Marty, who raises beef, pork, chickens, and sheep as the 6th generation on his family's farm. "I know many talented young

people that would love to farm, but it isn't feasible for them because of student loan debt. Aiding young people to pursue their farming dreams would reinvigorate our agricultural community with new ideas, energy, and stewardship."

The New Farmer Student Loan Assistance Program would reimburse up to \$30,000 of student debt for those who commit to operating a small or medium-sized farm in Wisconsin for at least five years.

"Farming has become a complex business, especially with strong global competition and extreme weather patterns," said Matthew Walthius, a Beloit College graduate who manages an organic vegetable farm between Beloit and Brodhead. "Because of this, my college education has been very important to me. Unfortunately, five years into my career, I have stalled. I can't save up for land, buy any equipment, or even get a truck from this millennium because I have a large monthly student loan payment. Wisconsin needs the next generation of farmers, and farmers need to use their capital to grow food for people."

"This bill addresses the need for more new, educated farmers from both farming and non-farming backgrounds," Spreitzer noted. "By awarding grants to qualified new farmers, we can help reduce or eliminate their need to find extra money for monthly loan payments while launching a farming career."