

# Don Vruwink: Changes are afoot in America's Dairyland

Posted on Friday, Oct 19, 2018

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When I received a call from Wisconsin Agriculture Secretary Sheila Harsdorf asking me to serve on the Dairy Task Force 2.0, I was pleased to say yes.

The "2.0" signifies that this is a sequel to a task force formed during the farm crisis of the 1980s.

Then as now, the major question is: Do we want Wisconsin to remain America's Dairyland and if so, how do we expand our dairy economy?

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Our dairy economy accounts for nearly half of Wisconsin's overall agricultural economy. The loss of family farms creates a ripple effect. When a farm goes out of business, milk haulers, implement dealers, and veterinarians lose customers. Grocery stores and hardware stores lose customers. Schools lose students. Churches lose congregants. When a farm exhausts its credit, then the suppliers extend more credit to the farmer, putting the supplier at risk for the debt.

The task force is comprised of 14 men and women who operate farms; 9 members who process or market dairy products; and 8 members who represent financiers and other allied organizations. I am one of 4 legislators on the task force to hear ideas that require legislative action.

At the first meeting in August, each task force member named what they felt were the major challenges and opportunities for the dairy industry. The top items were the need for more innovation in products and processing; recruiting and retaining

workers; helping new farmers enter the industry; and building up the rural infrastructure, which includes expanding high-speed Internet and repairing our crumbling roads.

One thing every member of the task force agreed on is the need to expand the base of consumers for our excellent dairy products, especially exports to new markets. Paul Scharfman is a member of the task force who owns Specialty Cheese Company, which employs 250 people in Reeseville, north of Watertown. He said that Wisconsin cheese will always be coveted around the world because of the high quality of our milk and the skill of our cheesemakers. The fact that our cheese plants are so close to our milk producers is an advantage.

There are 8 subcommittee meetings in the month of October, and I will be attending 6 of them. So far, I have attended meetings addressing rural infrastructure and access to capital. Coming up, I will attend meetings on workforce; price volatility; markets; and regulatory certainty. The full task force will convene again in November and December.

Meanwhile, I welcome your comments on building up rural communities and boosting our agricultural economy. You can submit your ideas online at [dairytaskforce.wi.gov](http://dairytaskforce.wi.gov) or directly to me. Please see contact information below.

*-Vruwink, D-Milton, represents the 43rd Assembly District.*