

Patrick Testin: New opportunities for Wisconsin farmers

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This year, National Agriculture Week falls between March 18th and 24th, but in Wisconsin, we celebrate farmers and our farming heritage year-round. Our state is built on an agricultural foundation, and though farming has evolved considerably, it remains at the forefront of our state's economic future. That's why I've worked with my colleagues in the legislature to provide more opportunities for farmers in 2018.

Our biggest agricultural accomplishment this session has been the reintroduction of industrial hemp to Wisconsin. Unlike its cousin marijuana, hemp is not psychoactive, but it does have hundreds of industrial applications – from brake pads to food additives. Before the crop was banned a few decades ago, our state was a leading producer of hemp across the country, with nearly three-quarters of American hemp coming from here in Wisconsin.

As a result of a bi-partisan bill that I authored with Rep. Jesse Kremer (R-Kewaskum), Wisconsin has reintroduced the ability for farmers to grow industrial hemp. Federal regulations still require that farmers work with their universities or state departments of agriculture to cultivate industrial hemp for research and marketing purposes. Wisconsin's Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection (DATCP) began taking applications for growing licenses from interested farmers on March 2nd, and will continue to do so until May 1st. If you would like to grow hemp in 2018, visit https://datcp.wi.gov/Pages/Programs_Services/IndustrialHemp.aspx .

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In addition to growing our crop diversity, it's a goal of mine to grow the state's agricultural workforce. To accomplish that goal, I worked across the aisle with Reps. Evan Goyke (D-Milwaukee) and Ed Brooks (R-Reedsburg) to author the Wisconsin Veterans Farm Bill of 2017. This bill created a program at DATCP to help military veterans transition into careers in farming. We based our program on a similar one already operating in the state of West Virginia that has helped more than 300 veterans become farmers and has resulted in nearly as many new business registrations in the state. In addition to the jobs created, West Virginia's program has helped many veterans find a new purpose in life. Eight veterans have said that the program helped turn them away from a path that was leading to suicide. In addition to helping veterans develop careers, the legislation also calls for the creation of a logotype to identify farm products grown by veterans, giving consumers the option to choose to support veteran farmers with their grocery budget.

Wisconsin farmers feed the world – and I hope you'll join me in offering them thanks and support.

— *Testin, R-Stevens Point, represents the 24th Senate District.*