

Wisconsin Farmers Union: Members take part in Farm & Rural Lobby Day

Posted on Tuesday, Feb 27, 2018

>> WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)

Contact: Danielle Endvick, 715-471-0398 or dendvick@wisconsinfarmersunion.com

MADISON – Farmers and family farm advocates from across the state gathered in Madison Feb. 21 for Wisconsin Farmers Union’s Farm and Rural Lobby Day. Sixty participants connected with their legislators on issues impacting family farms and rural communities. Attendees shared perspectives on the importance of rural development, improving broadband access and protecting groundwater.

“The Farm and Rural Lobby Day is an inspiring opportunity to see democracy in action,” said Wisconsin Farmers Union President Darin Von Ruden, a dairy farmer from Westby. “Not only does this event help legislators put faces and names to the farmers in our state, it also gives Farmers Union members a better understanding of how they can help shape change in their rural communities.”

“It was well worth the time to come down and see how things operate,” said first-time Farm and Rural Lobby Day participant Don Begalke of Holcombe. “Seeing the Capitol and learning more about a day in the life down there was fascinating.”

“It was empowering to see people who cared about the same things as me organize and engage in the political process,” said Lake to Bay Farmers Union member Heather Toman of Seymour, another first-time attendee. “I have a lot of faith in the organization now to do everything in our power to be heard and enact change.”

Jacob Marty of Green Fire Farm in Monticello has attended the Farm & Rural Lobby Day for several years and enjoys the process of speaking up and meeting legislators. “I think being able to relate and tell a meaningful story is one of the most effective ways to make an impact,” Marty said. “It’s also very interesting to

hear other farmers around the state speak about their varying interactions with their legislators.”

Rural broadband

The Farmers Union members stressed that nearly 50 percent of rural Wisconsin residents do not have access to broadband internet and many of those who do have access face data caps and limited competition that results in higher monthly bills than their urban counterparts.

“Though Wisconsin’s last budget brought us closer in line with other states when it comes to rural broadband spending, we’re still far short of the investment that is needed to maximize the entrepreneurial potential of our rural communities,” Von Ruden said. “Wisconsin has invested only \$20 million in rural high-speed internet infrastructure since 2014 – our neighboring state of Minnesota has spent over four times that amount.”

Those calculations are based on reports from the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin and the Minnesota Office of Broadband Development. A recent needs assessment in Minnesota recommended broadband investments of \$35 million per year to fill gaps in coverage. Wisconsin’s needs are likely greater due to historic under-investment, Von Ruden noted.

WFU members advocated for legislation that would be a step forward in building better broadband infrastructure, including bills that would make it easier for municipalities to apply for broadband grants, limit Net Neutrality violations, better define broadband speeds and advance White Space technology availability for internet providers.

Rural Entrepreneurship

The farmer lobbyists urged their legislators to foster rural entrepreneurship by supporting bills that would make agritourism businesses more wedding friendly, such as allowing wineries to provide cider samples from other wineries and to stay open past 9pm. Another provision they supported was making it easier to use historic barns for events.

Though Farmers Union had previously been a vocal supporter of the Cookie Bill, members made it clear they did not support the home baking bill if it included the \$10,000 gross sales cap included in AB 360. Home bakers won a court victory in October 2017 allowing them to start their businesses, but the cap, if imposed,

would be the lowest cap in the nation and one that members argued would be limit rather than support rural entrepreneurship.

Groundwater

Farmers Union members also encouraged their legislators to pass without amendment the revisions to NR 151, the Natural Resources Administrative Rule that governs agricultural performance standards to protect water quality. They voiced support for bills that would boost funding for Farmer-Led Watershed Projects, create a fund to make well testing more affordable and require the DNR to notify well owners in the event of a DNR permit violation that threatens drinking water quality.

Participants visited 50 offices and dropped information to every legislator in the Capitol building.

Wisconsin Farmers Union, a member-driven organization, is committed to enhancing the quality of life for family farmers, rural communities, and all people through educational opportunities, cooperative endeavors, and civic engagement. For more information visit www.wisconsinfarmersunion.com.