

Brad Pfaff: Wisconsin dairy needs to expand its markets worldwide

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MADISON – Consumers from around the world enjoy agriculture products that come from our state’s farm fields and agriculture processing firms. Wisconsin is consistently one of the top exporters of dairy-related products in the nation. As milk production in the United States continues to increase, it is more and more important to create value-added products and identify new markets for those products, here at home or around the world.

The 31 members of Dairy Task Force 2.0 recognize the importance of trade and international markets to our state’s dairy community. To help our cheesemakers research and develop new products targeted for export markets, the Task Force called for a study on the possible development of a Wisconsin Cheese Brand and Export Board.

Another recommendation emphasizes the importance of value-added and specialty cheese in our state. Today, nearly half the nation’s specialty cheese is made in Wisconsin by a diverse array of cheese businesses. To better understand changing consumer tastes and demands, Task Force members recommended conducting an in-depth consumer study to gain additional market understanding. They also recognized the significant up-front costs of starting a dairy processing business, and sought ways to establish incubator facilities for start-up dairy processors.

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Much of Wisconsin’s specialty cheese is made by artisan cheesemakers who may produce smaller amounts of product. To help reach consumers across the country,

the Dairy Task Force 2.0 recommended an analysis on consolidating multiple companies' products for joint distribution. Other recommendations sought to increase demand for fluid milk consumption and advocated for dairy product vending machines to be placed in Wisconsin public schools.

Dairy Task Force 2.0 members also passed a recommendation asking for an increase in dairy processor grant funding, an item that was included in Governor Evers' 2019-2021 biennial budget proposal. Increased funding will promote and encourage growth and innovation in Wisconsin dairy plants. To ensure Wisconsin's innovative dairy products are positioned for success in the marketplace, the Dairy Task Force 2.0 also approved recommendations for truth in food labeling and asking the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to make needed regulatory changes to product standards of identity.

Wisconsin's dairy products are the best in the world. The best products require the best milk. Our state's hardworking dairy farmers produce some of the highest quality, most nutritious milk every day. Recognizing this, members of the Dairy Task Force 2.0 passed a recommendation supporting the National Dairy FARM program and equivalent programs that are science-based and cow-centric. Members also recommended changes to the Pasteurized Milk Ordinance (PMO) to increase our milk quality standards.

The team at the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection works to develop our markets locally through Farm to School; Buy Local, Buy Wisconsin; and Something Special from Wisconsin™. The Wisconsin International Dairy Export (WIDE) initiative, in collaboration with industry partners, brings in buyers from across the world to learn more about our state and its dairy products. The work of the Dairy Task Force 2.0 will help guide the state's marketing efforts for years to come. For more on the Dairy Task Force 2.0, visit dairytaskforce.wi.gov.

- Pfaff is secretary of the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection.