

Fitzgerald pushes for Pfaff's ouster as DATCP secretary, gov rejects call

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Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald today asked Gov. Tony Evers to withdraw the nomination of Brad Pfaff as DATCP secretary rather than face the possibility the nomination will be shot down on the Senate floor Tuesday.

But an Evers spokeswoman said the gov won't withdraw Pfaff's nomination, and the gov slammed Republicans for pushing for the ag secretary's ouster amid the ongoing uncertainty in the industry.

In February, Pfaff cleared a Senate committee unanimously. But since then, he has clashed with GOP lawmakers on several issues. Last month, Fitzgerald told WisPolitics.com that his members "have concerns, real concerns that he's not up to the job."

"Senator Fitzgerald does not believe Pfaff has the votes to be confirmed," Fitzgerald spokesman Alec Zimmerman said today.

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Evers expressed amazement at the suggestion.

"It is astonishing that, in the middle of a dairy crisis and trade war, Republicans want to create even more uncertainty and instability by firing the leader of the agency charged with fighting for Wisconsin's farmers and rural communities," Evers said.

Pfaff's nomination is one of two cabinet secretaries scheduled for floor votes on Tuesday along with Mark Afable as Insurance commissioner. The Senate is also scheduled to vote on Rebecca Cameron Valcq as PSC commissioner and three of Evers' picks for the UW System Board of Regents.

Should the Senate vote to reject Pfaff's nomination, it would be a first in at least decades. The Senate chief clerk's office, whose records go back to 1997, said it had found no instances of the chamber voting down a cabinet secretary's nomination. The closest was the tabling of Charles Thompson's nomination to be Transportation secretary in 1999.

Meanwhile, the Legislative Reference Bureau said its research so far has found past guys have withdrawn a cabinet nominee, but none had been voted down at least back to 1987.

To date, the Senate has only confirmed five of Evers' cabinet picks, and Fitzgerald told WisPolitics.com last month his members were still working through issues they had with some of the nominees.

Fitzgerald also personally clashed with Pfaff after the secretary knocked the Joint Finance Committee for failing to release funding aimed at helping farmers struggling with mental health issues. He said the ag "community needs this funding, and they need it now — not when it's convenient for legislative Republicans." Fitzgerald at the time called the comments "offensive and unproductive."

Zimmerman cited two other instances that have prompted concerns in the Senate GOP caucus. GOP state Rep. Joan Ballweg this summer knocked Pfaff for failing to turn over information she requested on farmer suicides for her work leading the Speaker's Task Force on Suicide Prevention.

Also, state Sen. Steve Nass, R-Whitewater, has criticized DATCP for work on revising siting rules for livestock facilities amid the crisis in the dairy industry, raising fears it would lead to the closure of more farms.

But DATCP announced today it has decided not to take the proposed updates to the agency board for a final vote. The proposed rule would set the standards local governments have to follow if they choose to require permits for new or expanding livestock operations.

Pfaff said in a statement that was released before Fitzgerald's announcement that the department has had "ongoing, constructive meetings with stakeholders on this complex rule" since a public hearing earlier this year.

"Given the tremendous importance of our dairy and livestock industries to the state

of Wisconsin, we've decided to take more time to continue these discussions," Pfaff said.

A Fitzgerald spokesman said the agency release became public after the majority leader spoke with Evers. A DATCP spokeswoman didn't immediately return a call seeking comment.

Senate Minority Leader Jennifer Shilling called Pfaff a "tireless advocate and ally for Wisconsin farmers" and charged Republicans are "playing petty political games."

"At a time when Wisconsin is losing dairy farms daily and suicide rates for farmers are rising, it is unacceptable and callous for Republicans to obstruct the appointment of Secretary Pfaff," Shilling said. "Once again, Republicans are playing petty political games rather than doing what is right for Wisconsin families and local farms."