

Assembly Republicans release package of bills to aid struggling ag industry

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Assembly Republicans have rolled out a package of bills designed to boost the struggling ag industry.

In a Capitol news conference yesterday, they also said they intended to tweak some of Gov. Tony Evers' State of the State proposals aimed at helping farmers. But Rep. Tyler August said some Evers' measures to help farmers "take us in the wrong direction with simply just adding a bunch of government employees."

"They need actual help, they don't need more government bureaucrats," the Lake Geneva Republican said.

An Evers spokeswoman fired back that it was "unfortunate that (Republicans) didn't support some of these ideas when the governor first proposed them in the budget a year ago, but it's good news that they're ready to work together on these issues now."

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"We are happy to see that Republicans in the Legislature are following the governor's lead when it comes to investing in agriculture and our rural communities," spokeswoman Melissa Baldauff said.

A spokesman for Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald directed WisPolitics.com to comments the Juneau Republican made last week in which he indicated Senate Republicans are "all ears when it comes to plans that help farmers."

The package, which includes five bills as well as amendments to the two special

session bills Evers called for during his address last month, aims to take on both short- and long-term challenges facing the ag industry.

In the short term, the package includes two provisions that would modify the state's tax code to help farmers: one bill would create an up to \$7,500 credit for property taxes levied against farms; another would expand the number of self-employed individuals could subtract from their income taxes for costs stemming from health insurance.

Rep. Travis Tranel, R-Cuba City, said the tax credit was designed to "return some of the dollars that these farmers have paid into the state government."

"The reality is when you farm, even though income is down 50 percent from 2013, the bills just keep coming in," he said.

Under the three-year proposal, farmers who hit a \$35,000 gross receipt threshold would be able to "proactively" apply for the credit in the first year.

Tranel said the measure was modeled off the 2018 child tax credit and would allow a taxpayer in the first year to claim the credit online through the Department of Revenue rather than waiting until the end of the year to claim it through a tax return.

In the second and third years, those who meet the threshold would apply for the credit as they file their taxes.

Rep. Amy Loudenberg touted the second bill — a \$9 million-per-year tweak to income tax subtractions, as a way to "make health insurance affordable." But the Clinton Republican said she didn't have a break down of how many farmers would be able to take advantage of proposed changes as compared to other industries.

The remaining three bills call on the UW System to require: UW-Madison to conduct a study on developing an agricultural science and technology program; require the System's Board of Regents to review on current agriculture programs; and allocate \$1 million for the Board of Regents to spend on a state specialist in agricultural research.

Republicans also said they wanted to boost funding for Evers' proposal to increase dairy exports from \$1 million to \$5 million, as well as add a position to coordinate the effort between DATCP and WEDC.

The other amendment to Evers' special session bills would change the gov's proposal to boost dairy processing plant grants by defining what constitutes a small processing plant, allowing funding to be directed to small businesses.

Though some members had a rough estimate of how much individual proposals would cost, August said he didn't have a fiscal estimate on the whole package. Evers' proposals would cost \$8.5 million over two years.

Evers' two special session bills and the five bills from the package are scheduled for a public hearing and exec tomorrow morning ahead of the Assembly's floor session.

See the bills:

<https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/2019/proposals/reg/asm/bill/ab627>

https://www.wispolitics.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/19s0261_1-2134868.pdf

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