

# Charlie Mitchell: Farmers thank DATCP — and support hazard pay for workers

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CHIPPEWA FALLS — Over last week and the following, thousands of Wisconsin farmers will apply for much-needed government support to cover losses from COVID-19 through the [Wisconsin Farm Support Program](#). These one-time grants of no more than \$3,500 are a small but meaningful sum that helps farms survive a challenging time, and since March, \$50 billion in farm support has been [allocated](#) through the CARES Act.

Our membership at Wisconsin Farmers Union (WFU) is grateful that our essential work of providing food to families is valued and supported. Other essential workers in the supply chain have [stopped receiving hazard pay](#) even while the crisis has continued apace, and many don't have access to paid leave if they get sick or are quarantining. This is inconsistent with WFU's grassroots policy, set by members, which supports fair, just, and safe labor practices that promote both individual and community integrity. We recognize farmers can't feed anyone without the tens of thousands of workers in processing plants and grocery stores who bring our goods to market. That's why WFU is calling on Wisconsin food processors and grocery stores to [reinstate hazard pay](#) and guarantee paid leave for sick and quarantining employees—until the pandemic is over.

Just like cows need to be milked twice a day, grocery stores have to be open seven days a week. The workers who process, stock, ring up, and deliver our food to the table often do so at a serious risk of [exposure](#) to COVID-19. Over 700 meatpacking and processing plants, along with almost a hundred farms and production facilities, have confirmed cases of COVID-19. Over 55,000 workers have tested positive and nearly 250 have died, the majority of cases and deaths suffered by meatpacking workers. These are certainly underestimates as some companies have not disclosed internal testing numbers. The virus has also [killed at least one hundred grocery](#)

[workers](#) nationwide. With PPE and social distancing, and the wrath of customers who get upset with their enforcement, that difficult work is [even more complicated](#) and stressful than it was before the virus hit.

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It's unacceptable that these workers are not receiving the "hero" compensation they've deserved since shoppers first panic-bought stores out of toilet paper in March. [Most workers](#) fearing for their health, experiencing symptoms, or diagnosed with COVID-19 are forced to use no more than two weeks of paid leave to stay home. After those two weeks, they are high and dry, especially workers at processing plants: government-funded paid leave through the Families First Coronavirus Response Act only applied to businesses with fewer than 500 employees, and few processing plants, which often exceed the maximum, are offering that leave voluntarily. They should. No worker should have to choose between a paycheck and the safety of themselves and their community.

As farmers, one of the most important reasons we love our work is the opportunity to provide a service to our community. Keeping shelves stocked and checkout lines moving during the pandemic is such a vital service. While state and federal funds have supported our work, it's our responsibility to speak up for those who are being left out. Hazard pay and paid sick and quarantine leave need to come back to Wisconsin grocery stores and processing plants, and stay until this nightmare is over.

*-Through his work as Farmer-Labor Solidarity Organizer for Wisconsin, Charlie Mitchell is developing grassroots power through unity among farm and labor groups. Learn more about Wisconsin Farmers Union and the Rural Voices project at [www.wisconsinfarmersunion.com/ruralvoices](http://www.wisconsinfarmersunion.com/ruralvoices). Charlie can be reached at [cmitchell@wisconsinfarmersunion.com](mailto:cmitchell@wisconsinfarmersunion.com).*