

Jon Erpenbach: It's time to stand up for our agricultural and rural communities

Posted on Monday, Feb 3, 2020

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West Point - The story is starting to become cliché. Wisconsinites overwhelmingly support a proposal that benefits our state, Republican leadership cries “partisanship”, and blocks action until an undetermined future date. We saw this happen with funding to combat homelessness, which still has seven pending proposals awaiting Republican action, and now we are watching this happen with Governor Evers’ call for a special session to help our agricultural and rural communities.

During the State of the State Address, Governor Evers announced that he will be prioritizing Wisconsin’s farmers, and called for a special session to take up proposals to help alleviate the strain on our rural communities. The special session was scheduled for Tuesday, and unfortunately, the day came and passed with no discussion, no debate, and no progress. In fact, Republicans chose instead to ignore our farm crisis and hold a partisan political rally of their own.

Democrats stand ready to take up a plethora of proposals, from passing the Wisconsin Initiative for Dairy Exports (WIDE) to providing grants to small dairy processing plants and increasing support for farmer mental health. Unfortunately, Republicans were nowhere to be found. For generations, farmers have served as the backbone for our state, and it is time that we step up and support our agricultural industries and rural communities.

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Wisconsin unfortunately leads the nation in farm bankruptcies, with an average of 2 dairy farms closing per day. Whether it is effects of global warming wiping out crops, bad federal policies disrupting trade or slapping on unnecessary tariffs, or massive corporate farms shutting down their competition, each day these challenges stack up and get harder to address. These challenges are outside of the control of Wisconsin farmers, and it will take legislative action to keep our state alive.

The truth is, agricultural diversity is one of Wisconsin's greatest strengths. That's one reason why it's vital we do everything we can to maintain our smaller family farms. Agriculture contributes nearly \$105 billion to our state's economy and thousands of jobs. From vegetables, to cranberries to leading the nation in cheese production, our agricultural industry should not be taken for granted.

Thankfully, Governor Evers did more than call a special session, he also signed an Executive Order to create the Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity. The commission is tasked with going out into our communities to listen to the issues that are affecting farmers, the agricultural industry and rural businesses. The commission will create recommendations based on the information they gather and report back to the Governor, so that we can better address the real issues that our rural communities are facing.

Additionally, the Governor announced his plan to work with the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) to establish the Office of Rural Prosperity. This action will help to ensure that our farmers, agriculture, and rural communities are a part of Wisconsin's economic development strategy.

Wisconsin depends on our farmers, so this crisis is not their burden to carry alone. It is the food that comes to our tables, the farmer's markets that bring people together, the businesses that depend on access to locally grown food, and the communities that keep our state afloat. Our farms are Wisconsin's legacy. The least we can do is show up to the discussion.

-Erpenbach, D-West Point, represents the 27th Senate District.