

Wis. Cheese Makers Association: Wisconsin ag groups applaud focus on broadband accessibility, affordability

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Madison, WI – Wisconsin agricultural producers, processors, and business leaders are applauding Governor Tony Evers' focus on broadband accessibility and affordability in the 2021-23 state budget process. Tonight, Evers is expected to deliver his budget address, proposing broadband investments of \$200 million. Evers dubbed 2021 the "Year of Broadband Access" in his January State of the State Address, following his July 2020 launch of the Governor's Task Force on Broadband Access.

Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association, Cooperative Network, Dairy Business Association, Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation, Wisconsin Farmers Union, Wisconsin Agri-Business Association, Midwest Food Products Association, Wisconsin Cattlemen's Association, Wisconsin Association of Professional Agricultural Consultants, Wisconsin Potato and Vegetable Growers Association, Wisconsin State Cranberry Growers Association, Wisconsin Soybean Association, Wisconsin Pork Association, Wisconsin Veterinary Medical Association, Midwest-SouthEastern Equipment Dealers Association, Wisconsin Corn Growers Association, GROWMARK, Land O'Lakes, Compeer Financial, AgCountry Farm Credit Services, and GreenStone Farm Credit Services are advocating for bipartisan support for broadband investments that will strengthen rural communities and businesses.

Approximately 394,000 Wisconsinites lack broadband access, with 98 percent of them living in rural parts of the state, according to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) 2021 Broadband Deployment Report. Still more rural residents

face the challenge of inadequate internet speeds and unreliable connections.

“Broadband expansion opens rural, agriculturally-based businesses – including dairy processors – to the boundless opportunity of online sales and enables them to better compete for emerging and top talent – people who expect high-speed access to the world around them,” said **Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association Executive Director John Umhoefer**. “Investments in rural broadband are investments in Wisconsin’s economic future.”

Cooperative Network President and CEO Dan Smith said, “Internet is now an essential service for farmers and cooperatives because of e-commerce’s positive effects on local economies. Cooperatives across Wisconsin have had to come up with alternative strategies and plans to continue conducting business during the pandemic, but lack of fixed broadband access prevents many cooperatives from staying connected.”

“Inadequate broadband service continues to hold back Wisconsin’s farming communities from reaching their full potential,” **Amy Penterman, president of the Dairy Business Association**, said. “Having the ability to connect with customers and neighbors through social media has become essential for our farm businesses. High-speed internet also powers innovation through things like precision agriculture technology that makes our farm operations more efficient and environmentally sound.”

“Broadband access is critical to Wisconsin farmers and rural residents,” said **Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation President Kevin Krentz**. “From virtual school and remote work needs to online marketing, purchasing and equipment controls, now more than ever farmers need access to quality broadband to stay connected.”

“A lack of broadband access is hindering the economy in rural communities and putting some Wisconsinites at a disadvantage when it comes to business, education, and even health. Wisconsin Farmers Union appreciates Governor Tony Evers’ efforts to make 2021 the Year of Broadband Access, and we will continue to strive for a Wisconsin in which all people have access to affordable and reliable broadband, regardless of their zip code,” said **Darin Von Ruden, Wisconsin Farmers Union President**.

“Access to rural broadband has long been likened to the rural electrification of the

1930s,” said **Tom Bressner, Wisconsin Agri-Business Association Executive Director**. “Wisconsin’s agribusinesses rely on dependable internet to connect with and provide quality services for their customers. The need for reliable rural broadband became even more apparent in the last year as the pandemic prevented the in-person connection our industry is used to. Our members need this investment to remain competitive and to keep our state’s proud agriculture history strong.”

“Reliable broadband access is key to the modernization and growth of food processors across Wisconsin,” said **Jason Culotta, Midwest Food Products Association Executive Director**. “We applaud Governor Evers’ focus on this issue and look forward to working with lawmakers on both sides of the aisle to encourage investments in our rural communities and businesses.”

“The need to use technology to connect with markets and to implement production decisions continues to increase,” said **Jim Magolski, President of the Wisconsin Pork Association**. “It is essential that Wisconsin farmers have access to reliable internet connections in rural areas.”