

Laura Paine & Randy Jackson: Positioning agriculture for resilience in a post-pandemic Wisconsin

Posted on Friday, Feb 26, 2021

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In the depths of winter, we all dream of summer pleasures—this year more than ever! Ours is sitting down with friends to a grass-fed burger hot off the grill, topped with a slab of Wisconsin cheese and washed down with a cold Wisconsin beer. The pandemic has made clear that many of the things we love about Wisconsin can be lost if we don't make some changes. Governor Evers' recently released budget acknowledges as much and offers several initiatives to support resilient farming systems and food supply chains that will ensure we can all enjoy the products of Wisconsin's agricultural economy for years to come.

We applaud the Evers Administration for including critical programs and resources that recognize we don't have to choose between profitable farms and clean water, thriving rural communities and healthy soils, or productive agriculture and biodiversity. Governor Evers' proposed investment in a statewide grazing education grant program will assist producers who adopt regenerative grazing practices – a practice many Wisconsin producers are already doing but that needs more support.

Well-managed pasture for dairy, beef, and other livestock products promises opportunities for lower costs and more stable income for farmers; improved animal health; high quality and more diverse consumer choices; cleaner water, healthy soils and high quality pollinator and wildlife habitat. With all these benefits, it makes sense for livestock producers, large and small, to add this cost-effective practice to their toolbox.

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From 2006 to 2014, one of us (Paine) managed a previous version of the Grazing Education program at the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP). The program put resources into the hands of more than a dozen community-based organizations and agencies to provide educational opportunities and technical assistance to tens of thousands of farmers, while protecting more than 100,000 acres of farmland under productive perennial pasture. This locally driven, voluntary program can deliver significant conservation benefits – I've seen that first hand.

But for the grazing education program to work and reverberate with broad impact, we must look at the whole agricultural picture. Livestock producers are seeing incredible demand for their local products, but there is a critical shortage of meat processing capacity in Wisconsin. We know livestock producers who must book processing dates a year or two in advance. This agricultural budget proposes grant programs to help meat and dairy processors expand and modernize their facilities. These steps will help build supply chains that contribute to sustained economic growth and vitality of Wisconsin's rural communities.

The budget also provides additional resources for DATCP's conservation practices. Of critical importance is increased funding for county conservationists, university extension, and watershed groups. Farmers need these locally-based technical assistance opportunities to learn from their peers to help them adapt their farming practices to be both economically and environmentally sustainable.

Well-managed grazed perennial grasslands are our best opportunity to cushion cropping systems from catastrophic losses, protect rural infrastructure from flooding, and possibly accumulate atmospheric carbon in agricultural soils. The Governor's recommendations for a DATCP pilot program to study the feasibility of a carbon market in Wisconsin will position the state as a leader in markets and policies that reward farmers for the environmental benefits they can provide. The budget provides grants to producers and producer-led groups who participate in the carbon market pilot program, making it another voluntary, locally driven approach.

Well-managed pasture is the most cost-effective source of feed for livestock and can significantly reduce capital and production costs and lead to healthier livestock and better environmental outcomes. Managed grazing is a tool that can be incorporated into livestock farming operations of all sizes.

There is a whole new generation of innovative farmers and farmers-to-be out there.

With the right set of tools and resources in their hands, they'll build systems that steward land and water while providing for their families and engaging in their communities.

Governor Evers' support for grazing education, processing facilities, and new market opportunities provides much needed resources and a path forward toward an agricultural system that provides a healthy income for farmers, fosters economic vitality for rural communities, and ensures clean water and a healthy environment for generations to come. We can taste those Wisconsin cheeseburgers now!

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