

WFU: Celebrates investment in Wisconsin agriculture and rural communities in governor's budget

Posted on Friday, Feb 5, 2021

>> WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)

CHIPPEWA FALLS, WI – Today's announcement of priorities in Governor Tony Evers' proposed biennium budget brings good news for Wisconsin's rural citizens and farmers. Wisconsin Farmers Union President Darin Von Ruden offered strong praise for the package of initiatives that aim to boost market opportunities, infrastructure and innovation across rural Wisconsin.

"Our rural places and family farms have been in decline for decades and are in dire need of investment. This budget demonstrates a commitment to agriculture and reassures rural Wisconsinites that their voices are being heard and their communities matter to the State of Wisconsin," Von Ruden said.

In a release this morning, Governor Evers noted, "Our agricultural industry is Wisconsin's past and present, and it will be our future. Our proud farming history is core to our state's culture and people, and Wisconsin farmers have carried and supported our state economy for generations. Long before the COVID-19 pandemic hit and then throughout this pandemic, our farmers and producers were fighting every day to save their farms and to save their industry while helping us put food on our tables. It's time to join in this fight for Wisconsin's farmers and their families and agricultural industries to ensure future economic prosperity for our rural communities and our entire state."

WFU members and staff shared the following perspectives on elements of the budget package:

"This \$43 million investment confirms Governor Evers' strong support of Wisconsin

agriculture and rural communities, and checks off many of the budget priorities WFU expressed to the governor's team in recent months," said WFU Government Relations Director Nick Levendofsky. "We are grateful for this show of support for critical topics like rural mental health, meat processing infrastructure, and expansion of market opportunities for farmers. We look forward to working with Governor Evers, DATCP, members of the Joint Finance Committee, Assembly, and Senate to advance these and many other WFU budget priorities."

"Seeing financial and legislative support for such initiatives in our state and in the farming community goes a long way in shattering the stigma that continues to surround stress and mental health in agriculture." – Brittany Olson, Barron County dairy farmer and WFU member

"WFU supports additional funding to grow the producer-led watershed council program in Wisconsin. WFU works directly with several watershed councils to support farmers in their efforts to promote conservation agriculture practices among other farmers in their watershed. The producer-led program has proven to be effective at increasing adoption of conservation practices because it leverages the power of farmers working together. – Bill Hogseth, WFU Watershed & Organizing Coordinator

"The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted an already-prevalent gap in our food system. Support for meat processing and inspection couldn't be more timely, and will be significant for processors and farmers alike." – Tommy Enright, Amherst farmer and WFU Communications and Special Projects Coordinator

Highlights of the package include:

Expanding Local and International Market Opportunities

- Creating and funding the Wisconsin Initiative for Agricultural Exports
- Increasing funding for the Dairy Processor Grant Program by \$1.2 million
- Investing \$20 million to connect Wisconsin food banks and pantries with Wisconsin producers

- Funding the Farm-to-School Grant Program to get locally-produced foods into cafeterias
- Creating a Farm-to-Fork program to build connections between farmers and non-school entities
- Increasing funding for the Buy Local, Buy Wisconsin program
- Providing additional funding for Something Special from Wisconsin™
- Creating a Small Farm Diversity Grant Program to support ag producers adding new products, increasing production where market opportunities exist, or starting a new operation entirely

Three-Pronged Plan to Bolster Local Meat Processing

- Creating a Meat Processor Grant program to target the needs of the meat industry, incentivize innovation, and expand Wisconsin's overall meat processing capacity
- Creating and funding a Meat Talent Development Program to target workforce development
- Adding additional Food Inspector Positions at DATCP to ensure a safe, secure food supply

Promoting Agricultural Innovation & Farmer-Led Conservation

- Creating and funding a Value-Added Agricultural Grant Program, which would provide education and technical assistance related to producing value-added agricultural products

- Providing additional funding to counties in order to support three conservation staff per county;
- Increasing funding for the Producer-Led Watershed Grant Program
- Creating and funding Water Stewardship Grants which provides support for third parties assisting farmers with water stewardship
- Creating and funding a Conservation Grant Program which supports farmers seeking to transition to more environmentally sustainable agricultural practices
- Providing funding to support additional UW-Extension specialists and county agents, who provide technical assistance and research to support producers throughout Wisconsin

Supporting Farmers' Mental Health & Wellbeing

- Creating a new Regional Farmer Mental Health Program to increase farmers' access to mental health support services, coordinate peer support programs, and provide counseling
- Providing ongoing funding for the Farmer Mental Health Assistance Program, which supports a 24/7 counseling service, tele-counseling sessions, counseling vouchers, and building farmer peer-support networks