

Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association: WCMA applauds ag, broadband investments in Evers' budget

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MADISON, WI – Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association (WCMA) members are tonight praising Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers' plans to boost the state's agricultural economy, food aid programs, and broadband access and affordability, via the 2021-23 state budget.

"Governor Evers' budget proposals are designed to stabilize and strengthen Wisconsin's \$46 million dairy industry, from farm to market," said John Umhoefer, WCMA Executive Director. "We welcome the opportunities the state budget holds to work with our elected leaders to bolster not only dairy businesses, but rural communities and the state as a whole."

This evening, Evers detailed investments of \$43 million in Wisconsin agriculture, including more than \$2 million to launch and fund the Wisconsin Initiative for Agricultural Exports, which will build Wisconsin's brand and boost sales of cheese, value-added dairy products, and other agricultural goods in other countries.

"Now is the time to focus on growing Wisconsin's dairy exports, with rising household incomes in emerging markets and new trade agreements in place," said Jeff Schwager, President of Sartori Cheese in Plymouth. "Governor Evers is proposing a smart, targeted investment, designed to help Wisconsin dairy

processors navigate the logistics that hold so many back from sales abroad. As processors grow their customer base, the state can expect economic growth – and a stronger, more stable dairy industry – for years to come.”

Evers is also proposing a \$1.2 million boost to the dairy processor grant program at the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, small-dollar grants designed to support dairy modernization and innovation.

“Wisconsin’s dairy industry contributes \$45.6 billion in revenue and supports nearly 160,000 jobs, statewide – and our potential for growth is limitless, if we continue to innovate, modernize our operations and reach new markets,” said Paul Scharfman, President of Specialty Cheese Company in Reeseville. “The Governor’s budget proposal offers investments crucial to growth amid today’s many challenges, and we look forward to partnering with him and with legislators on both sides of the aisle to strengthen Wisconsin’s rural communities, rural businesses, and rural economy.”

Evers’ budget plan includes \$20 million to support food banks and pantries partnering with Wisconsin food processors, continuing efforts started with the CARES-funded Food Security Initiative last year.

“Our cheese factories, and our farm suppliers, have benefited greatly from Wisconsin’s Food Security initiative during the pandemic,” said Bob Wills, Cheesemaker and Owner of Cedar Grove Cheese in Plain and Clock Shadow Creamery in Milwaukee. “Restaurant closures and diminished tourism meant that some of our usual buyers weren’t in the market – and, at the same time, many of our neighbors faced severe food shortages. We welcome Governor Evers’ sensible program to alleviate both sets of needs by supporting the food aid distribution network.”

Evers proposes a nearly \$1 million investment to create and fund a new Value-Added Agricultural Grant Program, which will provide education and technical assistance related to producing value-added agricultural products, such as organic farming and grazing.

“This budget includes forward-looking investments in value-added agriculture, with a greater focus on organic farming and best practices related to grazing. These key resources can move our state ahead and leverage greater economic vitality for family farm dairy producers and the rural businesses they support. We stand at the

ready to work with the governor and state legislature to secure strategic food and farm policy that helps Wisconsin be a national leader in agriculture,” said Adam Warthesen, Director of Government and Industry Affairs for Organic Valley, based in La Farge.

In tonight’s speech, Evers also called for \$200 million to build the state’s broadband infrastructure, a proposal WCMA members strongly support. 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. Many more Wisconsinites face the challenge of inadequate internet speeds and unreliable connections.

“High-speed internet is essential to competition for online sales and top-tier talent, meaning that many of Wisconsin’s rural businesses are currently at a disadvantage,” said Andy Hatch, Cheesemaker and Owner of Uplands Cheese in Dodgeville. “Governor Evers’ proposed investments in broadband infrastructure will help to address that disparity and create new economic opportunities.”

“A stronger agricultural economy and broadband access for all: these are practical proposals that leaders from both sides of the aisle have championed in recent years,” said Umhoefer. “We support bipartisan coalitions for these budget proposals, with the goal of creating prosperity and a brighter future for all in Wisconsin.”