

Sen. Marklein: Ag committee action

Posted on Friday, Mar 25, 2022

>> 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.](#)

Even though legislative floor sessions have come to a close, legislative committees continue to meet and take action on important issues. This week, the Senate Committee on Agriculture & Tourism joined the Assembly Committee on Agriculture for a joint public hearing on Clearinghouse Rule 21-093 related to county and district fairs as well as an informational hearing on the University of Wisconsin Madison's Farm & Industry Short Course. And it just happened to be on National Ag Day!

I serve as Vice-Chair of the Senate Committee on Agriculture & Tourism. I deeply value this role because I represent one of the most ag-dependent Senate districts in Wisconsin. Our communities represent every facet of agriculture in Wisconsin. From crops to cows to hogs to cranberries, we do it all in the communities of the 17th District. I appreciate the opportunity to impact ag policy on behalf of the people I serve.

The two issues we discussed on Tuesday, March 22, 2022 may impact the ag community throughout Wisconsin. The public hearing on the clearinghouse rule prepares the committee to vote on this issue. The informational hearing on the UW-Madison Short Course was designed to engage the ag community with the University and will hopefully encourage the groups to work together as the course is revamped.

Clearinghouse Rule 21-093 impacts county and district fairs. The Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) proposed changes to administrative rules in ATCP 160. While much of the proposed rule is reasonable, there is one major change that is causing concern throughout Wisconsin. This change prohibits fairs from receiving reimbursement from the state to pay fair winners premium awards if they have already won at another fair. This means that if someone wins an award at the Elroy Fair, the Juneau County Fair would not be

able to be reimbursed for the premium if they won at the Juneau County Fair.

This may seem like a minor thing, but to young people and adults who show at fairs and work hard all summer to raise animals, refine recipes and create intricate crafts, the small premium awards paid by the fairs are major. If a fair wants to continue operating as usual, they will be required to fully-fund any premiums for exhibitors who have won at another fair.

In addition, our local fairs in the 17th Senate District are coordinated by volunteers on a shoestring budget. Making up the difference of a few thousand dollars is a big deal. As a result, a large number of constituents from Grant, Juneau and Sauk counties contacted me and attended the public hearing to provide input on this rule change. The Juneau County Fair, for example, estimates that they would lose 61% of their state aids if this rule proceeds. In 2019, they shared 63 exhibitors with the Elroy Fair.

Leadership from the Elroy Fair said that they have approximately 2,800 exhibitors each year. They said the burden on their volunteer fair staff to track whether or not an exhibitor has won at another fair would be enormous.

So, what happens now? The standing committees, in this case the Committees on Agriculture, have 30 days to review the rule. We held a public hearing to review the proposed rule and now we must decide whether to object to all or part of the rule for specified reasons. The committee may request changes to the rule. I will be working with my colleagues to determine our path forward.

In addition to the Clearinghouse Rule, we were briefed on UW-Madison's plans to make significant changes to the Farm & Industry Short Course. This course is currently a 16-week residential course for farmers that has been offered since 1885. This course involves instruction in soils, crops, dairy, meat animals, agricultural engineering, farm business planning, agri-business risk management, employee relations and communications. It is held from late fall to early spring to coordinate with the non-growing season.

UW-Madison announced plans to change the structure of this course on March 2, 2022. They announced that in 2023, they plan to switch from a for-credit, on-campus, 16-week residential experience to a non-credit, in-person and virtual format with options at night and on weekends, as well as during the work week. UW-Madison said that this new format will better serve the ag community who "no

longer see winter as a 'down time' for their businesses.”

The decision made by UW-Madison for changes to the short course may be appropriate, but they shouldn't be asking for stakeholder input AFTER they made their decision. Reaching out to stakeholders after the fact seems to be more of an appeasement rather than a solicitation for input. The informational hearing was scheduled to create a conversation about these changes and I am hopeful that it will spur reconsideration and change at the university.

The WFBF told us that there was virtually no communication between the ag-stakeholder groups and the university leading up to this announcement. Many of their members are alumni of the program. They were never informed that the program was struggling or that the university was looking to make changes. They are hopeful that they will be included in any future discussions for how this course will be revised. I will continue to monitor this situation and encourage the university to improve their relationships with the ag groups.

Again, even though legislative floor sessions have ended for the year, the work of the legislature continues. I am thankful for all of the constituents who spent the day in the State Capitol to share their concerns and experiences with our committee. Their stories were very impactful and I know my colleagues and I were inspired by their comments.

As always, please do not hesitate to connect with me to provide input, ideas or to seek assistance. Send an email to sen.marklein@legis.wisconsin.gov or call 608-266-0703.