

# Craig Thompson: Improving transportation keeps Wisconsin agriculture competitive

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Farming has made such great contributions to the culture and history of our state, we sometimes forget that Wisconsin is still an agricultural powerhouse. In fact, agriculture and related industries continue to be one of the cornerstones of Wisconsin's economy.

Agriculture contributes \$104.8 billion annually to our state's economy. Wisconsin is home to 64,100 farms on 14.2 million acres. Annually, Wisconsin agriculture provides 435,700 jobs or 11.8% of the state's employment. Wisconsin exported \$4.22 billion of agricultural and food products to 142 countries in 2022, accounting for more than 9% of Wisconsin's total export value.

Agriculture, like nearly all of our major industries, relies heavily on freight. So when we consider what we as a state can do to make Wisconsin more economically competitive, maintaining and upgrading our transportation infrastructure is of paramount importance.

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## Roads and Bridges

The majority of agricultural freight in Wisconsin is moving over our roadways in trucks. Even products that may spend part of their journey on a ship or in a freight car often begin or end their trip on our roads and highways.

It is vital, then, that we maintain our roads and bridges in good repair. However, four years ago many of our rural roads and bridges were in bad shape after years of underinvestment. We understand that when pavement is deteriorating and bridges are weight restricted, it's not just a time-consuming inconvenience, it puts our state's farmers and agriculture industry at a competitive disadvantage.

To begin to turn that situation around, Governor Evers' administration has devoted historic levels of resources to improving local roads and bridges. Between the investments in Governor Evers' first two budgets and the new federal resources Wisconsin will receive under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, \$1.65 billion will be directed to WisDOT programs specifically for local road and bridge projects through Federal Fiscal Year 2026.

This total represents more than doubling the funding to local road and bridge structures. Additionally, General Transportation Aids supply another \$500 million annually to help address transportation needs.

This increased investment is yielding benefits to residents throughout the state. Since 2019 we have improved more than 5,800 miles of roads and nearly 1,600 bridges throughout the state. That, in turn, helps to ensure that agricultural goods can reach their destinations quickly and efficiently. Although we've made tremendous progress in a short period of time, it is going to take a sustained commitment to get the thousands of miles of roads that support agriculture into the condition we need.

### **Bipartisan Infrastructure Law**

Here in Wisconsin, we chose to put increased formula funding under BIL where it is most needed—in high-priority state and local highway and bridge projects. WisDOT's current schedule will apply federal BIL funding to 513 local road and bridge projects, for a total of \$615.6 million during federal fiscal year 2022 through 2026. This represents a 61% increase in the number of local program projects and an 84% increase in total federal spending for the Local Program compared to the prior five-year period before the passage of BIL.

There are BIL-funded Local Program projects in every Wisconsin county. An additional \$150 million in Local Bridge projects are expected to be added through the end of federal fiscal year 2026. This will enable us to accelerate our efforts to improve the condition of local roads and bridges to benefit agriculture and everyone

who lives in rural communities.

## **Harbors**

Another transportation resource that's vital to agriculture is our state's harbors. Each year, Wisconsin ports handle more than 40 million tons of cargo valued at more than \$8 billion, including agricultural commodities destined for international markets. For example, the Port of Milwaukee is the third largest exporter of grain on the Great Lakes.

The primary way WisDOT supports water freight is through grants from the Harbor Assistance Program or HAP. For example, in Milwaukee, the Harbor Assistance Program worked with the port, local agricultural commodity company DeLong, and the federal government to create a new Agricultural Maritime Export Facility. The facility opened in July and has the potential to create \$63 million in revenue each year and bring Midwestern agricultural projects to new overseas markets.

Earlier this year, Governor Evers and WisDOT, announced HAP grants totaling \$5.3 million for seven harbor maintenance and improvement projects to promote waterborne freight and economic development. Several of these projects are specifically targeted to enable ports to more effectively load and transport agricultural goods.

For example, in La Crosse a \$200,000 HAP grant will help to repair a failing dock wall used to export agricultural commodities and import miscellaneous bulk goods. A second grant of \$1,170,000 will help to repair and construct a new dock wall dedicated to the transfer of corn and soybeans. And in Manitowoc, a \$1,000,000 grant will help to dredge the bed of the Manitowoc River along frontage used to broaden maritime transportation options for agricultural commodities.

Whether agricultural and food products move by land or water, WisDOT is making the kinds of improvements to our transportation infrastructure that will help agriculture and all of Wisconsin's freight-dependent industries be more competitive, both in the state and in markets all around the world.

*-Thompson is secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Transportation.*