

Federal funds expected to expand ag conservation programs

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More farmers will be able to participate in conservation programs through funding from the Inflation Reduction Act, according to the head of the Wisconsin Farmers Union.

Speaking yesterday during a virtual press conference organized by Dem lawmakers, WFU President Darin Von Ruden touted the impact of the IRA's \$20 billion in funding for agricultural conservation efforts. He said those federal dollars are vital for keeping farms in business as well as supporting environmental initiatives.

"Right now, for every slot of programs that are available, only one out of every three farmers can participate because there's not dollars available there," he said. "So this is certainly going to open that window up to more farmers."

Senate Minority Leader Melissa Agard, D-Madison, noted the IRA also included \$14 billion to support development of clean energy resources in rural areas. She said these federal dollars will have a direct impact on farmers in Wisconsin. Von Ruden also highlighted the potential for rural communities to benefit from this provision of the law, pointing to solar and wind projects as examples.

"One thing that I'm hearing loud and clear from our members is that farmers want to be a part of the solution to climate change, and something that the Inflation Reduction Act will allow us to do is be those participants," he said.

Meanwhile, Clean Wisconsin Climate, Energy and Air Program Director Chelsea Chandler noted agriculture currently contributes more than 10 percent of U.S. climate pollution. She pointed to soil disturbance and loss from erosion, overuse of fertilizers and pesticides, and "improper" livestock management as key environmental problems in Wisconsin.

To reduce these impacts, she argued the state's ag industry needs to introduce more food-bearing trees and perennial plants, boost biological diversity and reduce fertilizer use.

“The many climate-smart practices and programs that the IRA funds can help address these needs,” she said. “For example, the Conservation Stewardship Program, or CSP, can help improve grazing management and grassland conservation.”

Dem. U.S. Rep. Mark Pocan noted IRA funding will go toward efforts to sequester carbon from the atmosphere, reduce emissions, improve surface water and groundwater quality, expand habitats for fish and wildlife and more. But he said the upcoming federal farm bill will need to “keep this level of important funding available” to meet demand for climate-focused programs.

“We want to make sure family farmers in Wisconsin can sustain these practices that not only are good for the environment, but are good for their family farms and the practices they are doing,” he said.

Still, Pocan raised the question of whether a 2023 farm bill will even make it through Congress to President Biden’s desk.

“We’re hoping first of all that there’s a farm bill, period,” he said. “Because you saw our opening week, what normally is a 40-minute process of electing a speaker took five days and 15 votes ... ideally, we would continue this level of funding, because there are farmers who need it and it’s good for both addressing climate as well as helping in the rural communities.”

See a recent story on the potential for IRA funding:

<https://www.wisbusiness.com/2023/federal-funding-for-clean-energy-seen-as-transformational-though-state-impact-remains-uncertain/>

— *By Alex Moe*