SARAH GODLEWSKI'S PLAN FOR RURAL WISCONSIN

Rural America is suffering right now in a way that is unfamiliar to most Americans and certainly isn't top of mind to most elected officials in Washington.

In Wisconsin, we have a front-row seat to the hardships that rural communities face. Rural communities and small towns value hard work and are the backbone of Wisconsin and its economy. Yet, these areas are losing young adults to urban areas and local talent to jobs in bigger cities, they are starving for reliable internet service and decent medical care. In between, they are battling extreme weather, large corporate farms, and rising energy costs. Rural communities cannot continue at this pace, and they certainly can't afford to be a federal afterthought – especially when one in five Americans lives in rural America. For far too long, politicians in Washington have ignored the needs of rural communities.

As a proud fifth-generation Wisconsinite with deep family roots in rural Wisconsin, Sarah Godlewski has traveled across the state and has been listening to rural voters. Like them, Sarah believes that no one should have to leave their community to obtain a good education, get a job, raise a family, or have access to quality health care. But that's exactly what is happening because most lawmakers in Washington have failed to invest meaningfully in our rural communities. Rural communities are fundamental to Wisconsin's and the United States' economy, health, nutrition, and success. **In order to restore and reinvigorate these communities, Sarah Godlewski has a plan to invest in rural Wisconsin to ensure that no matter where they live, Wisconsinites have access to jobs, education, health care, and quality of life they want and deserve.**

I. BROADBAND AS A PUBLIC UTILITY

Every Wisconsin household, business, school, and government office needs internet access. The bipartisan infrastructure deal that President Biden signed into law in November 2021 gives a much-needed boost to expanding access to broadband internet, but it doesn't go far enough for Wisconsinites. That's a problem Sarah wants to fix because internet access is essential to Wisconsinites' livelihoods, education, health, and economic success.

In the 21st century, broadband internet access can no longer be treated as a luxury. Wisconsinites need broadband access for everything from getting an education to running a small business or family farm to accessing health care and mental health care. **It's become as essential as electricity. That's why Sarah would fight to make the internet a public utility. Making broadband a public utility would ensure that regardless of where Wisconsinites live and work, everyone would have guaranteed access to quality and affordable internet service. Doing this will also allow the Federal Communications Commission to**

regulate the internet service providers, stop price gouging, and hold these big telecommunication companies accountable.

Over the last almost two decades, Washington has appropriated tens of millions of dollars to broadband internet companies to expand internet access without directing where the companies must invest and provide access.[1] As a result, most internet service providers have failed to invest in America's rural areas, and the few providers that do service rural areas have fleeced those communities by charging higher rates for slower speeds. [2] That's certainly true in Wisconsin, where 173,000 Wisconsinites do not have access to any internet provider, and 836,000 Wisconsinites only have access to one.[3]

Successful lobbying by big telecommunications companies has persuaded some state legislatures to make it illegal or incredibly difficult and costly for municipalities to own and operate broadband networks. Here in Wisconsin, municipalities are not allowed to offer services at a lower cost than current internet service providers offer.[4] These state laws hinder municipalities from successfully investing in their own communities to fulfill local needs. **Sarah will advocate for public, community-based internet providers and cut red tape so that municipalities can build their own networks.**

Access to the internet can't continue to depend on internet service providers' interest or disinterest in doing business in a particular corner of the country. The pandemic has made that abundantly clear. Ensuring that every rural household has access to affordable and dependable broadband internet will boost rural communities, connect rural Wisconsinites to the rest of the world, improve rural residents' health, education, and businesses, and significantly reduce costs for families and businesses.

II. ACCESSING QUALITY MEDICAL CARE

From a rural hospital closure in western Wisconsin, "hospital deserts" in northern Wisconsin, to a lack of health care providers across the state, rural Wisconsinites face a unique set of challenges when it comes to seeking quality care close to home. In some parts of the state, patients may have to drive an hour to receive care[5] and may need to travel 30 minutes for emergency care.[6] These conditions are only worsening and will continue to do so if federal lawmakers don't take action.

A. *Rural Hospitals.* Even before the pandemic, rural hospitals across the country have struggled to keep their doors open. In the past decade, 137 rural hospitals have closed across the country.[7] Another 800 rural hospitals are at risk of closing, including 22% of Wisconsin's rural hospitals.[8] The pandemic only made the viability of rural hospitals more challenging. When elective surgeries were paused, many rural hospitals and clinics lost a revenue stream that was an estimated 40-60% of their incomes.[9] Today, with a shortage of rural hospital beds and an influx of unvaccinated COVID patients, non-COVID patients

[1] Barrett and Arseneau, "With poor data, deficient requirements and little oversight, massive public spending still hasn't solved the rural internet access problem"
[2] Arbel, "FTC, Wisconsin sue Frontier for delivering internet that's too slow"
[3] BroadbandNow, "Wisconsin Internet Service Providers: Availability & Coverage"
[4] Cooper, "Municipal Broadband Is Restricted In 18 States Across The U.S. In 2021"
[5] McCoy, "For Women In Rural Wisconsin, Access To Maternity Care Is Often A Long Drive Away"
[6] Wisconsin Office of Rural Health, "Drive Time to Emergency Care"
[7] Sheps Center, "Rural Hospital Closures"
[8] Ellison, "State-by-state breakdown of 897 hospitals at risk of closing"
[9] Kowles, "Rural Wisconsin hospitals already operated at narrow or negative margins. Will they survive the pandemic?"

seeking urgent attention cannot get the timely care they need.[10] This is particularly problematic for seniors' and veterans' access to urgent care.

These extensive hospital closures pose a danger for Wisconsinites' health and depress the local businesses and economies that are supported by the presence of the local hospital. **Sarah will push to bring federal investments into rural Wisconsin to stem the tide of rural hospital closures and will make sure that medical insurers are not taking advantage of rural consumers.**

Additionally, the Wisconsin State Legislature's refusal to expand Medicaid has hurt rural care providers. Research by the Chartis Center for Rural Health found that the "closure crisis has affected rural hospitals located in non-Medicaid expansion states much more so than in states that have expanded Medicaid."[11]

By expanding Medicaid, Wisconsin rural hospitals would be able to significantly reduce the amount of uncompensated care dollars they lose. That would help keep more hospitals open and staffed. **In the Senate, Sarah will work to make Medicaid expansion a reality in Wisconsin. She will expand Medicaid by working with state leaders or by pushing to pass a workaround at the federal level to expand coverage to the Wisconsinites who fall into the current coverage gap, such as Senators Tammy Baldwin, Raphael Warnock, and Jon Ossoff's Medicaid Saves Lives Act.**

B. *Medical providers.* Hospitals aren't the only medical shortage Wisconsin is facing. Less than 10% of Wisconsin primary care providers are based in rural Wisconsin, even though 20% of the state's population lives in rural communities.[12] By 2035, Wisconsin could face a primary care doctor shortage of 745 physicians,[13] with rural communities facing the biggest gap. Shortages are even worse in specialty practices such as maternal care, mental health care, and oral health care. These shortages are particularly concerning for getting seniors and veterans in rural communities the care that they need. Wisconsin is already working to increase the number of residency programs for primary care doctors but must do more. **In the Senate, Sarah will work to bring more doctors to train and work in Wisconsin by:**

- *Promoting and securing funding to help individuals from rural Wisconsin to serve their communities through partnerships with Wisconsin's university system.* The Medical College of Wisconsin has shown great success with its pathway program. 108 students have received training at regional campuses in Wausau and Green Bay since 2015.[14] The program recognizes that students who come from rural areas are more likely to remain and practice in those areas. It also allows students to be closer to home, creates personal ties to the communities, and prepares students to work in and address the needs of rural communities. This type of program serves as an important first step to address a lack of primary care practices. **Sarah will work to secure federal resources to expand the program beyond just primary care to include maternal, dental, and mental health care as well.**

[10] Bella, "He died after waiting 15 days for a hospital bed. His family blames unvaccinated covid-19 patients."
[11] The Chartis Center for Rural Health, "The Rural Health Safety Net Under Pressure: Rural Hospital Vulnerability"
[12] Wisconsin Council on Medical Education & Workforce, "2018 Healthcare Workforce Report"
[13] Mills, "Report Projects Shortage Of Primary Care Physicians In Wisconsin By 2035"
[14] Medical College of Wisconsin, "Closing the Gap: Improving Access to Care in Rural Wisconsin by Training the Next Generation of Primary Care Practitioners"

- *Expanding student loan forgiveness programs.* Right now, the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program only benefits health care professionals who work for the government or not-for-profit employers. **Sarah will work to expand the program to include privately owned hospitals, clinics, and practices in rural areas**. **Sarah will work to improve the program by having the student loan repayments begin immediately and incrementally** rather than forcing health care workers to make ten years' worth of payments before even becoming eligible for forgiveness.

C. *Alternative ways to access medical care.* Given the current gap in medical and hospital care, coupled with the continuing pandemic, we have to think outside the box to get rural Wisconsinites the quality care they need.

- *Telemedicine*. The pandemic has made telehealth more prevalent and accessible than ever before. Telemedicine benefits all communities across Wisconsin, especially rural communities. Telemedicine has been particularly instrumental with respect to the administration of mental health care in rural communities, where providers are few and far between. We must ensure that telemedicine accessibility remains available even once the pandemic is behind us. **In Washington, Sarah will work to pass legislation in the Senate to protect telehealth accessibility by passing bipartisan legislation that makes permanent:**
    - **Medicare and Medicaid reimbursements for telehealth care.**
    - **The elimination of Medicare's geographic barriers on the use of telehealth–be it mental or physical health care–for both the patient and the practitioner.**[15]

  Of course, none of this can be accomplished without providing broadband in every home.

- *Pharmacists*. In recent years, we have seen countless rural pharmacies shut their doors. In some circumstances, it's because small local pharmacies simply can't compete with the national big box companies.[16] To help keep pharmacies' doors open, **Sarah will advocate for small businesses to be able to buy prescription drugs at the same bulk rate as large mail-order companies and big-box stores.**

  Compounding the problem for small pharmacies, pharmacists are retiring and no one is taking their place in their communities. **Sarah will make sure we are investing in recruiting and retaining pharmacists in rural communities** because pharmacists often serve as the nearest and only accessible health care professional. A pharmacist's role is much broader and more influential than a pill counter,[17] and is particularly vital in smaller towns and with aging clients. With the breadth of training and experience pharmacists have, coupled with their walk-up accessibility to patients, failing to leverage their expertise is a missed opportunity in rural Wisconsin. To fully utilize the benefit of pharmacists' expertise, proximity, and accessibility, there needs to be a loosening of restrictions regarding what services they can provide. Pharmacists should, at a minimum, be able to prescribe certain, limited medications, and modify certain prescriptions under specific circumstances. Expanding the scope of their services could allow patients to

[15] Jercich, "U.S. lawmakers reintroduce House bill safeguarding access to telehealth"
[16] Hawryluk, "How Rural Communities Are Losing Their Pharmacies"
[17] Stevenson, Biddle & Reath, LLP, "Could Pharmacists Improve Access to Health Care in Rural America?"

receive medications in a timelier, streamlined manner.[18] That's why **Sarah would support legislation such as the Pharmacy and Medically Underserved Areas Enhancement Act, which provides for Medicare coverage and payment with respect to certain pharmacist services that (1) are furnished by a pharmacist in a health-professional shortage area, and (2) would otherwise be covered under Medicare if furnished by a physician.**

Where we live should not determine the access and quality of health care we receive, especially in the United States. If we want our rural communities to continue to thrive and provide for the rest of the country, we have to make sure they are able to access the health care they need, even if that means thinking out of the box to provide the services that rural Wisconsinites need. That's true for the 26% of Wisconsinites who live in a rural community and deserve quality, timely, and convenient health care.

III. EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES - EDUCATION, JOBS, AND ADVANCEMENT IN RURAL WISCONSIN

Decades ago, it was possible to work, live, raise a family, and retire, all without having to leave your Wisconsin community. That's harder than ever before in rural Wisconsin. Young adults are growing up and leaving their hometowns searching for broader opportunities. As the rural population continues to age and shrink, it has had a cascading effect, shuttering schools, local banks, and local businesses. Families that have lived in the same community for generations are being forced to leave in order to access economic opportunities, education, and a better quality of life. To survive, our rural communities need investments from the federal government.

A. *Education and workforce readiness*. We must start with investing in our education system–from preschool through postsecondary education. As Wisconsin's rural population has shrunk, so have the schools, their ability to recruit educators, their ability to garner resources, and ultimately their ability to successfully place high school graduates into a four-year college, community college, technical programs, or apprenticeship programs.

Inequities in our public education system are all too familiar throughout our country and state. Regardless of the zip code they're born into, every child in Wisconsin deserves a quality public education. **That's why, in the Senate, Sarah will work to increase Title I funding so that teachers get paid a living wage, regardless of where they teach. Sarah will also fight for schools in rural communities to receive more resources to support the education of all of their students.**

The more rural the school, the more challenging recruiting and retaining a qualified teacher becomes. Thirty-nine percent of remote schools (schools that are 25 miles from an urban center) struggle to fill positions in every subject.[19] In Washington, **Sarah will work to expand student loan forgiveness programs for rural teachers. Additionally, Sarah will work to improve the program by having the student loan repayments begin immediately and incrementally instead of after five years of payments.** This will help attract and retain the best and the brightest educators in rural schools.

[18] George, "Using Pharmacists to Provide Care in Rural Areas"
[19] Latterman and Steffes, "Tackling Teacher and Principal Shortages in Rural Areas "

For parents of below school-age children, child care costs are soaring. We face a shortage of child care workers which, in turn, has created child care deserts in pockets of Wisconsin, including in our rural communities.

According to the Wisconsin Early Childhood Association, 15%, or 25,000 child care slots have temporarily or permanently closed statewide.[20] Fifty-four percent of people in Wisconsin live in a child care desert.[21] It's become clear that it's more lucrative for child care workers to take other food service or retail jobs, rather than settle for little more than minimum wage. That means parents of small children have limited child care options, and have to compete for those they can find. The pandemic has exacerbated the situation as providers and kids infect each other and fall ill. Without child care, women, in particular, are not reentering or remaining in the workforce which keeps them out of the workforce, prevents them from earning a paycheck, and reduces their family's ability to thrive.[22] **To reduce the number of child care deserts, Sarah will work to fix the tax system so that it's simpler for employers who provide onsite daycare to fully utilize available tax credits. Sarah also believes that we need to be approaching the need for high-quality childcare as an infrastructure issue in the same manner we approach fixing the roads and bridges. Where there remain child care gaps, as in rural Wisconsin, we can't simply ignore them, lest the whole system fails. Instead, we must invest to close those gaps.**

Workforce readiness is a crucial component of our educational system that is often overlooked. All too often, society looks at success in K-12 education through university acceptance rates. Post-high school education looks different for everyone. Our schools must be capable of supporting those who want to continue their education in college along with those students who want to enter the trades. **That's why Sarah will work to fund apprenticeship programs and technical colleges across the country.**

According to the Department of Labor, for every dollar spent on apprenticeship programs, employers get back $1.47 in increased productivity.[23] That benefits both our students, our employers, and our local economies. That's why she's a staunch proponent of these programs and will support them in Washington. We also need to continue to build a pipeline of tradespeople in rural Wisconsin, and offering free technical college is a surefire way to develop home-grown expertise to support our local farms and businesses.

B. *Small business loans and grants.* Many small towns across the state and nation have Main Streets that are in desperate need of reinvigoration. Yet there are countless roadblocks to access capital, loans, and grants for small businesses and family farms in rural communities, including miles of red tape for potential business owners to navigate to receive grants or loans. Over the years, we've seen the federal government inconsistently show interest in investing in rural communities, and create short-lived, temporary sources of funding. Each different grant or loan requires its own application, making it incredibly difficult for small business owners and farmers to know what programs they are eligible for.

Main Streets across America and Wisconsin are the economic, social, and cultural hubs of our small towns. **In the Senate, Sarah will fight to secure permanent grant and loan programs dedicated to**

[20] Fello, "'Childcare desert' in Dodge County nearly four times worse than in Milwaukee County"
[21] Center for American Progress, "Child Care Access in Wisconsin"
[22] Restuccia, "Iowa's Child-Care Problems Show Scale of Washington's Challenge"
[23] U.S. Department of Labor, "Fact Sheet: Investing $90 Million Through Apprenticeshipusa to Expand Proven Pathways into the Middle Class"

investing in rural Main Street businesses and family farms. In addition, Sarah will work to cut the red tape coming out of Washington so that it's more streamlined and accessible for Wisconsinites to pursue loans and grant programs.

C. *Investments in entrepreneurs.* Rural entrepreneurs, like all entrepreneurs, need a support network in order to build a thriving business, including access to lawyers, accountants, and web developers.[24] They also have more success securing loans from small, local, independent banks and credit unions.[25] Providing rural communities with technology and management training, collaborative ideas and workspace, along with venture capital financing and access to independent banks, will allow rural communities to actually grow in size and become increasingly digital. No matter the small business, rural Wisconsinites, with the right tools and support, can bring their ideas to life right from their own backyards where they can thrive, contribute to the economy, and start their families. **Sarah will work with the Small Business Administration to ensure they have access to resources and tools. Sarah will also work to create a Wisconsin network of federally-funded small business incubators for sharing ideas, resources, and creating a sense of community for entrepreneurs across rural Wisconsin, as well as develop a sister-city relationship between rural towns in Wisconsin and other states' rural cities.**

D. *Jobs.* We need rural businesses to remain and thrive in our state, as well as employ Wisconsin's workers. That means helping our local businesses staff up with veterans or members of other groups that face barriers to obtaining employment through incentives like the work opportunity tax credit or creating tax credits to support small employers who create jobs in our most financially vulnerable communities. **Sarah is committed to fighting for federal funds to serve the economically distressed areas of Wisconsin, particularly our rural communities, to help farms and businesses create more jobs.**

We have a lot of work to do to address the everyday challenges that Wisconsinites in rural communities face. But those problems will continue to exist unless we address the fundamental issue of the lack of opportunity in rural Wisconsin. From expanding education opportunities, to re-investing in Main Street, to creating more jobs, Sarah will fight for these common-sense policy approaches in Washington.

IV. COMBATING CLIMATE CHANGE AND PROTECTING NATURAL RESOURCES

Here in Wisconsin, we have seen firsthand how climate change has detrimentally impacted our communities across the state. This is especially true for our rural communities – from dams failing, to flooding rural main streets, to crops being destroyed during a storm. Between 2010 and 2020, Wisconsin has been impacted by 17 billion-dollar disaster events including severe storms, flooding, and droughts.[26] More rainfall and intense flooding are expected to become more standard in Wisconsin in the coming years.[27] If we don't act now to mitigate the damage and combat climate change, these erratic weather events will only increase in frequency and devastation.

A. *Combating climate change*. Our rural communities must have the necessary tools to transition dependencies from brown energy to green energy if we are going to combat climate change. As

[24] Ponraj, "3 Crucial Areas of Focus for Rural Small Business"
[25] Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, "Perspectives from Main Street: Bank Branch Access in Rural Communities"
[26] NOAA's National Centers for Environmental Information, "Events | Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters | National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI) (noaa.gov)"
[27] United States Environmental Protection Agency, "What Climate Change Means for Wisconsin"

Wisconsin State Treasurer, Sarah has worked to make renewable energy more accessible for rural communities. For example, as Treasurer, Sarah helped Washburn, Wisconsin secure funding for solar panels built on the Washburn Wastewater Treatment Plant.[28] Not only did this work cut costs, but it also decreased the community's carbon footprint. This not only helped the Washburn community cut costs, but they were able to save money. **In the Senate, Sarah will continue her efforts to ensure that rural communities have the financial resources needed to build their own sources of renewable energy.**

Our farmers work on the frontlines of climate change. They've seen flash flooding remove nutrients from the soil while crop yields have plummeted. Farmers can and should play an important role in combating climate change, and they can't do it alone. **Sarah will partner with our farmers and create incentives for practices like biofuels, carbon capture, crop rotation, and more. It is critical that farmers have the tools they need so they can combat and prepare for the negative impacts of climate change.**

While we invest in combating climate change, we also have to invest in making our rural communities more resilient against extreme weather. Ashland County has taken a lead in these efforts by focusing on restoring historical wetlands, and they are hoping to turn their efforts into a template for other communities.[29] In western Wisconsin, the Kickapoo Valley suffers from failing dams that are in need of repair or replacement. Too often, these communities have to jump through seemingly endless hoops to secure funding from federal agencies. **Sarah will work to cut government red tape and ensure that funding for resiliency projects is more accessible for Wisconsin's rural communities.**

B. *Safe, clean drinking water.* Communities big and small across our state are grappling with contamination of well and groundwater, fish, wildlife, and soil by nitrate contamination from farm runoff and leaking septic tanks, as well as toxic forever chemicals like PFAS, or per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances. This past summer, tribal communities were warned against eating the fish they have harvested for generations because they're increasingly too toxic.[30] Farmers are facing an increasing risk of losing profits because PFAS contamination can arise in crops and animal products.[31] Big corporations continue to violate their civic, legal, and moral duty to act as good citizens and neighbors. Meanwhile, a report by the Environmental Working Group found Wisconsin is among 10 states where nitrate contamination is only getting worse, and around 90% of nitrogen in groundwater can be traced back to agriculture. [32]

In order to address nitrate runoff in our water, Sarah will work to form a partnership between farmers and the federal government. Sarah knows that farmers are great stewards of our land and it's important to meet with, learn from, and use their expertise in formulating solutions. She will work with key stakeholder groups to ensure manure spreading practices are safe for our water and don't detrimentally impact our farmers' efforts. **Sarah will also work to create incentives for farmers who adopt conservation practices that reduce contaminations of our waterways and wells.**

What's clear is the federal government has to move more quickly to protect communities and help them recover from contaminations. **In the Senate, Sarah will fight to ban the future use of PFAS and similar chemicals altogether to protect our water and wildlife. Sarah will also make sure we hold accountable**

[28] Conklin, "State Treasurer Godlewski sees green in climate-friendly investments"
[29] Schulte, "Climate change is bringing heavier rains. Here are steps Wisconsin communities are taking to combat flooding."
[30] Riley, "Lake Superior's Forever Chemicals"
[31] Subbaraman, "Farmers Are Losing Everything After "Forever Chemicals" Turned Up In Their Food"
[32] Kaeding, "Report Finds Wisconsin Is Among 10 States Where Nitrate Contamination Is Getting Worse"

those who have contributed to the pollution and provide support for those whose health and livelihoods have been harmed.

C. *Conservation and Recreation.* Wisconsin's natural beauty and character come in large part from its history of conservation. Growing up in western Wisconsin, Sarah was taught to appreciate public lands and the vital roles these lands play in rural Wisconsin's way of life, from hunting and fishing, to hiking and canoeing.

Preserving our ecosystems by protecting Wisconsin's forests, lakes and wetlands can't be an afterthought. Safeguarding public lands protects Wisconsin traditions and provides revenue to rural communities that rely on outdoor recreation to boost their economies. As Treasurer, Sarah has worked to ensure more sustainable practices when it comes to timber and land management and increased public access to public lands, like the stretch of the Namekagon River. **That's why Sarah will always make sure we keep public lands in public hands**

Safeguarding our land is just part of preserving our ecosystems. We face daunting challenges when protecting our wildlife, as well. Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) is threatening Wisconsin's deer, moose, and elk population–and by extension, threatening Wisconsin's outdoor traditions. There is no known cure for CWD, nor is it known how the disease spreads. Twenty-five states including Wisconsin have confirmed cases of CWD in their deer herds. If further action isn't taken to control CWD's spread, consequences could be devastating for our ecosystem and for the future of a favorite Wisconsin outdoor tradition. Recently, the U.S. House of Representatives passed legislation for researching and addressing CWD in a bipartisan effort co-led by Wisconsin Congressman Ron Kind.[33] **In the Senate, Sarah will work to ensure this legislation passes so stakeholders can get to work on researching and addressing how best to stop the spread of this disease**.

Over the past few decades, Wisconsin has been drastically impacted by climate change and threats to our natural resources. In order to keep rural communities healthy, economically independent, and vibrant, we must do all we can to preserve the land, water, and air that millions of Americans rely on year after year. Working with rural communities to combat climate change and protect natural resources will create good-paying jobs, help preserve our outdoor heritage, and protect these fragile ecosystems.

V. INVESTING IN WISCONSIN'S FAMILY FARMS

Wisconsin has a long and proud history of farming. Family farmers are the heart of every community throughout rural Wisconsin. However, the unfortunate reality is that Wisconsin has consistently led the nation in farm bankruptcies[34] for the past several years–with western Wisconsin at the top of the list.[35] Last year, 500 farms disappeared in Wisconsin alone.[36] Meanwhile, large industrial-scale factory farms are now dominating the market.[37] Farmers must pay more and more for equipment and supplies, and accept less and less from agribusiness for their crops and livestock. This is problematic not just for the farmers themselves, but for the surrounding rural communities, be it the local restaurant or banks. The

[33] DeSantis, "CWD Bill Passes the House... now onto the Senate!"
[34] Dahdah, "Wisconsin Leads Nation in Farm Bankruptcies By Wide Margin"
[35] Kirwan, "Western Wisconsin Leads The Nation In Farm Bankruptcies. Again"
[36] Bokun. "As 500 Wisconsin farms disappear, a Fremont family battles to keep theirs running amid declining sales"
[37] Baker, "Go big or go bankrupt: Wisconsin farmers face daunting challenges as factory farms flourish"

farmer population is aging, which means we need a path forward to recruit and train the next generation of farmers in Wisconsin.

A. *Raising Wisconsin farmers' profile in Washington*. Despite being the Dairyland State, Wisconsin doesn't have a voice on the Agriculture Committee in the House or the Senate. **Sarah will seek a seat on the Senate Committee on Agriculture. She will use the position to ensure that Wisconsin's family farmers have a much-needed voice on policies as they are being crafted. Specifically, she will work on updating the farm bill,** which is antiquated and needs to meet the needs of the 21st century. Sarah will also work to **ensure any future trade agreements promote Wisconsin farmers, Wisconsin families, Wisconsin workers, and the environment**.

B. *Dairy pricing*. In addition to leading the nation in farm bankruptcies, Wisconsin has lost its dairy herds at record-breaking numbers.[38] Since 2014, farm milk prices have drastically dropped, hurting dairy farmers.[39] Even so, consumers are paying more for milk while farmers are being paid less to produce it. Unlike other agricultural products, milk is harvested daily and has a short shelf life. That makes dairy farmers particularly vulnerable when it comes to negotiating prices. Other producers can sit on their harvest or ship it to a better market in hopes for a bigger profit, but dairy farmers generally have little choice other than to sell their milk immediately and nearby, or otherwise face potential losses.[40] America's milk pricing system is simply too complicated and out-of-date for the challenges today's farmers and dairy industry face. Whether through the Farm Bill or a stand-alone piece of legislation, **Sarah will work to bring the milk pricing system up to date, increase transparency for farmers, and loosen restrictions that will ultimately benefit both farmers and consumers.**

C. *Antitrust enforcement*. Market consolidation and monopolies are squeezing the life out of our local rural economies. Former Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue infamously said, "In America, the big get bigger, and the small go out."[41] That's only true because the rules are written that way, and it has to change. Lawmakers in Washington have to do more to prevent the consolidation of agribusiness, which then leads to the hollowing out of rural communities.[42] **Sarah is committed to fighting for federal antitrust enforcement and fighting back against the anti-competitive practices of the agribusiness firms that are hurting Wisconsin's farmers.**

D. *Supporting the next generation of farmers*. Without farmers, Americans wouldn't have food on our tables. Yet the number of Wisconsin family farms continues to shrink. We cannot afford to keep losing family farms at this rate. More than anything, farmers want to pass on their farms to the next generation, but a flawed and complicated tax system, among other barriers, makes it challenging and too expensive to pass their farms down. Selling to large corporate farms becomes the path of least resistance – but it shouldn't have to be this way. These family farms are part of families' identity and legacies, and the hard work that built and sustained the farms shouldn't be for nothing. As the age of Wisconsin's farmers continues to increase, we should not penalize them for wanting to pass their family farms onto the next generation. And we have to prepare for and support beginning farmers with the tools and resources they need to be successful.

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[38] Kirwan, "Wisconsin Lost Record-Breaking Percent Of Dairy Farms In 2018"
[39] Barrett, "Dairy farmers are in crisis — and it could change Wisconsin forever"
[40] Cushman, "Regional production, federal rules and global markets dictate dairy farmers' paychecks"
[41] Goodman, "Perdue to small farmers: Stop whining, your demise is inevitable"
[42] Baker, "Go big or go bankrupt: Wisconsin farmers face daunting challenges as factory farms flourish"

Supporting the next generation of farmers starts with education. Agricultural education is vital to ensuring that the next generation of farmers is gaining the knowledge and skills to enter the agriculture industry. For many Wisconsin communities, agriculture education begins at a young age with 4-H and FFA–two organizations that, to differing levels, rely on federal support. These programs are significant practically and culturally to many communities in rural Wisconsin. That agricultural education must continue for students, going on to include traditional classes around production agriculture as well as courses on emerging technologies, forestry, sustainability sciences, and more. **Sarah will work to make sure these programs and the schools that support them, like UW Extension, have the resources they need to keep this crucial pipeline running. She will oppose any attempts to cut these vital programs.**

As the next generation of farmers takes over their families' farms, they can't be weighed down by burdensome taxes. **In the Senate, Sarah will oppose any increase to a capital gains tax that does not include a special carve-out for family farms.** Next generation farmers who continue to own and operate the farm should be allowed to defer the tax payment until they sell the farm outside of the family.

In addition to supporting next generation farmers, we also have to help new farmers be set up for success. Farming is one of the few careers where, unless you inherit the land, it can be hard to get started. **Sarah will create additional funding programs for first-generation farmers so they are able to purchase the necessary land, equipment, and livestock they need.**

Lastly, according to a National Young Farmers Coalition survey of young and prospective farmers, "53% of respondents are currently farming but struggling to make their student loan payments" while "30% didn't pursue farming, or are waiting to start farming because their student loan debt is more than a farming salary would support."[43] Crushing student loans provide a barrier to pursuing occupations like farming, which lack the predictability of a set income. That's not just a problem for Wisconsinites, that's a problem for all Americans who rely on Wisconsin's farms. **In the Senate, Sarah will work to make farmers eligible for student loan forgiveness through the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program.**

E. *Partnerships between communities and farmers to eliminate food deserts.* Many rural communities, particularly in northern Wisconsin, find themselves in food deserts, where access to grocery stores with fresh produce is limited.[44] This simply shouldn't be the case at a time when small, family farms across Wisconsin are hurting. The state and federal governments must work to establish a partnership to get farmers' crops to the markets of Wisconsin's rural communities. **Sarah will support establishing and funding those partnerships in Washington not just to address food deserts in Wisconsin, but across the country.**

F. *Farmers' Mental Health*. American farmers face unique challenges in their occupations, between their physically demanding and somewhat isolated jobs, navigating and responding to extreme weather events, aging, and the stresses of economic uncertainty. As with other medical care, mental health care is difficult to access in rural communities while insurance coverage constantly fluctuates, both of which create direct obstacles to farmers' seeking help. Forty-six percent of farmers and farmworkers say it is

[43] National Young Farmers Coalition, "Farming is Public Service: A Case to Add Farmers to the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program"
[44] U.S. Department of Agriculture, "Food Access Research Atlas"

difficult to access a therapist or counselor in their local community.[45] That means that we need to do a better job at meeting farmers where they are – which oftentimes is in their homes or through their trusted primary care providers. It also means sending farmers to care providers who are trained to address their changes in behavior and sleep in a manner which specifically factors in the larger rural and farming life. **Sarah will work to increase investments in affordable and accessible mental health care, crisis hotlines, virtual support groups for farmers and farm families, farm crisis programs, and suicide prevention training for agriculture communities, as well as retailers, bankers and others who work and interact directly with farmers.**[46] [47]

For Sarah, it's not just about talking the talk — it's about rolling up her sleeves and doing the hard work to get things done for Wisconsin. That's why her plan will not just ease the neglect and suffering for rural communities, but it will revitalize them. Sarah will work to guarantee broadband access to everyone who wants it, ensure quality and timely health care, expand education and economic opportunities, safeguard Wisconsin's environment, and stand up for family farmers. These policies will encourage and retain more people to rural Wisconsin life, create more jobs, and expand economic opportunities — making sure our investments in rural communities have a lasting impact. Sarah will put the voices of rural Wisconsinites front and center in Washington.

[45] American Farm Bureau Federation, "Rural Stress Polling Presentation"
[46] Gilles, "Virtual support groups now available to Wisconsin farmers"
[47] Kirwan, "'We Need Some Help': Farmers Look To Officials, Community For Mental Health Resources"