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Wisconsin Farmers Union members praise package that would invest in agriculture, farm families

Proposal would boost local food movement and farmer mental health efforts

CHIPPEWA FALLS -- A legislative package announced today at World Dairy Expo hits on some key priorities Wisconsin Farmers Union has been advocating for at the Capitol.

"This proposal builds on efforts made through the state budget process and provides critical support for initiatives that would bolster the local food movement, combat food insecurity, address rural mental health, and tackle labor shortages," said WFU Government Relations Director Nick Levendofsky. "The package would be a pivotal investment in Wisconsin agriculture and our rural communities, and we wholeheartedly support it."

The bill was announced by Governor Tony Evers, alongside Sen. Brad Pfaff (D-Onalaska), State Rep. Dave Considine (D-Baraboo) and Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection Secretary Designee Randy Romanski earlier today in Madison.

"As a person who advocates for farmers and helps lead community efforts to feed hungry people, I can say this legislative package is a win-win for everybody," said WFU Executive Director Julie Keown-Bomar, who also serves on the board of Feed My People, a food bank that serves 14 counties in Northwest Wisconsin. "Farm to table food boxes provide some income for farmers in uncertain times and help financially struggling families access healthy foods. The more we can put healthy, locally grown farm fresh food in the hands of families who need and appreciate it, the better."

Barron County Farmers Union member, dairy farmer, and mental health advocate Brittany Olson expressed appreciation for a Regional Farmer Mental Health Program included in the legislation. "Barriers to seeking mental healthcare include distance and finding a mental health professional that understands agriculture," Olson said. "Hopefully the implementation of such programming on a more local level than the nearest big city softens those barriers and gets farmers and their families the help they need when they're struggling."

Chippewa County Farmers Union President and beef farmer Danielle Endvick praised plans to include funding to beef up meat processing in the state. "Direct marketing shows real potential for beginning farmers to secure a steady, reliable price for their meats, but a lack of processing capacity in regions across the state remains a stumbling block," Endvick said. "The proposed investment in meat industry workforce development is a promising step forward for the farmers and meat processors who are facing that labor shortage."

According to the Governor's office, the package introduced today includes:

- [LRB-4244](#): Invests \$20 million to help connect Wisconsin food banks and pantries with Wisconsin producers to provide food to families experiencing food insecurity.
 - These grants will help food banks and other non-profit organizations purchase Wisconsin food products for distribution to people experiencing food insecurity.
 - This investment will bolster Wisconsin's food supply chain strengthening local markets, from producers and processors to food banks and consumers.
- [LRB-2865](#): Creates a Meat Talent Development Program, which provides more than \$2.6 million in grants to specifically target meat industry workforce development and help spur growth in Wisconsin's meat processing industry.
 - This program provides financial support to students enrolled in a Wisconsin meat processing educational or training program.
 - This bill would allow DATCP to provide grants to universities, colleges, and technical colleges to reimburse tuition for students enrolled in a meat processing program.
 - Each tuition reimbursement covers up to 80 percent of the tuition cost for enrolling in a meat processing program, with a maximum reimbursement of \$7,500.
- [LRB-4243](#): Provides additional funding for Something Special from Wisconsin™, a branded marketing program available to businesses who can attribute at least 50 percent of their ingredients, production, or processing activities to Wisconsin.
 - The bill creates a new continuing appropriation and provides \$400,000 in fiscal year 2021-22 from the general fund to support efforts to strengthen marketing of Wisconsin-made products.
- [LRB-2867](#): Creates a new Regional Farmer Mental Health Program to help increase farmers' access to mental health support services, coordinate local and regional peer support programs, and provide counseling and assistance to Wisconsin farmers.
 - This bill provides a biennial investment of \$784,000 and an additional 5.0 GPR positions to serve as regional farm support agents within DATCP's Farm Center and increases funding for these positions.
 - Creating a new Regional Farmer Mental Health Program would increase farmers' access to mental health support services, bolster coordinated local and regional peer support programs, and enhance counseling and assistance to Wisconsin farmers.
- [LRB-4328](#): Provides funding for the Farm-to-School program to get fresh, nutritious, locally-produced foods onto kids' plates in school cafeterias across Wisconsin. It also creates the Farm-to-Fork program to build connections between farmers and businesses, hospitals, and higher ed facilities interested in purchasing local food for their cafeterias.
 - This bill creates the farm to fork program, providing \$553,300 over the biennium, to connect entities that have cafeterias but are not school districts with nearby farms to provide locally produced foods in meals and snacks, to help the public develop healthy eating habits, to provide nutritional and agricultural education, and to improve farmers' incomes and direct access to markets.
 - The bill also provides an additional \$400,000 over the biennium in funding for DATCP to award grants for creating and expanding farm to school programs and requires that in awarding grants under the farm to school programs, DATCP must give preference to school districts that have a high percentage of students who are eligible for free or reduced-price meals under federal law.

“Wisconsin Farmers Union looks forward to working with other agricultural, rural, and food and hunger groups across the state, along with members of the Wisconsin Legislature, to lift up these priorities over the coming weeks and months,” Levendofsky said.

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