

Rural Folks: Ag Budget Cuts III Advised

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BLACK RIVER FALLS - "Black River Falls is grappling with high phosphorus in the water," the woman told me at the Town Hall Meeting. "The phosphorus is coming from farms up river. Why cut funding to conservation staff that help farmers keep manure out of the river?"

Buried in the 2013-15 state budget is removal of almost \$5 million or over a quarter of cost-share funding to create structures to reduce run-off and preserve topsoil. The budget proposal also cuts nearly \$2 million for local county conservation staff who assist farmers in creating and monitoring these structures.

It's been a difficult spring for farmers. Many turned to spreading on frozen and snow covered ground. Now with the melting season underway, phosphorus from the manure finds its way into waterways.

State and federal rules clamped down on phosphorus discharged by city wastewater treatment plants and cities are crying foul. They claim the state is shortchanging them by taking away money used to help farmers control run-off. The increased cost of phosphorus cleanup will fall unfairly on city ratepayers.

Local people also raised concerns about several other changes in the budget of the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP). The Governor proposes getting rid of popular programs like the Buy Local, Buy Wisconsin, the Agriculture Development and Diversification, and the Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative programs.

Buy Local, Buy Wisconsin is a competitive grant program launched in 2008 to strengthen the 'value added' aspects of Wisconsin agriculture. If we can keep more of the food dollar in Wisconsin, the entire state benefits. Local folks used these programs to develop markets for local produce, meat, fish, and cheese. With a small investment, the program created \$4 million

in new food sales over three years.

The Agriculture Development and Diversification grant program was created in 1989. Since then it has funded 342 projects with an investment of \$6.9 million according to its website. This program leveraged \$49 million in new capital investments and over \$140 million in economic returns.

For example, James Altwoes of Mazomanie wanted to reestablish hops growing and processing in Wisconsin. With grant support he developed new technology, reached out to new buyers and involved 1,000 people through workshops focused on growing hops.

I often hear from farmers who benefited from the Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative Program. Intensive rotational grazing is a technique many used to keep cattle rotating from one pasture to another to increase the consumption of high quality feed and preserve plants and topsoil. The practice is not as easy as you might think.

Technical assistance from the Grazing Program helped farmers hone their skills at recognizing noxious weeds and early signs of needed pasture maintenance. The popular local 'pasture walks' were part of the outreach provided by this program.

Cutting popular and effective programs was not the only part of the state budget that drew complaints from rural people. Many were concerned about the changes facing rural schools and BadgerCare. I will cover these topics in upcoming columns.

Removing the ban on foreign corporations and foreign individuals from owning large tracts of Wisconsin land has many farmers upset. Older folks express concern about the control of food by foreign companies. They remember the rationing of World War II. They see land ownership as a way to protect the security of our country.

Younger farmers, trying hard to get started in farming, are worried foreign companies will increase the competition for land and drive up prices. I have yet to find a person attending a town hall meeting who thinks changing the law on foreign companies owning large tracts of

land is a good idea.

Like foreign land ownership, the change in conservation funding is an issue that cuts across city dwellers and rural residents alike. People see the connection between high costs for city ratepayers and dirty water from farm run-off. They do not see cutting conservation money as a wise decision when cities are facing higher phosphorus standards.

Especially this year the late spring snow keeps cattle on concrete pads and winter manure storage over capacity. As one rural woman said, "we all live somewhere down stream."

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