http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/veteran-home-s5.jpg



A proposal before the Agriculture, Small Business and Tourism committee would provide assistance to veterans interested in farming. A career in agriculture helps veterans who are suffering from PTSD return to civilian life and will also address the aging workforce of farmers.

MADISON - “As far back as WWI connecting soldiers with nature and farming has been used to treat the invisible wounds of war,” Mr. Brian Sales recently told members of the Senate Agriculture, Small Business and Tourism Committee.

“Back then it was called shell shock. Today it’s called PTSD. No matter what it’s called, its effects are the same and what was true then is true now. Veterans need help and help is what I am here to talk about.”

In a bipartisan effort to bring more veterans into agriculture, Senators Testin, Ringhand, Representatives Goyke and Brooks introduced legislation called the Wisconsin Veterans Farm Bill of 2017. The bill calls for several state agencies to work together assisting veterans in both urban and rural communities. The proposal seeks to provide education, technical assistance, employment, and mentorship including connecting existing farmers with veterans who want to learn farming. Over forty percent of the legislature supports the bill as cosponsors, including myself.

A U.S. Army Infantry and combat veteran who served two tours of duty in Iraq and one in Kosovo, Mr. Sales captivated Senators with his story of how farming brought his life purpose.

“When I returned to civilian life after my final tour, I found myself, like so many other veterans, void of direction,” Mr. Sales explained. “Military service changes a person in many ways. Transitioning back to a civilian life is an overwhelming and often shocking experience – not unlike entering boot camp for the first time. However, there is no such thing as reverse boot camp. The military are experts at turning civilians into soldiers, but not turning soldiers back into civilians…we are still coming to terms with what we experienced in the service…leaves us feeling overwhelmed, confused and restless.”

Mr. Sales experience led him to college to study sustainability, which led him to form the group Green Veterans. Working with both civilians and veterans, he found a new sense of purpose and “a renewed commitment to service and ultimately a passion for farming.”

Using his skills and knowledge, Mr. Sales worked with Mr. Will Allen to develop of veteran “farmer boot camp”. The veterans get up early and stay focused on a mission to build, teach, heal the soil and grow crops.

Mr. Sales noted “with farming, I can see the beginning and the end of a task completed. Through nature’s technology, I can see the result of my work and sacrifice, knowing that I’m serving my fellow man, woman and children. I feed people. I create healthy soil in a way that sustains nature. This is a mission I am dedicated to and with the collaboration of Growing Power and Mr. Will Allen; our vision is to make Growing Power the National Urban Farming Training Center for all veterans who want to learn and become an Urban Farmer.”

Joining Mr. Sales at the hearing was Shea Zastrow who serves at the Civilian Chair of Green Veterans of Wisconsin. Mr. Zastrow spoke about how veterans are “hardwired to finish jobs.” He gently admonished the committee to “do more than simply thank Veterans on Veterans Day and then think they are good for 364 days.”

“I challenge civilians to spend just one more day this year with a Vet than they did last year.”

Committee members seemed eager to support the bill. However, during discussion on the bill, members expressed concern as to whether the bill duplicated existing programs. Some of what

the bill seeks to do is available through some programs. The Wisconsin Farm Center and U.W. Extension play critical roles in assisting farmers across the state every day.

But twenty-year US Army Veteran and certified organic farmer, Tony Kurtz testified, there is not a specific program to get veterans into agriculture.

Mr. Kurtz told the committee the average age of Wisconsin farmers is 56 and ½ years old. “To maintain our leadership in agriculture, we need an infusion of young, enthusiastic workers. A dedicated program to promote veterans entry into the agriculture industry is a great step forward in helping our aging workforce.”

This is a proposal we can all rally behind. As Mr. Sales said so eloquently, “This bill is an investment in Wisconsin’s veterans that I strongly believe will pay dividends for generations to come.”