

National Agriculture Week: Recognize the Farmers Who Feed You

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Sen. Jeff Smith writes about farmers' contributions to our state and how the legislature must support them.

BRUNSWICK, WI - The distinction of my hometown as the center of the dairy industry was always a matter of pride for me growing up. While I didn't understand how milk pricing worked yet, all that mattered was that Eau Claire was the center of the milk industry and played a big role in determining the price of milk.

The '[Eau Claire Rule](#)' was established as part of the New Deal in 1937. Since we were America's Dairyland it made sense that the further you were from Eau Claire, the more you paid for milk. However, the eventual establishment of huge corporate farms in southern and western states allowed them to charge more for their milk. It wasn't until 1997 that a federal judge agreed with farmers that the rule depressed prices in the Midwest while raising prices for farmers elsewhere, and the rule was abandoned.

I tell that story, not because of an unfair rule, but because being America's Dairyland is still something to be proud of. Dairy products from Wisconsin are the envy of the world. We may take it for granted, but Wisconsin cheese is a special delicacy you can't find anywhere else.

It would seem obvious that a top responsibility of the state legislature would be to support an industry that's treasured throughout the agricultural world. Yet, politicians have watched from the sideline as we lose hundreds of dairy farms. In 1978 nearly 48,000 dairy farms in Wisconsin each milked an average of 65 cows. There are now about 6,500 dairy farms milking an average of 200 cows.

There are many reasons Wisconsin is losing our dairy farms, including aging farmers and their children choosing other paths to follow. But we've also ignored the need for policies that protect and encourage dairy producers to thrive in Wisconsin.

A prime example of this legislative dysfunction is the inability to do something as simple as pass dairy labeling bills. Session after session, a bill that would define milk as coming from a mammal rather than a plant, stalls in the legislature. I imagine if you were to ask some legislators they might say "we ran out of time." Hogwash, I say.

When majority party leaders want something that will make the headlines, they pass it so fast your head will spin. No, the real reason the milk labeling bills are in limbo is because they politicians failed to prioritize our farmers in America's Dairyland.



I've heard directly from farmers about the everyday challenges they face. During National Agriculture Week we must commit ourselves to policies that will support our farmers today and for generations to come.

Too many farmers need to work off the farm just so they can have health insurance, for instance. Smart legislation to make healthcare more affordable for Wisconsinites, like Medicaid expansion, would be huge for farmers.

Dairy farmers, in particular, depend on migrant labor. Creating a driver permit for migrant workers would help our farmers and make our roads safer.

Climate change has affected farmers in negative ways because of increased flooding and warmer temperatures. That's why cover crop rebates, flood resiliency and more support from UW Extension agents is necessary in the ag world today.

In today's world, being connected is critical to success. That's why bills like mine to run fiber to every farm and every household in Wisconsin matters. If we want the next generation to work and live in rural Wisconsin, they must have reliable, high-speed internet. Who wouldn't want to live where they can enjoy the beauty of Wisconsin—if only they could thrive here?

There are a lot more farmers among us than we realize. Simple policy fixes can have dramatic effects for farmers. These ideas are examples of bills that were offered this legislative session, but ignored or forgotten by the majority party.

Our farmers are there for us each and every day. We need to support them just as much as they support us. Farmers put food on our tables. What better way can we say 'thank you' than to take simple steps for our hardworking farmers?

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