It’s Time to Prioritize Rural Prosperity

Posted on Jan 29, Posted by Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31 Category Wisconsin



Sen. Smith writes about the SOS Address and the urgency of prioritizing rural prosperity. He shares information about Evers’ three-part plan to support our farmers and invest in our agricultural industries and rural communities.

MADISON - During the State of the State, Governor Tony Evers reflected on the accomplishments made in 2019 and the priorities we must carry out in the year ahead. As we draw closer to the end of this legislative session, we have a stronger sense of urgency to get things done.

Governor Evers showed exemplary leadership and his willingness to tackle the serious issues in our state during his State of the State Address. Along with his effort to create a Fair Maps Commission and Task Force on Student Debt, Evers announced a 3 part plan to address the visible challenges affecting our farmers and rural communities.

Finally, Wisconsin has a leader who values the dedication of our family farmers, recognizes Wisconsin’s role as America’s Dairyland and wants to learn from those who live and work in rural Wisconsin.

The Legislature is wrapping up session too soon. The Majority Party has neglected to hold public hearings or schedule votes on legislation that offer solutions to some of the most pressing issues in our state, including the dairy crisis. Wisconsin lost more than a third of dairy farms in the last decade, losing 800 in 2019 alone. At a time when local, family farms are disappearing rapidly and Wisconsin is leading the nation in farm bankruptcies, we need to take action.

During the State of the State, Evers called for a special session for the Legislature to take up 8 bills to support our farmers and invest in our agricultural industries and rural communities. I’m especially proud of the proposal to create a small farm diversity grant program to help new producers with initial start-up costs, a bill I introduced earlier this session with Rep. Vruwink (D – Milton).

- In the agriculture special session bill package, Governor Evers also included proposals to:

- Create the Wisconsin Initiative for Dairy Exports to help build Wisconsin’s presence in international dairy markets.
- Offer more opportunity for dairy processors who want to innovate and become more efficient in their practice through the dairy processor grant program.
- Expand the Farm Center to assist farmers in financial planning and farm succession.
- Increase resources and partnership opportunities for farmers through UW Extension.
- Provide additional mental health services and peer support programming for farmers.
- Connect farmers to education and training assistance through new grant programs.
- Promote producer-consumer relationships in local communities through the Farm-to-School program.

The announcement of the special session was not the only productive news Governor Evers shared during the State of the State. As the second part of his agricultural investment plan, Evers announced the creation of the Blue Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity.

The Commission will be made up of members of Wisconsin’s rural communities and agricultural industries. Together, members will travel around the state learning about agricultural issues directly from key stakeholders. This experience will qualify them to advise the Governor and Legislature on critical agricultural and rural economic solutions we must make moving forward.

Under the third part of the agricultural investment plan, Governor Evers directed the Wisconsin

Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) to create the Office of Rural Prosperity. This new division within the agency will focus on broadband expansion, accessible healthcare in our rural areas, housing availability and more.

The creation of WEDC initially overlooked the impact of our rural economy, a critical piece of the puzzle. Now we’re really going to be a major player in building the economy like we always knew we were capable of.

The day after the State of the State Address, I had the opportunity to sit down with community members and members of Governor Evers’ cabinet to discuss rural prosperity. I realized these are just the beginning steps toward prioritizing the issues that matter most to our economy and way of life in our rural areas.

Now we need leaders from the Majority Party to step up and prove they understand the urgency of our agricultural industry and farm families. This may be the greatest opportunity yet to demonstrate how shared governance can work. Let’s get to work!

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