Written by Kathleen Vinehout, State Senator 31st District
Tuesday, 30 January 2018 14:50

http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/farm-family-s5.jpg



Farmers need to take on the role of citizen lobbyists to share concerns with their legislators about the importance of the state of agriculture and rural communities.

ALMA, WI - Farmers from several western Wisconsin counties traveled to Madison as part of the annual Ag Day at the Capitol.

On the day the Governor delivered his State of the State address, farmers shared with their legislators, the state of things in their world.

Safety is always on the mind of farmers. For one farmer, farm safety was a heightened worry when his daughter took drivers education. He told me, folks traveling down rural roads often ignore the turn signals and lights on his tractor. People will make the dangerous decision to pass him when he is turning left into a farm field. There have been instances when drivers hit the farm equipment.

“Why don’t they teach drivers education students about taking care while driving around farm equipment?” he asked me. “How can we change this?” We talked about how many schools out-sourced drivers’ education, which made it difficult for school board members to influence what was taught in farm country.

Farmers play numerous roles in our communities. Many serve on the local school board

because they see public schools as essential to sustaining rural communities. Schools are the heart of our rural communities. Schools are where we all gather to cheer on our local teams, laugh at the antics of actors in the school play or cry tears of joy when our babies graduate.



“I’ve been on the school board now for six years,” one of the farmers shared. He saw what happened to the school after rounds of state budget cuts. The farmers knew the current school funding formula hurt rural schools. They also knew the importance of sparsity aid to rural schools. A budget deal cut back increases in sparsity aid.

Farmers were concerned about bills to take away local school board powers related to referenda. While they agreed, school boards should not keep going back to voters when a referendum to raise taxes failed, but they also thought the state should not take away local authority to decide what to do.

Concerns about immigration and police actions worried farmers whose livelihoods depend on the skills of their devoted workers.

“We hire good, hard working, legal Mexican farm laborers who have families,” said one Pierce County farm couple. “They are continuously getting pulled over by police in the morning and receiving tickets for operating without a license.” The couple was frustrated that legislative leaders were not taking up a bill to allow undocumented farm workers to get a driver’s license.

One Buffalo County farmer said he knew of a worker who was jailed for multiple violations of operating a vehicle without a license. The farm worker requested to remain in jail over Christmas so federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents would not send him back to Mexico.

Rumors of several ICE raids in the middle of the night created anxiety for many farmers and their employees. Some workers moved away because they did not feel safe. Losing workers creates an immediate crisis for dairy farmers who rely daily on the dedication and skill of farm workers.

Losing workers adds to the already tough times for some farmers. Some farm commodity prices are low and farmers experience increases in their input costs – squeezing the farm budget. Recent reports tell us about a decline in the number of western Wisconsin farms. The Eau Claire Leader Telegram reported Dunn, Eau Claire, and Chippewa counties lost a combined 27 dairy herds in 2017. Statewide slightly more than 500 herds were lost last year.

Reflecting on the tough times, Wisconsin Public Radio reported western Wisconsin had the highest number of farm bankruptcies in the United States last year.

One of the farmers who visited my office is part of the network of Discovery Farms. This state program uses on-farm research to provide evidence of what works and what doesn't when it comes to best practices for keeping nutrients where plants can use them and keeping our waterways clean. The farmers reminded us to use science in setting environmental policies.

Farmers told their stories, and through them, I saw a deep concern for their communities, their workers and the environment. I appreciate the farmers who took time out of their busy schedule to take up the important role of citizen lobbyists for rural Wisconsin.