



Wisconsin's ag diversity is its strength

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A commentary by Secretary-designee Brad Pfaff of the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP).

On Tuesday, October 1st, U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue visited the World Dairy Expo in Wisconsin to see the best of our dairy industry. During his visit, he participated in a town hall discussion with dairy farmers, agriculture advocates, and members of the media, where he heard that farms of all sizes matter in Wisconsin. When asked about the survival of small farms during a press briefing following the discussion, he surprised many by saying, "In America, the big get bigger and the small go out."

I'm grateful Secretary Perdue took the opportunity to spend time with some of our state's outstanding farmers and get to know Wisconsin's agricultural community. But "get big or get out" is simply not the message I am hearing from our family farmers as I crisscross the state listening to and learning from them.

Farmers do not need to be told about economics; they live it every day. Their milk check, banker, and operating bills remind them regularly of basic economic principles. Farmers understand that they are in a competitive, global economy. They know what economies of scale are. They understand labor markets, feed production, and farming in a state that has strong partnerships between rural communities, small businesses, and supportive neighbors.

Some argue that our state's dairy farms need to model themselves after other states. Those arguments say Wisconsin's farmers need to either move to a California model of larger farms, or downsize to the small, boutique operations of New England. I reject that notion. I believe that Wisconsin's diversity in farm size and scale benefits our state, both economically and socially.

In many rural Wisconsin counties, thriving farms mean a thriving community. At the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP), we're working to assist farmers in capturing greater profitability from their operations so they can continue supporting their local economies. For some, that might mean implementing value-added efforts or finding new, different product markets. For others, it means lowering inputs like health care costs, moving to cost-saving production methods like grazing, or modernizing by improving their access to high-speed broadband.

We also need to foster a better connection between consumers, their food, and the farm family that produces it. Farming in Wisconsin is more than just bushels, bales, and hundredweights, it is who we are. "America's Dairyland" isn't just a slogan on our license plates, it's part of our heritage. As consumers, many of us are becoming more interested in that story, and in using our hard-earned dollars to support farmers in our own communities.

I believe that connection will be at the core of the future of farming in Wisconsin. The survival of the agricultural community depends on strong connections and innovation that is tailored to each business – not universal expansion. I appreciate Secretary Perdue's visit and interest in our state, but "get big or get out" simply isn't the Wisconsin way.

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