



Be there for farmers; they are always there for you

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A commentary by Randy Romanski, DATCP Interim Secretary

MADISON – The COVID-19 public health emergency has forced all of us to think about what is essential in our lives. While some decisions are difficult, others are clear. Food and agriculture are essential. Food and those who produce it are fundamental to our personal well-being and our state’s strength.



We are privileged to live in a state that produces an abundance of nutritious, high-quality foods. From fruits and vegetables to milk and meat, Wisconsin agriculture is diverse and plentiful. You do not have to drive far in Wisconsin to see the farms and fields that feed us. Unfortunately, this pandemic has impacted the entire world and has the potential to cause disruptions to the food supply chain here in the Midwest.

In recent days, we have seen devastating photos and videos of milk being disposed of in manure lagoons and heard stories of processing plants in some parts of the country reducing their hours due to COVID-19. These situations are worst-case scenarios that no one can prepare for. No one works seven days a week, 365 days a year to see milk not leave the farm. No one wants to shut down processing lines and lay off employees at a time when families need their paycheck more than ever.

Even during this public health emergency, farmers and processors are working tirelessly to produce food for all of us. While you may have walked into a store in the past month and saw an empty shelf, it is not because there is no food. It just may not have gotten on the shelves yet. Grocery stores are working tirelessly to be sure families have a variety of fresh, frozen, and packaged foods available.

With schools closed and restaurant service limited, an entire component of food processing and distribution has been unexpectedly disrupted. These processors and distributors are now rapidly working to adapt to the current conditions, but there is only so much they can do so fast. They must work within the confines of the equipment, packaging, and transportation methods available to them. A carton of milk is much different than a gallon, and a can of green beans packaged for your family is much different than a bulk purchase for a school.

Across the industry, agricultural advocates have encouraged consumers everywhere to support farmers. I want to add my voice to that message. From weeks of conversations with our dairy and livestock farmers, crop producers, agribusinesses, and food suppliers, here are four takeaways:

1. Shop responsibly. Food is and will be available. While your favorite brand or flavor may not be available at a certain time, remember how lucky we are to live in a state and country with access to a variety of foods.
2. Buy Wisconsin products. Choose dairy products including milk and cheese. Pour an extra glass of milk at dinner, or add extra cheese to your pizza delivery. Buy beef for your grill or bacon for breakfast. Keep the supply chain moving by creating demand.
3. Donate to those in need. This is a very difficult time for thousands of people who are underemployed or unemployed. Many, including our farmers and those in rural

communities, are struggling to make ends meet. If you are able, grab an extra gallon of milk for a neighbor or drop off canned vegetables at your local food pantry.

4. Share your thanks. Now is the time to express your gratitude to our essential workforce, including those in food and agriculture. Show your appreciation in your local community or on social media for those who fill our plates and stock our shelves every day.

The COVID-19 public health emergency will have a lasting impact on each of us, including Wisconsin's agricultural industry. I hope that by supporting the state's farmers and processors through our purchases now will ensure the industry's vitality in the future. Please be there for our essential workforce at this time, because they are always there for you.

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