



Celebrating Earth Day with Wisconsin agriculture

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A commentary by Randy Romanski, DATCP Secretary-designee

MADISON – Spring weather is upon us, field preparation is underway on many Wisconsin farms, and on April 22, we celebrate Earth Day in Wisconsin. Many Wisconsin farmers are already taking a lead role in developing and implementing conservation practices on their land. They know that the success of our state and the health of our communities would be impossible without healthy soil and water. We all rely on these resources, and preserving them is all of our responsibility.

Partnerships are an important part of encouraging innovative soil and water health solutions. The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) regularly works with the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), county land conservation departments, and Extension to provide technical support and administer financial resources to farmers across the state who are interested in pursuing conservation practices in their area. Additionally, last year I joined four representatives of Wisconsin farm groups in serving on the Governor’s Task Force on Climate Change.

In December 2020, the Task Force issued a report with recommendations on ways our state can mitigate the impacts of climate change. With the input and participation of agricultural stakeholders, the task force proposed initiatives to build connections between food producers and consumers. These included a food waste production pilot program and increased funding for grants through Buy Local Buy Wisconsin, Farm to School, and a new Farm to Fork program at DATCP. The report also recommended supporting farmer-led watershed groups, paying farmers to increase soil carbon storage, avoiding conversion of natural working lands, and making managed grazing systems a priority.

These recommendations have also helped inform the 2021-2023 biennial state budget. In order to maintain existing producer-driven conservation efforts and encourage new ones in the future, both financial and technical support are necessary. In his proposed budget, Governor Tony Evers has proposed significant investments in programs that improve Wisconsin’s soil and water quality by advancing producer-led conservation solutions and incentivizing farmer participation in these efforts. Some of these proposed investments into Wisconsin’s land and water health and sustainability include:

- Increased funding for the Producer-Led Watershed Grant Program, raising the overall available funding from \$750,000 each year to \$1,000,000.
- A new Conservation Grant Program to support farmers seeking to transition to grazing and other regenerative agriculture practices.
- Additional county conservation staff to provide on-the-ground technical assistance support to producers.
- Funding for a pilot program to award grants to farmers so they can implement practices that optimize their use of nitrogen.
- Funding to study the feasibility of a carbon market in Wisconsin, and to provide grants to producer-led groups who participate in that market.

- Funding to assist farmers who are looking to obtain third-party certification through the Alliance for Water Stewardship (AWS), which verifies that a site has met AWS water conservation standards.

These proposals build on our state's existing strengths and successes. We often hear about the areas where there is disagreement, but this is one topic where there are many opportunities for bipartisan agreement. Maintaining soil and water health is a year-round effort that is essential to the success of our state's economy and our local communities. The time is right to work together to invest in the land and water resources that provide the foundation for our \$104.8 billion agricultural industry. To learn more about Governor Evers' proposed budget, visit <https://evers.wi.gov/Pages/BudgetListeningSessions.aspx>. To share your thoughts on the Governor's proposal, find contact information for your state legislators at <https://legis.wisconsin.gov>.

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