



WISCONSIN FARMERS UNION NEWS

UNITED TO GROW FAMILY AGRICULTURE

March/April 2021

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Bring on Spring & State Budget

Will the 'Year of Broadband
Access' Reach Rural Wisconsin?

WI Women In Conservation
Launches with Spring Events

WFO Honors Rural Leadership
at 90th Annual Convention



WISCONSIN FARMERS UNION NEWS

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FROM THE EDITOR

And so the work begins

**Danielle Endvick**

Communications Director

An ending is often a beginning in disguise. As this year's historic 90th convention came to a – virtual – close there escaped from me sigh of relief that came not only from reaching the end of two days at the computer screen. Mixed into the exhalation was a sense of peace in the certainty of the work that comes from my fellow Farmers Union members laying out a path of priorities for WFU's work in the year ahead.

We take it for granted, but it truly is remarkable how we manage to hash out these grassroots policies in our "big tent" of farmers and rural allies from varied backgrounds and farm types. As a colleague recently noted, "It was a windy year for the Big Tent." There were plenty of stormy gales we have been working through as a society. Add to that the complexity of trying to tackle decades-old structural issues in the agricultural industry, and it's the perfect storm. But there's something wonderful about weathering such storms together and coming out of it stronger.

With convention over, the work begins. If you have been feeling a bit of overwhelm at the state of the world lately, set aside such worries and rest your sights instead on what can be done. Our guideposts have been set – Farmers Union members approved five Special Orders of Business: Dairy Policy Reform, Concentration in the Agriculture Industry, Family Farmers Shaping Climate Change Policy, Meat Processing Infrastructure, and Pandemic Response & Recovery. WFU staff are already working to elevate these issues through our work in policy, special projects, education, organizing, and communications. We're also focusing our energy on rural priorities in the upcoming state budget.

There is a place for you in this work – even after you've scratched convention off the calendar. We have envisioned a landscape with resilient family farms and thriving rural towns. Now let's work to make these policy initiatives reality. Consider attending upcoming trainings on budget organizing and deep canvassing. WFU support is also available for members who would like to write or speak to topics when media or testimony opportunities arise.

Together, we can affect change. As you'll see in the following pages, WFU is mindful of the heavy toll the past few years have had on many farmers. But we're also finding the good in 2021 – cheers to sunnier days ahead.

Below: Some of the 200+ attendees to the first-ever virtual Wisconsin Farmers Union Convention.



Challenging, beautiful, messy democracy



Darin Von Ruden
President

The stark contrast of two January events has been on my mind lately.

The images of the plundering of the U.S. Capitol on January 6th are burned into my mind, and likely yours. The actions of that day were an attempt to disrupt democracy in an attack that shook the very foundation this country was built upon.

But 24 days later, I was reminded of the beauty that can be found in the democratic process as I watched the civility and thoughtfulness of WFU members who met virtually to deliberate on policy. This gathering to set grassroots priorities has happened for 90 years, and there was comfort in knowing there are good people willing to envision and engage on plans to improve the future for our farms and rural Main Streets.

As one convention-goer so eloquently put it, *"This was my first convention and I left very uplifted. I think it has been so long (if ever) that I participated in or witnessed true democracy and it was refreshing. Even though there was tension, it was a respectful, healthy tension, and we learned together from those personally affected by these issues. Rather than one side trying to beat the other side, it was more like consensus building to arrive at a common stance. I think what was so beautiful is that we all came simply as members - from different sizes and types of farms and ways of farming with the common value of supporting current farmers, aspiring farmers, and rural communities. There was no subgrouping of political party, wherein one might already be assuming if they would agree or disagree before a speaker even opened their mouth. This is how*

democracy is supposed to work - it is challenging and messy, and really, really beautiful! I am more proud than ever to be part of the Wisconsin Farmers Union."

This year's policy is posted at www.wisconsinfarmersunion.com/policy, and I encourage you to study the policies and share them with those who may not know the work of Farmers Union. Even as the ink dries on the 2021 policy book, the process for next year begins anew. Here are a few ways to get involved:

- Already some chapters are starting to talk about policy initiatives from convention. Discuss these issues and invite others into the conversation by holding chapter educational events and engaging with your legislators.

- In July, WFU seeks nominations from directors and chapter leaders of members to serve on convention committees. Member committees oversee elections, bylaw changes, and more. The Resolutions Review Committee, for example, reviews resolutions to ensure they align with WFU's mission and works to bring forward a manageable amount for the convention time frame. To volunteer, contact local leadership or let us know at the WFU State Office, 715-723-5561. Some committees only have one member from each district, so you may have to be patient. WFU has experienced a surge in members wishing to serve, which is a sign of the vibrancy of the organization and members' passion for policy.

- In late summer and early fall, WFU chapters hold their annual meetings and invite members to introduce policy resolutions. Bring forth your ideas!

Whether you're a new member or a seasoned delegate, I hope you'll engage on the issues that matter to you in 2021!

Von Ruden farms in Westby and is Wisconsin Farmers Union president.

Farmers Union hiring Administrative Assistant

Wisconsin Farmers Union is hiring an Administrative Assistant. This position is responsible for office administrative duties in support of the organization's work, including general office duties and some project management. The work requires the exercise of problem solving, accountable recordkeeping, multitasking, teamwork, and the ability to work with limited supervision. It is a key position in support of WFU operations including meeting and event planning, coordination of governance committees, and records retention.

Learn more about responsibilities in the position description, which is posted under featured updates at www.wisconsinfarmersunion.com.

The ideal candidate will share the WFU team's passion for helping family farmers and rural communities. Salary dependent on experience. Medical, dental, vision, life, long and short-term disability insurance, employer contribution to simple IRA retirement account, wellness plan, and generous paid time off package provided.

During the course of the pandemic, this position can work remotely several days per week, rotating coverage of the state office with co-workers. When conditions improve, this position is expected to work out of the Chippewa Falls state office.

This position will be open until filled, but apply ASAP if you're interested. Due to the critical support this role provides within the organization, we hope to fill the position by early March.

ON THE COVER

Spring has nearly sprung and it won't be long until Wisconsin farmers are back in the fields. The excitement for many is akin to that captured in this photo of young Austin, the son of Chippewa County Farmers Union member Tom Moos. (Submitted by Deb Jakubek)



Agriculture shines in Governor's budget proposal

Member voices needed as WFU organizes around rural issues



Nick Levendofsky
Government Relations Director

On February 16, Governor Tony Evers announced his budget for 2021-2023, including \$200 million for broadband expansion, \$43 million for agriculture and rural programs, and \$150 million for mental health services and expansion of BadgerCare, all top budget priorities for Wisconsin Farmers Union. As you can see from the graphic (at right), the Governor checked off a good number of WFU's priorities for the next two years, much of which came from regular conversations between WFU and the Governor's staff during the fall of 2020.

Over the next few months, the WFU policy team will be meeting virtually with legislators and their staff to share WFU's budget and legislative priorities. We will also hire a budget organizing intern to assist in these efforts; see that job description on the following page.

In normal years and times, WFU would host a lobby day for our members to share the organization's legislative and budget priorities with state legislators and agencies. Due to the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, we have decided to forgo a 2021 Farm & Rural Lobby Day, and instead focus on opportunities to organize around the state budget this spring and summer, including, but not limited to the following:

- Deep canvassing on BadgerCare expansion
- Virtual budget advocacy workshops
- Virtual Op-Ed/testimony writing workshops
- Virtual budget roundtable meetings between WFU members and their legislators
- Outdoor town hall meetings when the weather allows

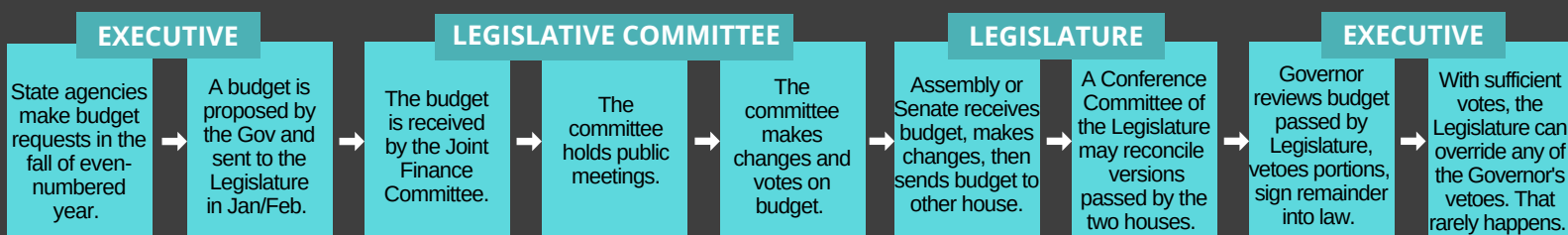
We will share more details on these engagement opportunities once they are finalized. All events will be posted to the Events page on the WFU website.

As we move forward in the budget process, one important opportunity for Wisconsinites to get involved in is the Joint Finance Committee Road Show, normally held in March/April. In normal years, the Joint Finance Committee holds hearings throughout the state on the budget where citizens testify or submit written testimony on an issue that is important to them. At this time, we do not have COVID-19 guidance from the JFC on their plans for these hearings.

WFU recommends our members not participate in large in-person gatherings during the pandemic. In fact, WFU is part of a statewide coalition of groups requesting the Joint Finance Committee to consider allowing virtual testimony. If virtual hearings are not allowed, we will encourage our members to submit written testimony to the committee and engage in other ways. It is possible WFU will host its own virtual budget hearing or collaborate with other statewide groups to host a virtual budget hearing where our priorities can be shared.

WFU is very encouraged by the first steps being made in the state budget, and we look forward to engaging and organizing our members along the way. There are still many hurdles to get over, with no guarantees on anything at this point, so we need to keep our expectations in check and be prepared to compromise. We look forward to working with all of you as active members to lift WFU's priorities up and ensure that rural voices are heard throughout this process. For more information and background on the state budget process, please go to www.wisconsinfarmersunion.com/budget

The Wisconsin Budget Process



Governor's 2021-2023 Proposed Budget Investment in Wisconsin Agriculture & Rural Communities

On February 5th, 2021, Governor Tony Evers announced that he would include \$43 million in investments into the state's agriculture systems in his 2021-23 budget proposal. Below is a comparison of some of the initiatives included in the proposed budget.

	WFU BUDGET PRIORITY	GOVERNOR'S BUDGET
Rural broadband expansion	✓	✓
Expansion of Badgercare and mental health services	✓	✓
Grants for new and expanded meat processing infrastructure	✓	✓
Antitrust enforcement staffing at the Department of Justice	✓	✗
Increased funding for agricultural conservation, clean water, and climate initiatives	✓	✓

WFU hosts Budget Organizing events

Wisconsin Farmers Union is holding three budget organizing workshops throughout the month of March to engage members in the Wisconsin state budget. During these workshops we will provide an overview of the budget process, share WFU priorities and talking points, and help you prepare to get involved through public testimony, meetings with legislators, and media work. You are welcome to attend more than one, but the same information will be covered in each workshop.

- Tuesday, March 9th: 2pm to 4pm
- Friday, March 19th: 11am to 1pm
- Monday, March 29th: 6pm to 8pm

Register at www.wisconsinfarmersunion.com/events.

Now hiring State Budget Organizing Intern

Wisconsin Farmers Union is a member-driven organization committed to enhancing the quality of life for family farmers and rural communities through educational opportunities, cooperative endeavors, and civic engagement.

We are looking for a motivated and reliable intern to en-

gage WFU members in the state budget process this year.

Primary duties include, but are not limited to:

- Reaching out to WFU members via telephone and email
- Planning budget organizing workshops
- Scheduling meetings with state legislators
- Updating records in our database

The time commitment is a flexible schedule of 10-20 hours per week between March 15th and July 1st. This position is fully remote and can be completed anywhere in Wisconsin.

This internship is ideal for a college student. Preferred majors include political science, agriculture communications, agriculture economics, public relations, public administration, or rural sociology. This is a paid internship with a compensation rate of \$15/hour. In addition, this opportunity will provide an enriching learning experience.

The application deadline is Sunday, March 7th. To apply, please send a resume and a brief description of your interest in this position via email to: Bobbi Wilson, Policy and Special Projects Coordinator, bwilson@wisconsinfarmersunion.com. Bobbi can be reached at 608-234-3741.



Helping or hurting?

Government payments slowed the rate of dairy herd exits in 2020, but exacerbated the underlying cause.

Bobbi Wilson

Policy & Special Projects Coordinator

Wisconsin dairy farmers were treading water in 2020, kept afloat by direct payments from the federal government. The aid resulted in a sharp decrease in herd exits: 360 dairy farms went out of business in Wisconsin last year compared to 818 closures in 2019. When I read the latest statistic, my first reaction was relief. It's a sad state of affairs when the average loss of one dairy farm a day in Wisconsin feels like good news. Even worse was the recognition that the underlying cause was exacerbated by the very thing that kept farmers hanging on.

The Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP) provided \$564 million dollars to Wisconsin dairy farmers in 2020, accounting for over half of the farm assistance allocated to the state. The payments were sorely needed as farmers faced extreme price volatility and supply chain disruptions amid the pandemic. But government payments also tend to exacerbate overproduction which in turn creates chronically low commodity prices and leads to increased consolidation – exactly the situation we find ourselves in today.

After pouring billions of taxpayer dollars into the dairy industry, 2021 is starting with a glut of milk on the mar-

ket, cold storage full to the hilt with butter and cheese, and depressed milk prices. As Nate Donnay said in a recent *Hoard's Dairyman* [Milk Check Outlook](#) "we got bailed out and then we started drilling holes in our own boat." He adds that during the second half of 2020, U.S. dairy farmers added 93,000 cows, representing the fastest expansion in 22 years. While several dairy co-ops used base-excess plans to limit milk production during the pandemic, direct payments from the government encouraged farmers elsewhere to expand. If we are going to use taxpayer dollars to bail farmers out, at the very least we shouldn't pay them to make the problem worse.

During crises that require federal aid, such as a global pandemic, payment eligibility should include limits on overproduction. Under normal circumstances we should focus on policies that promote fair prices and keep dairy farmers in business. We need a complete overhaul of the Federal Milk Marketing Orders to promote greater transparency in milk pricing and allow farmers to capture more of the value in the dairy supply chain. We also need a mechanism to balance milk production to meet profitable market demand. Such a program should apply to all producers to avoid the scenario where farmers in one region limit their

production while farmers elsewhere ramp it up. These reforms will reduce government expenditures and better position the industry to respond to future economic shocks.

Dairy produces \$45 billion in revenue in Wisconsin, a figure that is often exalted by the industry. We celebrate our state heritage of America's dairyland. Given the important economic and cultural impact, one dairy farm a day should be regarded as an unacceptable loss in Wisconsin. If farm policy fails to provide a liveable income that keeps farmers on the land, it is simply failing. It's time to try something new, which is why WFU is ramping up Dairy Together efforts to address the urgency felt by family farmers to adopt real solutions. We're also building coalitions and setting the foundation for dairy reform in the 2023 Farm Bill.

Without changes to federal policy, the [USDA projects farmers won't see profits like 2020](#), of which over a third came from direct payments, for over a decade. As 2021 gets underway with a new President and a new Congress, the best hope to truly stabilize the agricultural economy is not more exorbitant bailouts, but structural reform.

Learn more about how you can be a part of this effort at www.dairytogether.com.

Rules must match the playing field

Editor's Note: This piece recently ran in Hoard's Dairyman and has been reprinted with the author's permission.



Richard Levins
Professor Emeritus of Applied Economics
University of Minnesota

I've been writing lately about how the size and number of dairy farms have a big role in how dairy policy actually plays out in practice. The same thing goes for other parts of the dairy industry.

Recent issues of *Hoard's Dairyman* put the spotlight on both dairy processors and dairy cooperatives. The trend toward fewer and bigger businesses, not to mention overlap among the two groups, is striking.

Let's look at the top 50 co-ops list first. The member milk volume of the five largest cooperatives was close to half of the nation's milk supply. A cooperative with only 16 farmers came in at No. 20 on the list. The cooperative in the No. 6 position has only 110 farmers.

The top 50 dairy processor list is equally dramatic. The country's largest dairy processor is a cooperative. A Canadian co-operative has the No. 5 position. Another domestic U.S. cooperative is listed at No. 9, and two more are tied for No. 10.

Then there is the issue of overlap between the two lists. Domestic dairy cooperatives ranked No. 1, No. 9, and tied for No. 10 on the top processor list are also ranked high on the top cooperative list.

Antitrust policy

Congress laid the legal foundation for antitrust policy relating to agriculture in the 1920s. Back then, we counted our dairy farms in the millions. The average herd size of those farms was measured in single digits. Operators of very small dairy farms individually faced off against giant proprietary milk processors in a battle over milk prices. It made good sense to grant an antitrust exemption to all dairy farmers and their cooperatives so they could balance bargaining power on both sides of the price negotiation table.

What would legislators from a century ago say if they suddenly came back to life and read the last few issues of *Hoard's Dairyman*? Could they even imagine a cooperative of 110 farms accounting for almost 4 percent of America's

total milk supply? Or that the nation's largest cooperative, with member milk accounting for roughly one in four loads of milk produced in the entire country, would also be America's largest processor?

The century-old goal of using antitrust policy to level the market playing field for smaller dairy farmers makes as much sense now as it did then. Nonetheless, the top 50 lists make me wonder if it is time to rethink the way we use antitrust policy to pursue that goal.

Federal order regulations

We can see the same story playing out in the Federal Milk Marketing Order (FMMO) system. Decades ago, bloc voting was easier to defend. The huge number of farms complicated voting, farmers had less information on the matters at hand, and we didn't have modern communication technology.

Today, we have many fewer farmers, they are well-educated, and they have access to sophisticated communications methods. On top of that, we are in a situation where four domestic cooperatives, each of them top 10 processors, can together bloc vote for over 10,000 dairy farmers.

Milk volume further clouds the balance of power between FMMOs and dairy cooperatives. The largest cooperative processor on the latest list has member milk volume far greater than the amount delivered to any single FMMO. The four largest domestic cooperative processors combined had member milk volume that was over half the amount delivered in all FMMOs in 2019.

Consider the natural economic tension between processors and farmers: One entity does better with lower milk prices, while the other group does better with higher prices. Then add into the mix that 10,000 dairy farmers can be represented by bloc votes from four different cooperatives. How can four "bloc votes" effectively represent so many competing interests in a FMMO referendum?

A lot more to think about

As you can see, there is a lot to think about in this year's top processor and top co-op lists. Antitrust regulation and giving farmers a stronger voice in FMMO reforms are at the top of my list. I'm sure you have your own ideas for what needs a fresh look in today's dairy economy.

No matter what your priorities, however, the main message will be this: When the playing field changes, so must the rules.

“The century-old goal of using antitrust policy to level the playing field for smaller dairy farmers makes as much sense now as it did then. Nonetheless ... [I] wonder if it is time to rethink the way we use antitrust policy to pursue that goal.”





Marion to lead WiWiC project

WFU is excited to announce that long-time member Kriss Marion of Blanchardville has signed on to lead the collaborative Wisconsin Women in Conservation project.

Marion lives in Lafayette County, where she runs a bed and breakfast on her diversified market farm. She is a county board supervisor with a history of conservation advocacy and leadership, having served several terms on her county Land Conservation Committee and on the WI Land+Water Policy Committee. She is the founder and a board member of Pecatonica Pride Watershed Association, a producer-led watershed protection council. Marion also serves on a Water Action Volunteer (WAV) stream monitoring team that assesses water quality on tributary streams. She also sits on the River Alliance of Wisconsin board of directors.

Marion and her husband Shannon implemented a number of conservation practices on their property - including pollinator habitat restoration and managed grazing of sheep to control invasives in a sedge wetland. They have a hoophouse and irrigation systems paid for through conservation cost-share programs.

"Conservation is contagious. In my experience, you start with one small project and you enjoy the results so much, you become addicted to making your land better - for future generations, but also for your own pleasure," says Marion. "The future of rural communities, and all communities, is dependent on how seriously we take stewardship. Soil conservation, habitat preservation, wetland restoration, water protection - these concepts aren't just nice ideas - they're about food security, economic development, flood mitigation, and survival. I'm excited to connect more women with the inspiration, knowledge and resources to do this important and satisfying work on their land."



Initiative champions collaborative learning

Building on Wisconsin's deep-rooted history of land stewardship, a new program connects women dedicated to amplifying their conservation practices, from building soil health to increasing habitat diversity. Wisconsin Women in Conservation (WiWiC) brings together women landowners to network and connect with resources.

With support from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), a coalition of organizations dedicated to sustainable agriculture and conservation, led by the Michael Fields Agricultural Institute in partnership with the Wisconsin Farmers Union, Renewing the Countryside and the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES), are kicking off this unique three-year initiative that will collaboratively bring together women throughout the state through a variety of workshops, field days and mentorship and learning opportunities, kicking off with March and April virtual workshops throughout the state.

"The 2017 Census also counted 38,509 female producers in Wisconsin, a 16 percent increase from the 2012 census," shares project director Esther Shekinah of the Michael Fields Agricultural Institute. "Though many of these women would like to support sustainable agricultural practices that would help them leave their land for future generations in a state of oneness with nature and better soil health, their lack of exposure to or knowledge about such agricultural practices impedes their acting on these impulses. This initiative aims to address that."

A team of "boots in the field" women coordinators for WiWiC will focus on 18 counties to bring women landowners together to share resources and connect with NRCS agency staff and programs. Women will have the opportunity to learn from "Conservation Coaches," experienced women landowners who will serve as mentors. Other aspects of WiWiC include creating a task force to bring together organizations working with women landowners to share best practices, support each other's work, and showcase the stories of women landowners in the media.

"Through this new partnership venture, we are very excited to extend our resources and further connect and support women landowners throughout Wisconsin," explains Angela Biggs, NRCS Wisconsin State Conservationist. "Through this effort, we aim to help women in their unique conservation goals, while strengthening the long-term environmental health of Wisconsin."

"I'm looking forward to bringing together women in my region on an on-going basis for the next three years and being able to grow relationships based on a shared commitment to stewarding the land," adds Kirsten Slaughter with the Wisconsin Farmers Union and a regional coordinator for the project.

For more information on the March events and to register for the statewide newsletter visit www.wiwic.org

Red Cedar conference free for WFU members

Wisconsin Farmers Union is a proud sponsor of the 10th Annual Red Cedar Watershed Conference, hosted by the Tainter Menomin Lake Improvement Association online from 8:30am to 4pm March 11.

Join in educational sessions on how the economic and environmental health of our watersheds affect us all. Highlights of the event will include:

Land

- Keynote: The Art and Practice of Earth Repair; Stories from Around the World, Judith Schwartz, Vermont-based author and journalist whose work includes the books *The Reindeer Chronicles and Other Inspiring Stories of Working With Nature to Heal the Earth*, *Cows Save the Planet*, and *Water in Plain Sight*.

- Breakout Session: Two Ways to Look at Working Landscapes; Permaculture Design and Holistic Management, Judith Schwartz, author and journalist

- Breakout Session: Farming Success Stories on the Red Cedar River Basin, Alex Smith, Water Resources Management Specialist, WI DNR

Water

- Keynote: Charting a Path for a Socially Regenerative Ag, Adam Reimer, National Wildlife Federation

- Breakout Session: Completion of the Three-Year Red Cedar River Basin Assessment Project for Water Quality Improvement: What Did We Learn?, Landon Profaizer, Planner, WCWRPC, and Dan Zerr, Regional Natural Resources Educator, UW Extension

- Breakout Session: A Natural History of the Red Cedar River, Doug Falkner, Professor UW-Eau Claire

People

- Keynote: United, We Can Solve This, Tia Nelson, Managing Director of Climate at Outrider

- Breakout Session: Making Changes in the Watershed One Student at a Time, Jarret Creek and M. Paul Verdon, Science Instructor, School District of the Menomonie Area

- Breakout Session: Eating the Watershed - Building a Local Marketplace that Links Consumers & Farmers for Clean Water; Tom Quinn, retired executive director, Wisconsin Farmers Union

Registration is free for WFU members; enter code "Thursday" and please note "WI Farmers Union" in the affiliation/company field at www.RedCedarConference.TMLIA.org.

RED CEDAR WATERSHED CONFERENCE

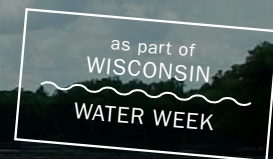
LAND, WATER AND PEOPLE COMING TOGETHER!

March 11, 2021

ONLINE

How does the economic and environmental health
of the Red Cedar watershed affect you?

Economic Development – Sustainable Farming
Water Quality Recreational Activities – Tourism – Personal Health



Free for WFU members | Use code: Thursday | Please note "WI Farmers Union" in the affiliation field

Register at www.RedCedarConference.TMLIA.org

WFU seeks Summer Staff

Do you love the outdoors?
Enjoy spending time with kids?
Are you mindful of best practices
for managing COVID-19 risk?

Employment available Mid-May through August 2021

Each summer, Farmers Union hires motivated, energetic & co-op minded individuals to staff our educational summer camp. WFU Kamp Kenwood is near Chippewa Falls. Work and live in an outdoor setting at a beautiful lakeside camp facility.

Staff develop and lead educational lessons and recreation for youth ages 7-18. Training is in May and camps are in June, July and August. Staff must commit to COVID-19 risk management expectations, and work activities will vary based on the conditions this summer (expect a mix of in-person and online programs, plus other organizational projects and support.)



To apply, contact Cathy at 715-214-7887
or cstatz@wisconsinfarmersunion.com

Rethinking Farmers Union Camp may mean cohort, virtual options



Cathy Statz
Education Director

We are continuing to monitor guidance from county, state, and national public health authorities, the American Camp Association, and the Association of Camp Nursing as we plan for summer 2021. We hope to run modified camp sessions on a limited basis, identifying self-selected small cohorts of youth from within extended family and friends as our first priority for registration. This means groups of 8-10 campers from the same local area, ages 8-18 (with 1-2 youth cabin leaders ages 16 and up), would register as a group to be in each other's "camp bubble," attending together, staying in the same cabin, and doing activities as a single group. This allows us to keep the spirit of camp in a risk-managed way. We also plan to hold a high school-age-only Senior Camp session, but will still adhere to a reduced-size, cabin-only cohort format. We may be able to open up sessions if conditions allow, but want to begin with a closely-managed, small-scale approach.

We anticipate that we may have families that 1) aren't able to register due to registration limits or 2) aren't able to attend due to health concerns. So, we're pleased to announce an alternative to enjoy camp at home! A Camp-In-A-Box option will be available for the cost of the camp registration deposit. That way, all campers can participate in one way or another. Camp-In-A-Box will feature fun, educational materials and activities paired with online programming (some live, some asynchronous) created and led by our energetic, creative WFU Summer Staff.

If you are interested in attending camp or want more information, please contact Cathy at cstatz@wisconsinfarmersunion.com or 715-214-7887. We look forward to engaging with Farmers Union camp families in a way that manages risk and reaches campers in safe, flexible, and accommodating ways.

2020 Farmers Union Youth Program Torchbearers honored

Wisconsin Farmers Union is pleased to recognize our 2020 Torchbearers, Willow Ulrich of Barron County Farmers Union and Emma Wegerer of Taylor-Price Farmers Union. The Torchbearer award is the highest honor bestowed upon Farmers Union youth, marking the completion of five years of community and organizational service, and education in the topics of cooperation, leadership and civic engagement. Since 1936, over 1,600 WFU youth have earned the honor.

"Farmers Union youth build leadership skills and cooperative awareness through participation in our youth program and summer camps," said WFU Education Director Cathy Statz. "Most began participating as elementary students, and have developed a strong sense of the importance of the role of family farming, cooperative business and rural communities for our economy, our culture and our planet."



Willow Ulrich
Barron County



Emma Wegerer
Taylor-Price County

Canvassing to create change

Expanding BadgerCare is a win for Wisconsin. Here's how to help.



Bill Hogseth
Organizing Director

This year, Wisconsin will adopt a new state budget for 2021-2022 which will have real implications on the daily lives of Wisconsin residents. Among the critical issues coming up in this budget cycle is the opportunity to accept federal funding to allow for the expansion of BadgerCare and provide stable health coverage to over 80,000 people.

Wisconsin Farmers Union's policy position on BadgerCare expansion notes that BadgerCare Plus has efficiently provided public health care coverage statewide to Wisconsin residents with low income, and could, according to the Legislative Fiscal Bureau, offer health insurance to more Wisconsin residents at a significant cost savings. Therefore, WFU urges the governor and legislature to pursue a BadgerCare expansion strategy that leverages all available federal dollars.

WFU is organizing people across rural Wisconsin to engage constituents in transformative two-way conversations about health care. These conversations - known as "deep canvassing" - have the power to break through to constituents on a challenging or polarized issue. Our efforts will focus on building constituent support for BadgerCare expansion in critical legislative districts.

Deep canvassing involves candid two-way conversations where canvassers ask constituents to share constituents' own relevant, emotionally significant experiences and reflect on them aloud. Rigorous experiments show that deep canvassing may generate larger and longer-lasting impacts on constituents' core attitudes than other methods.

To reach as many constituents as possible, we are building a team of deep canvassers. Because these will be phone conversations, anyone can participate from around the state.

Too many rural Wisconsinites do not have access to quality, affordable health care - especially during the COVID pandemic. However, Wisconsin can significantly reduce that problem and save money at the same time by using available federal funding to make more low-income adults eligible for BadgerCare.

The challenges in the current healthcare system disproportionately impact rural communities. Many farmers find it difficult to obtain affordable health insurance. Farmers are sometimes excluded from private health insurance plans entirely because of the risks inherent in farming. A lack of affordable health insurance options is a roadblock to prospective farmers getting into farming and a significant cost and area of vulnerability for continuing farmers.

By sharing our stories, we can make an impact. See the details at right on upcoming trainings and join WFU in creating change.

Join our team by attending one of these upcoming events:

KICKOFF EVENT

Learn more about WFU's strategy to build support among rural constituents for BadgerCare expansion using deep canvassing.

Friday March 12th 6:30-8pm

DEEP CANVASSING TRAINING

An immersive introduction to the craft of deep canvassing. Learn how to share your own stories, connect on shared values, and develop listening skills as a way to connect with people who may not agree with us.

Story Workshop (choose one)

Wednesday, March 24th 1-3:30pm

Thursday, March 25th 6-8:30pm

Deep Canvass Phone Bank Training
Sunday, March 28th 1-5pm

REGISTER FOR UPCOMING EVENTS:
wisconsinfarmersunion.com/events

Farmers Union members set policy priorities

Von Ruden re-elected as president, Lloyd welcomed as new district director

Election results are in from the Wisconsin Farmers Union's 90th Annual Convention, held virtually January 30-31. Convention delegates voted on policy priorities and candidates by mail-in ballot, with results tallied Feb. 9 at the family farm organization's state headquarters in Chippewa Falls.

The following 2021 Special Orders of Business, which will serve as priorities for WFU's work throughout the year, passed with overwhelming support from delegates:

- Dairy Policy Reform
- Concentration in the Agriculture Industry
- Family Farmers Shaping Climate Change Policy
- Meat Processing Infrastructure
- Pandemic Response & Recovery

Members passed 31 policy resolutions. Highlights included support of the diversity and equity in agriculture, greater transparency in livestock markets, overhaul of the Federal Milk Marketing Order system, development of local and regional fiber systems, increasing allowable THC content of hemp and creating a state hemp program, direct-to-consumer sale of poultry regardless of sales channel (i.e. farmer markets), transparency in allocation of federal farm payments, truth in food labeling, and measures to bolster the ethanol industry. The 2021 WFU policy book is available at www.wisconsinfarmersunion.com/policy.

Election results

Several district director seats were up for election this year. Dairy farmers Dave Rosen of Glenwood City and Tina Hinchley of Cambridge were re-elected to Districts 2 and 7, respectively. Rosen represents Dunn, Pepin, Pierce, and St. Croix Counties, while Hinchley's district covers Dane, Jefferson, Kenosha, Racine, and Walworth counties.

Newly elected to the board is Sarah Lloyd, who will serve District 6, which spans Adams, Columbia, Green Lake, Juneau, Marathon, Marquette, Portage, Sauk, Waupaca, Waushara, and Wood counties. Lloyd farms with her husband Nels Nelson and his family on a 400-cow dairy farm near Wisconsin Dells in Columbia County. She works off-farm bringing together farmers and researchers to understand and build the infrastructure necessary for regenerative agriculture at the UW-Madison Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems and the Grassland 2.0 Project via the University of Minnesota Forever Green Initiative. She also serves as the Director of Development for the Wisconsin Food Hub Cooperative (WFHC), a farmer-led cooperative focused on accessing local and regional markets for fresh produce. Sarah has a PhD in



Lloyd

Rural Sociology from UW-Madison and a Masters in Rural Development from the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. She is president of the Columbia County Farmers and also worked for WFU for 7 years, most recently as the director of special projects.

"By coming together through Farmers Union we can understand our shared interests and strategically build our voice to gain economic and political power," Lloyd said. "As a board member I will work to make sure that all the voices are heard and we can build a strong future for the organization together."

Rachel Henderson of Menomonie and Michelle Miller of Madison were elected to serve as delegates to represent WFU in the March 1-2 policy discussion at the National Farmers Union's 119th Anniversary Convention. Henderson is president of the Dunn County Farmers Union and owner of Mary Dirty Face Farm, which is home to a mixed-fruit orchard and pastured livestock, including hogs, lambs, poultry and cattle. Miller works for the University of Wisconsin's Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems (CIAS) with current projects covering dairy policy, market structure and concentration, technology in the public interest, and climate change mitigation in the food supply chain. She also is active in the Dane County Farmers Union and serves on the Wisconsin Farmers Union Foundation board.

Von Ruden re-elected

Westby dairy farmer Darin Von Ruden has been re-elected as WFU president. Von Ruden is a lifelong Farmers Union member, and since 2008 has served as District 5 director. He also leads the WFU Foundation Board of Directors, serves on the National Farmers Union Board and is NFU Membership Committee chairman.



Von Ruden

Von Ruden has high hopes for the year ahead, noting he is pleased to see agriculture being prioritized in the Governor's budget and pivotal rural issues being recognized.

"In the midst of a tense political climate and a global pandemic, the past year has challenged our family farms and rural communities in many ways," Von Ruden said. "However, there are a lot of silver linings in the awareness it has raised for many of the deep-seated structural issues that are affecting our food supply chains and agriculture. WFU will continue to lead on these issues and organize for a better future for the generations to follow."

Election of officers also included: Vice President Rick Adamski, Seymour; Secretary Linda Ceylor, Catawba; and Treasurer Ed Gorell, Eleva

Rural leadership recognized at WFU Convention

Seven honorees were recognized for their dedication to rural Wisconsin during the 90th Wisconsin Farmers Union State Convention.

"We appreciate the work this year's awardees have been doing to improve life in rural Wisconsin and to strengthen this organization," said WFU President Darin Von Ruden. "These recipients remind us that though we faced challenges in 2020, there was also a lot of good happening in the countryside."

FRIEND OF THE FAMILY FARMER

Three individuals received the Friend of the Family Farmer award, which recognizes individuals who have gone above and beyond on behalf of family farmers and rural communities.

Michelle Miller of Madison received the honor for her work at the University of Wisconsin Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems, where she has been leading research projects focused on family farm profitability and sustainability.

"Supply management has been a focus for WFU for several years, and we are so glad to have strong partners in the effort," Von Ruden said. "We're grateful to Michelle for her commitment to the subject and for her work with the Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems."

U.S. Representative Mike Gallagher and U.S. Representative Ron Kind were named Friends of the Family Farmer in recognition of their bipartisan introduction of the Dairy Pricing and Policy Act of 2020. The bill directs the USDA to convene a Dairy Pricing and Policy Commission to make legislative, agency, and market-based recommendations to improve milk prices and dairy farm profitability.

"Representatives Kind and Gallagher put aside political differences and reached across the aisle to find real solutions for dairy farmers," Von Ruden said. "America's Dairyland has been hit particularly hard in recent years; we applaud the bipartisan response to an ongoing crisis that threatens Wisconsin's dairy heritage. Wisconsin agriculture needs more of that collaborative spirit moving forward."

BUILDERS AWARD

The Builders Award, given for outstanding commitment to building WFU through county involvement, leadership development and member recruitment, went to Rachel Henderson, Menomonie; Sarah Lloyd, Wisconsin Dells; and the late Dave Fauska, Elroy.

Rachel Henderson owns Mary Dirty Face Farm with her husband, Anton Ptak. The farm is home to a 12-acre certified-organic mixed-fruit orchard and innovative CSA-style fruit share. Besides fruit, the family raises pastured hogs, lambs, and poultry. Henderson is president of the Dunn County Farmers Union. She has taken part in WFU's Emerging

Leaders Retreat and organized chapter events, including a community harvest dinner, book club, and guest speakers on local food systems. When not farming, Henderson works as a remote Organic Specialist for the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Services (MOSES), and serves on the board of the Land Stewardship Project.

Sarah Lloyd has contributed a great deal to WFU. She spent seven years on staff, guiding special projects and playing a pivotal role in formation of the Wisconsin Food Hub Cooperative. She also has been an engaging leader within Columbia County Farmers Union. See more of her bio in the announcement of her election to the board of directors (page 12).

Dave Fauska was born in 1930, the very year that WFU was established. His family soon became members of the new organization along with many neighbors. Fauska attended Farmers Union Camp as a youth and meetings of the Kendall Local chapter. He and his wife, Myrna, became active in Monroe County Farmers Union, taking part in membership drives and serving as delegates at the annual convention. They purchased Dave's family farm and milked a herd of Holsteins for many years. Dave and Myrna remained active for many years until age and health began to curtail their activities; Dave passed in August 2020.

EMERGING LEADER AWARD

In its inaugural year, the Emerging Leader Award was presented to Aaron Ellringer, for igniting energy and engagement in WFU. Ellringer has played a crucial role in recruiting members, planning events, and energizing the Eau Claire County Farmers Union. Ellringer lives on a small farm on the outskirts of Eau Claire. He moved from Rochester, MN to Eau Claire in 1991 to attend UW-Eau Claire, where he became immersed in local environmental and racial justice issues. After graduating with a degree in Geology and Environmental Science, he shifted focus to food and agriculture. By working on farms and in food co-ops he met others interested in local food and co-founded Just Local Food Cooperative in his garage. After helping to grow the co-op over several years from a small home delivery service to a million-dollar grocery store, he left to start Kubb Farm and work with the nonprofit Farmer to Farmer. Ellringer now works for the Pablo Group and helped develop Pablo Food Hub. He spends most of his time on the farm, raising his children alongside goats, poultry, prairie, veggies and berries and playing kubba (he is a former U.S. National Champion).

"As a grassroots organization, WFU's strength resides in the dedication and leadership of members such as these," Von Ruden said.



Miller



Rep. Gallagher



Rep. Kind



Henderson



Lloyd



Fauska



Ellringer



'The happiness and joy has been sucked out of me'

Wisconsin farmers face mental health crisis

Darian Acres dairy farm in Rio, Wis., December 2020. The farm belongs to the Fischer family. Photo by Coburn Dukehart / Wisconsin Watch

This story was produced by Wisconsin Watch, a nonprofit, nonpartisan investigative reporting organization that focuses on government integrity and quality of life issues in Wisconsin: www.WisconsinWatch.org

Jack Kelly
Wisconsin Watch

It was Wednesday, Dec. 21, 2016. David Fischer had just arrived for work at his dairy farm in Rio, Wisconsin. A slight breeze punctuated the freezing, grey morning.

His drive to work is just 2 minutes. From where he parked his pickup truck on the farm's gravel driveway, he could see his house on the top of a hill.

Fischer, who owns the roughly 350-cow dairy farm with his wife, Amy, was ready for another day of work alongside his twin sons, 33-year-old Kevin and Brian, and a handful of other employees.

Like most days, the lifelong dairy farmer had plenty to do. He didn't expect anything different from his usual

12- or 13-hour work day on his farm about 50 minutes north of Madison.

Fischer set off toward the north end of the dairy farm. He walked past the dozen-or-so buildings to chop wood that would heat water in the milking barn and warm Kevin's house on the property.

Fischer soon realized that Brian hadn't shown up for work. He couldn't shake a feeling that something was wrong.

Was Brian sick? He would have called or texted. Did he take off unannounced to go snowmobiling? That wasn't like Brian either.

Around midday, while taking a short break for lunch, Fischer and his son Kevin set off to Brian's house to drop off a feed wagon and check on him. What they found confirmed Fischer's nagging fears: Brian's body. He had died by suicide.

Brian's death blindsided the Fischers. And four years later, they still ask themselves the same question over and over again: "Why?"

"I had someone ask me the other day, 'Does it get

any easier?' " Amy said, tears forming in her eyes. "I said, 'It gets easier to cover it.' "

"It don't go away," Fischer said about the heartache he feels. "He should be here."

Financial pressures, long hours, labor shortages, harsh weather – these are all con-

ditions that farmers and their advocates say are escalating stress and depression among Wisconsin's dairy farmers. And nationally, people who run farms are much more likely to take their own lives than in many other professions. In response, the

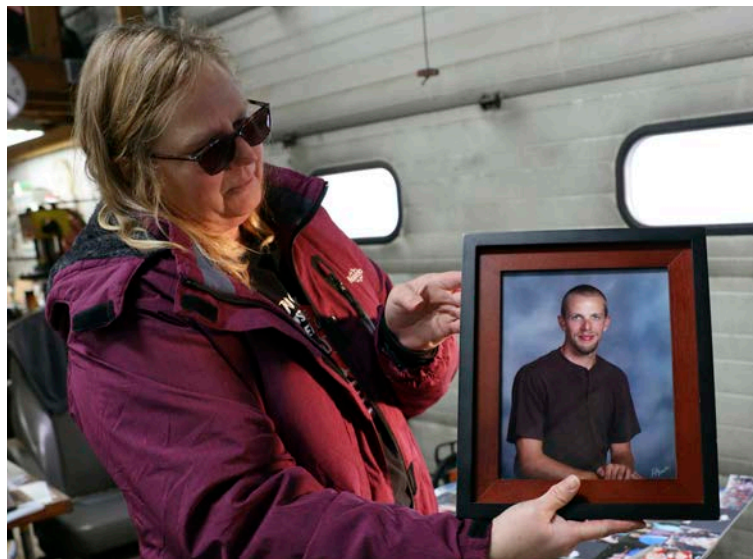


Photo by Coburn Dukehart / Wisconsin Watch

Amy Fischer is seen with a photo of her son, Brian, on her family's 350-cow dairy farm, Darian Acres, in Rio, Wis., on Dec. 18, 2020. Brian died by suicide at the age of 33, on Dec. 21, 2016. The Fischers attribute his death to a combination of stress from work, a drinking problem and depression from a recent break-up. Dairy farmers and their advocates say numerous stressors are leading to a mental health crisis in their industry, including financial pressures, long hours, labor shortages and harsh weather.

state of Wisconsin and farmers themselves have launched a series of programs to help them cope.

Stress, alcohol, overwork piled up

The events leading to Brian's death were complicated. The Fischers said Brian had a drinking problem and had just gone through a bitter breakup that ended a decade-long relationship.

The family had also invested heavily in expanding the farm, aiming to make it financially viable for the two brothers in the future. As Fischer describes it: "You have to grow. If you don't grow, you're getting behind," echoing a common expression among dairy farmers in recent years.



Kevin Fischer, Brian's twin brother, is seen on his family's 350-cow dairy farm, Darian Acres, in Rio, Wis., on Dec. 18, 2020. Photos by Coburn Dukehart / Wisconsin Watch



Brian Fischer, left, is seen with his twin brother, Kevin, in family photos that are part of a photo collage. Brian died by suicide in 2016.

With the expansion in mind, Amy said Brian was giving farming "100%." Said Amy: "He (Brian) could be in the tractor for 60 hours straight."

The stress from work, the drinking problem and serious relationship woes frustrated Brian, the couple said. Brian had a "short fuse" before his death, Fischer said, but the couple never imagined he would take his own life.

"Nobody saw it," the couple agreed. "Nobody saw it."

Survey: 1 in 10 farmers struggling

Conversations with 10 current and former family dairy farmers in Wisconsin revealed that work days, which often start before the sun rises and end well after it sets, are jam packed with stressors that make coping difficult.

Stress winds into every aspect of life on a dairy farm, says organic dairy farmer Linda Ceylor of Catawba. The stressors are almost too many to count, ranging from often grueling daily chores to equipment breakdowns, sick animals, uncooperative weather, unreliable staff and, perhaps the heaviest stressor of them all: low and fluctuating milk prices.

Dairy farmers statewide share these concerns, according to the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection's 2020 dairy producer survey. Among the 2,871 dairy farmers the agency surveyed, extreme weather was the top challenge. Other major concerns were managing day-to-day expenses, regulations, aging facilities, managing

long-term debt and difficulty finding labor.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further stressed farmers. A new national survey from the American Farm Bureau Federation found 65% of farmers report the pandemic has impacted their mental health a lot or some.

Daily concerns, coupled with a half-decade of serious financial woes, leave Wisconsin dairy farmers in the middle of a mental health crisis. In the DATCP survey, 9% of respondents said they felt a need to access mental health services in the past year due to farming challenges, with 6% of respondents actually seeking out help. That suggests that hundreds, if not thousands, of Wisconsin farmers are feeling the crisis.

Data from the Wisconsin Farm Center – which is a part of DATCP and provides social and business-related resources to farm families – indicates the crisis is worsening. The center runs a 24-hour hotline (888-901-2558) for farmers struggling with suicidal thoughts, depression or anxiety.

Funding for help available

In recent years, Wisconsin state government and private organizations have funneled more money into farmers' mental health. In his first budget, Gov. Tony Evers included \$200,000 for farmer mental health initiatives. The Wisconsin Farm Center used that money to expand its voucher program and develop other initiatives aimed at alleviating farmer stress.

The voucher program covers counseling costs with select providers for dairy farmers seeking mental health care services. Up to three vouchers, good for one hour of counseling each, can be used to purchase services from licensed counselors. Additional vouchers are available upon request.

The state has issued more than 1,500 vouchers to Wisconsin farmers since 2005. The center issued 252 vouchers in 2020, a 38.5% increase compared to 2019 – and a seven-fold increase compared to 2016, when only 31 vouchers were issued. During the 2020 fiscal year – from July 1, 2019 to June 30, 2020 – the voucher program cost \$7,700, according to Farm Center estimates. That number is expected to tick up to \$10,200 for 2021.

These figures only represent one, state-funded avenue to counseling sessions. They do not account for counseling that dairy farmers may have sought out and paid for using their private insurance or paid for out of pocket. Oftentimes, at least one member of a farm family works off the farm to bring employer-backed health insurance back to their family.

Other organizations have also started offering Question, Persuade and Refer training to teach people to identify the warning signs of suicide and refer someone to help.

The Farmer Angel Network, for example, has partnered with the Sauk County Health Department to train farmers and other dairy industry members how to identify and help people experiencing a mental health crisis.

Suicides up statewide

Wisconsin is seeing more suicides statewide, according to the most recent data from the state Department of Health Services. Between 2010 and 2017, an average of 815 Wisconsin-ites died by suicide each year, with the

See page 16 ► CRISIS



numbers trending up since 2015.

In 2016, the year Brian died, 862 people in Wisconsin died by suicide. And while DHS does not track the occupations of people who have died – medical examiners and coroners in Wisconsin are not required to list the occupation of people who die – one dairy farmer interviewed for this story said he “knows many (farmers) who have actually (died by) suicide.”

Suicide deaths are rising nationwide, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In 2017, nearly 38,000 working age Americans died by suicide, a suicide rate increase of almost 40% compared to the year 2000.

The suicide rate among male farmers is 43.2 per 100,000, the data show – 58% higher than the national rate among men of 27.4 per 100,000.

Several dairy farmers interviewed for this story said they are seeing the crisis in their own rural communities.

Ceylor said farmers are proud people who often won't reach out for help, so she watches for subtle behavioral changes in her fellow farmers to see when someone is struggling.

She knows of three farmers who halted their operations last year for financial reasons, and all of them struggled for months to adjust to life after farming. Ceylor would sometimes ask them to work on her own farm so they could maintain a “farming connection.”

Randy Roecker, a 56-year-old dairy farmer and mental health advocate, has also encountered numerous Wisconsin farmers struggling with their mental health. Roecker, who experienced a deep, financially driven depression sparked by the 2008 financial crisis, founded the Farmer Angel Network, a peer-to-peer support group aimed at getting farmers through tough times.

The farmer from Loganville, Wisconsin – located roughly 50 miles northwest of Madison – said “farmers don't know where to turn” when they're struggling with their mental health, and the group's monthly meetings provided a space for people to get together and talk.



Photo by Coburn Dukehart / Wisconsin Watch
Above: David and Amy Fischer stand together in the milking barn on their 350-cow dairy farm, Darian Acres, in Rio, Wis., on Dec. 18, 2020. Their son, Brian, died by suicide in 2016. “It don't go away,” David Fischer said about the heartache he feels. “He should be here.”

“We had farmers that were driving two or three hours to come up (the meetings) because ... they're embarrassed because they don't want their neighbors to see them,” Roecker said.

But since the COVID-19 pandemic set in, the group, many of them regular attendees, hasn't met. And online meetings sometimes aren't feasible because many farmers lack access to internet. For those who do have online access, the Farm Center launched a series of virtual counseling sessions starting in February for farmers and farm couples.

Financial hardships fuel crisis

Thirteen of the people interviewed for this story said the financial devastation many farmers have faced in recent years is fueling the mental health crisis.

Small Wisconsin dairy farms face a particularly dire outlook. Since 2004, the state has lost more than half of its registered dairy herds, according to data from DATCP. That's nearly 9,000 fewer herds, with 15,904 registered herds at the start of 2004 dropping to just 6,949 as of December 2020.

For the thousands of small dairy farms

that continue to operate, the stressful fight for survival continues.

Financial struggles are “almost always” the underpinnings of mental health struggles for dairy farmers, said Florence Becot, an associate research scientist at the National Farm Medicine Center in Marshfield, Wisconsin.

“I think it's hard to now talk about farm stress and depression without talking about the economy,” Becot said. “When you talk about (farm) stress and depression, so much of it ... is connected to the way that farming is structured. You might not be losing money, but you might be afraid of losing money.”

Jayne Krull, director of the Wisconsin Farm Center, pointed to volatility of milk prices – and the short- and long-term uncertainty rooted in that volatility – as a weight carried by dairy farmers.

“It's really hard to make a plan for your farm when you don't know what you're going to be getting paid,” Krull said. “Add to that you've got the high feed prices, and it's hard to make ends meet.”

The last five years have crushed family dairy farmers in America's Dairyland. The price for milk, a commodity, has varied widely on a month-to-month or even day-to-day basis, leaving dairy farmers financially unstable. In 2020 alone the average price farmers in Wisconsin received per 100 pounds of milk varied from a low of \$13.60 in May to a high of \$22.30 in July, U.S. Department of Agriculture data show.

The drop in prices paves a difficult path forward for small family dairy farms, current and former dairy farmers said. As Roecker describes it: “Our investment keeps going up and up and up, and our return goes down and down and down, and there's just no profit in it.”

Hard work but little gain

Mark Stephenson, director of the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Center for Dairy Profitability, attributes milk's wavering price to the fact that it is bought and sold as a commodity.

Stephenson said the dairy industry today consists of 30,000 individual dairy farmers, and when the price farmers are getting for milk is

high, they often respond by producing more milk.

Accordingly, Stephenson said, when they all produce more milk, they can overshoot the actual demand for their product, causing the price of milk to drop dramatically.

Unlike other products, the milk has a short shelf-life and can't be stored for long periods of the time when there is a surplus, forcing farmers to take whatever price they can get for it before it goes bad, Stephenson said.

Like many of his peers, Jerry Volenec, a dairy farmer in Grant County, has seen the financial burden of dairy farming only worsen throughout his career.

After he finished college, Volenec started dairy farming full time, initially milking 70 cows. He grew his herd over time, following – but not enjoying – the mantra of “get bigger to survive,” and today milks 300 cows three times per day.

Even still, he's struggling to get by. Volenec said he has never been “terribly comfortable” financially and only breaks even through “great personal sacrifice.”

“Right now I'm running with the fewest number of people that I've ever run, and I'm running the most land and the most cattle that I've ever run,” he continued. “Do the math on that.”

As Volenec has scaled up his operation, something that was supposed to lead to greater financial stability, he's pinching pennies and taking on more of the day-to-day work – and stress – himself. He said the increased workload has harmed his family life and his marriage, but he's not sure what else he can do.

“The happiness and joy has been sucked out of me,” Volenec said. “I don't want to be this guy.”

RURAL MENTAL HEALTH

Connection and support critical for farm families

Chris Frakes

Program Manager, Southwestern Wisconsin Community Action Program

By any measure, 2020 was an unusual year. Some people have described it as the year when time stopped or the year where the future was cancelled. On the other hand, those of us who track the changing seasons and the cyclical rhythms of planting and harvesting, birthing and butchering, know that time didn't stop and the future continued to spool out in front of us as it always does.

And yet, we know that farmers, farm families, and farmworkers have been impacted by the pandemic. The agricultural supply chain experienced disruptions. The promising forecasts for a better year for dairy farmers evaporated in the spring as the pandemic gripped the country.

More recently rural communities have come face-to-face with the medical realities of this crisis as friends, neighbors, and family members have fallen ill. For many the sporting events and school activities we look forward to were cancelled. Our kids may be navigating the whiplash back and forth between virtual and in-person school.

Time has continued, but the world we're navigating is not the same. Everywhere we look there seems to be more division and uncertainty, more stressors, more anger.

The farming culture I grew in up didn't encourage reaching out for support. Though no one said it directly, I understood that feeling sad or anxious or overwhelmed was simply irrelevant if there was work to be done. As I've grown older, and had kids of my own, **See page 23 ► CONNECTION**

PROJECT RECOVERY

Project Recovery is an outreach program working with individuals, families, and communities impacted by COVID-19 throughout the state of Wisconsin.

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Project Recovery is a service made possible through partnerships between FEMA, Wisconsin Department of Health Services, Wisconsin Community Action Program Association, and Southwestern Wisconsin Community Action Program.





How the Justice for Black Farmers Act Levels the Playing Field

Mackenzie Jeter
National Farmers Union Intern

A hundred years ago, agriculture was a relatively diverse profession in the United States: a million Black farmers operated about 14 percent of the country's farms.

The makeup of the modern agricultural workforce could not look more different. Today, there are just 48,000 Black farmers – a 95 percent decline since 1920. There are a number of reasons for this, but the combination of discrimination in federal farm assistance and lending programs as well as loopholes in property laws are largely to blame for Black farmers' loss of land and livelihood.

The forced exodus of hundreds of thousands of Black farmers from the agricultural industry has not only deprived individual families of generational wealth, but it has also inflicted irreversible social and economic damage on Black rural communities. Even so, until recently, there had only

been modest attempts to rectify the long legacy of racism in American agricultural institutions.

A new bill could change that. In November, Senators Cory Booker (D-NJ), Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), and Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) introduced the "Justice for Black Farmers Act" in order to "reform the U.S. Department of Agriculture and create a land grant program to encourage a new generation of Black farmers." The end goal of this bill is to eradicate the systemic racism that is embedded within the agriculture industry so that current and aspiring Black farmers have the opportunity to flourish. To accomplish this giant feat, the bill outlines how it will end discrimination within USDA, protect remaining Black-owned land, restore the land base lost by Black farmers, empower historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and advocates for Black farmers, assist socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers with resources to succeed, and enact system reforms that will help all farmers and ranchers. A

short summary of the bill follows:

Land Grants

This bill aims to restore and protect Black farmers' land. One of the most important steps in accomplishing that goal would be the establishment of the Equitable Land Access Service (ELAS) within USDA. ELAS would acquire farmland from willing sellers to provide land grants of up to 160 acres to eligible Black individuals. The new agency would also provide grants to HBCUs and non-profits to help find appropriate land for USDA to purchase, support Black individuals in acquiring that land, and provide farming training to both experienced and new farmers. HBCUs would also be eligible to expand their agricultural research and education efforts. In addition to its land grant program, the bill would establish the Farm Conservation Corps, which would provide young adults from socially disadvantaged groups with the necessary skills for a productive career in farming and ranching. Farmers who participate in the program

would have priority for land grants through ELAS.

Competition

The Justice for Black Farmers Act helps all farmers and ranchers by cracking down on anti-competitive practices within the agriculture industry and return competition to agricultural markets. More specifically, it would make multiple amendments to the Packers and Stockyards Act that would provide more protections and freedoms for farmers and strip away the existing protections for large corporations that have long impacted farmers' ability to compete. For far too long regulation and policy has benefitted multinational corporations. The bill enacts strong reforms aimed to fix this broken system.

Local Food

The bill would scale up funding for the Local Agriculture Market Program (LAMP) – which supports the development of local and regional food systems – by a factor of ten. Small and mid-size farmers are often left out of our national supply chain and instead depend on local outlets to sell their products in order to survive. According to the bill's summary, increasing LAMP funding would allow these farmers to “provide fresh nutritious food to more Americans, through farmers markets, local and regional food enterprises, value chain coordination, and regional food-shed planning.”

Conservation

The agriculture industry has made great strides in conservation practices over the years, but more could certainly be done. Rather than including conservation as an afterthought, the Justice for Black Farmers Act would make conservation and renewable energy programs a priority. It would not only increase funding for the Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) program and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), but it would also expand CSP by making new stewardship practices eligible for supplemental funding. Furthermore, the bill would assist socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers by giving them priority for these programs and Rural Energy for America Program (REAP).

At National Farmers Union, we support “efforts to remedy historical inequities in access to farm programs and other systemic barriers;” because the Justice for Black Farmers Act does just that, we are pleased to put our weight behind it, and we urge Congress to do the same. After years of inaction and the continuation of systemic racism in the agriculture industry, we welcome the sensible and easily applicable solutions put forth by Senators Booker, Warren, and Gillibrand. This bill is a step in the right direction for racial equity, not just for the agriculture industry, but the country as a whole.

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Will the "Year of Broadband Access" bring connectivity to rural Wisconsin?



Bayard Godsave
Rural Voices Correspondent

According to a 2018 report by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), some 21 million Americans lacked adequate internet access. Like many problems facing our country, the problem of the "digital divide," as it's been dubbed, does not affect all Americans equally. Communities of color and rural communities are far more likely to have inadequate access to high-speed internet. The FCC reports that 25 percent of rural Wisconsinites lack high-speed access, and that number is as high as 60 percent in rural Indigenous communities, according to reporting by the *Green Bay Gazette*.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated a range of issues, and exposed deep fissures in our social structures, and the problem of the digital divide is no different. Many Americans probably didn't give much thought to the issue prior to the pandemic. After all, roughly 94 percent of Americans do have adequate access.

A lot of people, furthermore, may have thought their internet access was fine until the first time they tried logging into a Zoom meeting while their child was attending virtual school in the next room – as Sam Bloch has noted on *The Counter*, a Zoom call typically requires 2.0 Mbps per call, so if you have 3.0 Mbps connectivity, which the FCC considers adequate, you may run into trouble if two or more family members are trying to connect at once.

The issue of access really hit home in 2020 when, all at once, nearly every school district in the country switched to virtual learning. Kim Kaukl, executive director of the Wisconsin Rural School Alliance, recalls that last spring, as in so many other states, Wisconsin schools had to scramble to figure out how to deliver virtual instruction to their students, and the problem presented a particular challenge when it came to reaching rural students.

"They did everything they could think of, library hotspots, mobile hotspots," said Kaukl, "but when you have a rural school district that stretches over 600 square miles, that's just a lot of ground to cover."

As a result, he said, many rural school districts made the decision to return to in-person learning because the challenge of delivering instruction online was just too great.

According to a technology survey conducted by the Department of Public Instruction in the fall of 2019, 15 percent of students in Wisconsin

did not have adequate internet access. That works out to roughly 130,000 students, many of them concentrated in rural areas. Though the problem of connectivity is particularly acute while schools rely on virtual learning, that doesn't mean the problem is going to go away as schools across the country return to in-person learning. Pre-pandemic, educators were already relying on more electronic resources for assignments. And, though most educators will no doubt welcome a return to the physical classroom, this past year has been a crash-course for them in virtual learning, and it's likely that many will have found aspects of virtual instruction attractive.

"We need to recognize that broadband access is a necessity," said Kaukl, "not a luxury."

The impact that the digital divide is having on students is highly visible, but it isn't a problem that only affects schools. "Broadband access," Kaukl told me, "can be an economic driver for local communities."

Shawn Phetteplace, who represents the Main Street Alliance, a small business advocacy group, agrees. With a customer base that is choosing to stay at home, more and more businesses are relying on delivery services and online ordering. Connecting to the internet can literally mean the difference between weathering the pandemic and having to shut your doors. "If you're a restaurant relying on Uber Eats to reach your customer base and you can't connect, that's obviously going to create huge problems," Phetteplace said.

As a result of the pandemic, farmer's market sales have taken a huge hit, and a lot of small farming operations are relying on online sales to survive as well, which means that access to high-speed internet is becoming an even more essential part of the business end of farming.

Additionally, rural America has an aging population. Both Kaukl and Phetteplace pointed out that internet access is going to be paramount in attracting a younger workforce. Just as the pandemic is likely going to change how we think about education going forward, it's also going to change how we work—like it or not, Zoom probably isn't going anywhere. Having a good internet connection can allow farming families to diversify their income. Take the example of Rachel Henderson and Anton Ptak who own Mary Dirty Face Farm near Downsville, WI. They recently were connected to a fiber-optic line, which allows Ptak to work from home for a renewable energies development company with offices in the Twin Cities while also being present on the farm, which means another set of hands at harvest, and it also makes it a little bit easier to



figure out childcare.

There are plenty of people who have access to the internet, but may not have broadband access. They could be connecting with satellite internet, or DSL, which utilizes copper phone lines. These can work fine, if all you need to do is access email and Facebook. Satellite internet services can be expensive, though, and often data usage is limited in the contract.

My family had satellite internet for a few years when we were living in Oklahoma and the woman who installed it for us put it this way: "If you decide to stream two episodes of *Friends*, let's say, you'll reach your monthly data limit right there."

The gold standard for delivering high-speed internet is fiber-optic cable, but it is expensive. In a 2020 *Journalist Resource* article, Clark Merrefield writes that it "would take \$150 billion dollar investment in fiber infrastructure to modernize rural broadband across the country." In 2009, Congress put the FCC in charge of developing a plan to extend access into underserved areas. This has mostly been in the form of grant programs. Recently, the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund was established through the FCC, providing \$20 billion over 10 years to companies building broadband in rural areas.

In rural Wisconsin, it has mostly been small providers who have been trying to bridge the divide, telecom companies like Norvado, or 24/7 Telecom, and even electric cooperatives, like Chippewa Valley Electric Cooperative, which teamed up with Ntera to extend broadband access to their customers in western Wisconsin. Some cooperatives and LLCs have even been established with the express purpose of expanding broadband. For its part, the State of Wisconsin has been offering funding streams in the form of Broadband Expansion Grants to aid providers with specific expansion projects.

And yet, despite these efforts, not everyone is connected. We're close, but getting to those last households is proving to be a massive undertaking. It's what people who study the issue call "the last mile problem," that point where continuing to run fiber for only a "handful" of customers (21 million people in the United States) becomes cost-prohibitive. It's not unlike rural parcel delivery, where private companies like FedEx and UPS routinely elect not to deliver to certain households because it would not be profitable to do so – the United States Post Office does deliver to such places, though, and actually has a contract with the private services to complete delivery, because their charter says they must deliver to everyone.



A lack of connectivity can leave rural businesses, students, and farms lagging behind their connected counterparts.

This is a problem not just for providers, but for customers as well, since the cost of reaching remote areas could be passed to them. "It's not just a connectivity issue," Kaukl said. "It's a cost issue as well. You can't sacrifice affordability for accessibility."

In some ways, the last mile problem is the logical result of a governing mentality that reflexively seeks a market-driven solution and claims government works best when it is run like a business. After all, from a business perspective, 94 percent looks pretty good. And as we reach this point, where we're close to full coverage but not quite there, some rural advocates question whether depending on private providers is the best course of action. As Phetteplace said "We need to take the time to figure out what really is the public good here, and not just line the pockets of internet providers."

Governor Tony Evers in his 2021 state of the state address declared 2021 "The Year of Broadband Access," and pledged \$200 million over the 2021-2023 biennium to help expand broadband access. Last summer, Evers established a broadband taskforce to examine best ways of moving forward.

Kurt Kiefer, assistant state superintendent for the Division of Libraries and Technologies for Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction, was one of the people appointed to that taskforce. Kiefer previously worked for Madison Metropolitan School District for 16 years.

Kiefer noted it is too early to tell the impact of the digital divide in the pandemic but notes a DPI survey from 2019 found 15 percent of students lacked sufficient Internet access. That number has since decreased to around 5 percent. "You do the math," Kiefer said, "and that's still 35,000 students."

That doesn't necessarily mean that all those students now have access at home; it may include students who take advantage of library and school-provided hotspots. Still, it is a marked improvement over just one year.

"It was an all-hands-on-deck kind of thing," Kiefer notes, crediting teachers and **See page 22 ► LAST MILE**



From page 21 ► **LAST MILE** school administrators for “busting their butts and getting things done,” and libraries for turning parking lots into Internet hotspots when the pandemic forced many of them to close their doors. “And I’ve got to give credit where credit is due to the local providers,” he said. “A lot of them really stepped up.”

Kiefer also is concerned about the last mile problem, “How do you get to those last few customers without driving up costs?”

As with so many other infrastructure projects, Wisconsin relies on a commercial funding model to extend broadband service. But when you task the private sector with getting people in Wisconsin connected, they’re going to expect a short-term return on their investment. “If you keep relying solely on that model,” Kiefer said, “you’ll never get everyone connected.” He compares it to rural electrification a century ago. “We said we could do it and we did it, using the same sort of ideas we need to explore today for broadband. It’s time to recognize that high-speed internet as a need instead of a want.”

Fiber-optic lines are anticipated to last 50 years. “The only way we get to that last mile is if we think in terms of a thirty-year return, which is how we’ve always treated those things we all need, like roads, and fire stations,” Kiefer said, though he added he isn’t suggesting that the state take on all of the burden of running fiber lines.

“The commercial model has worked great for a lot of people,” he said. “And where it’s working, we should keep doing it ... But where it doesn’t, that’s where we need to think about a different approach.”

With a new administration, some rural advocates are hopeful that comprehensive infrastructure legislation might follow closely on the heels of a COVID relief package. Phetteplace sees rural broadband as part of a constellation of issues that affect residents of rural Wisconsin

that also includes things like access to daycare, health care access, and transportation. He is hopeful that we might see a federal infrastructure package that provides funding to extend essential services like broadband, and high-speed rail, “a package that makes investments in technologies, including broadband, that can help small businesses and rural communities across the state.”

Current rural broadband efforts bring to mind the Rural Electrification Act, which was part of Roosevelt’s New Deal and helped extend electricity to 1.5 million farms in a little over two years. As with rural broadband, the program relied on funding extended to rural cooperatives, though in the form of low interest loans as opposed to grants. There are differences though. Perhaps most significantly, because of the Great Depression, the line mile cost for electric dropped from \$2,000 to \$600. It’s doubtful we will see a similar drop in the cost of running fiber lines, which means the last mile problem is likely to linger.

It’s important to remember that the New Deal was not only an attempt to extend basic necessities, like electricity, to all Americans, it was also a massive job creator. As in the 1930s, our nation is facing a once-in-a-lifetime crisis, and as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, and seek to repair the economic damage the pandemic has caused, we are faced with a choice. We can embrace a “return to normal,” a normal in which some people had access to basic needs while some didn’t, or we can recognize that we have an opportunity to do better—and not just better internet access, but better access to clean water, a better and cleaner power grid – and that a massive infrastructure undertaking, like the New Deal, can be a similarly massive economic engine. It’ll take a lot to get it done, of course, but we’ve done it before.

Godsave writes freelance for Wisconsin Farmers Union’s Rural Voices project.



Farmers Union Members,

Now, with your Farmers Union membership, you will receive a 9% special group discount on your Hastings Mutual Farmowners policy premium!



We'll Be There.

I've come to understand that this attitude of Stoic endurance doesn't always serve us well. Of course, the chores must get down and the livestock fed. But if we don't pause sometimes to reach out and connect, we aren't able to take care of all that's important to us and be who we want to be.

We have all been impacted by the pandemic: economically, emotionally, socially. Reaching out for support is not a sign of weakness. Connecting with family and friends--and sometimes those beyond our usual circles, can be important for maintaining our strength.

If you have been experiencing stress – which may show up as disruptions to your digestion, difficulty falling or staying asleep, having trouble concentrating, feeling unusually irritable, overwhelmed or worried – assistance and support are available.

One option is to call a Project Recovery Wisconsin outreach worker who can provide free, anonymous information on managing stress, emotional support, and help you find resources. If you or someone you know needs someone to talk to, call Project Recovery at 833-FARM-HELP (833-327-6435) or visit www.projectrecoverywi.org.

Meat-ings seek solutions to meat processing struggles

Wisconsin Farmers Union's "Winter Meat-ing" series on the challenges and opportunities around meat processing continues through April. These free and virtual events are open to the public.

"Rising interest in local food, growth in direct marketed meats, a lack of labor force and training for butchers, and increasing vertical integration in meat processing are a few of the factors that have challenged meat processing capacity," notes WFU Membership & Education Organizer Kirsten Slaughter. "WFU recognizes that this is a multi-faceted issue, so we're striving to give farmers, processors, rural leaders, and other stakeholders a chance to come together in search of creative solutions with this series."

Recent WFU Meat-ings have covered farmer and processor perspectives, mobile and on-farm processing, and cooperative and policy solutions. Upcoming topics will include:

- March 11 - Labor Struggles & Solutions
- March 25 - Educational Opportunities & Workforce Development
- April 8 - Creative Marketing Approaches

Governor Tony Evers announced a three-pronged plan to bolster local meat processing infrastructure in Wisconsin. The measures include creating a meat processor grant program to incentivize innovation and expand capacity, as well as a Meat Talent Development Program to target workforce development. The budget also includes additional food inspector positions at DATCP to meet growing demand.

RSVP at www.wisconsinfarmersunion.com/events. Learn more at www.wisconsinfarmersunion.com/processing.



PROUD TO BE

Farmers Union Industries is majority owned by the state farmers union organizations of Minnesota, Wisconsin, North and South Dakota and Montana. Each of the board members and many respective members of their farmers unions farm as their primary business. Their many years of experience and passion for farming have attributed to not only the success of Farmers Union Industries but also to the ideals that govern our organization. The company has benefited from this knowledge and blossomed into what has become a diverse set of six unique divisions, each contributing to the overall well-being of the company and to the goal of providing value and a benefit to the family farmer. This diversity has only strengthened our investment in agriculture over the past 91 years, a testament of success by being family farmer owned.

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WINTER MEAT-INGS

Challenges & Opportunities for Wisconsin Meat Supply Chains & Family Farms

March 11	Labor Struggles and Solutions
March 25	Educational Opportunities & Workforce Development
April 8	Creative Marketing Approaches

Noon events | Virtual or Call-in | All are Welcome
RSVP: www.wisconsinfarmersunion.com/processing



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DON'T STOP AT BIG TECH — WE NEED TO BUST BIG AG, TOO

Editor's Note: This piece originally ran in Modern Farmer and has been re-printed with permission. Find more: modernfarmer.com

Rob Larew & Diane Moss

A WAVE OF CONSOLIDATION HAS GIVEN A FEW LARGE COMPANIES CONTROL OF PROPRIETARY, MULTI-LEVEL SYSTEMS OF TRAITS, SEEDS, AGROCHEMICALS AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY.

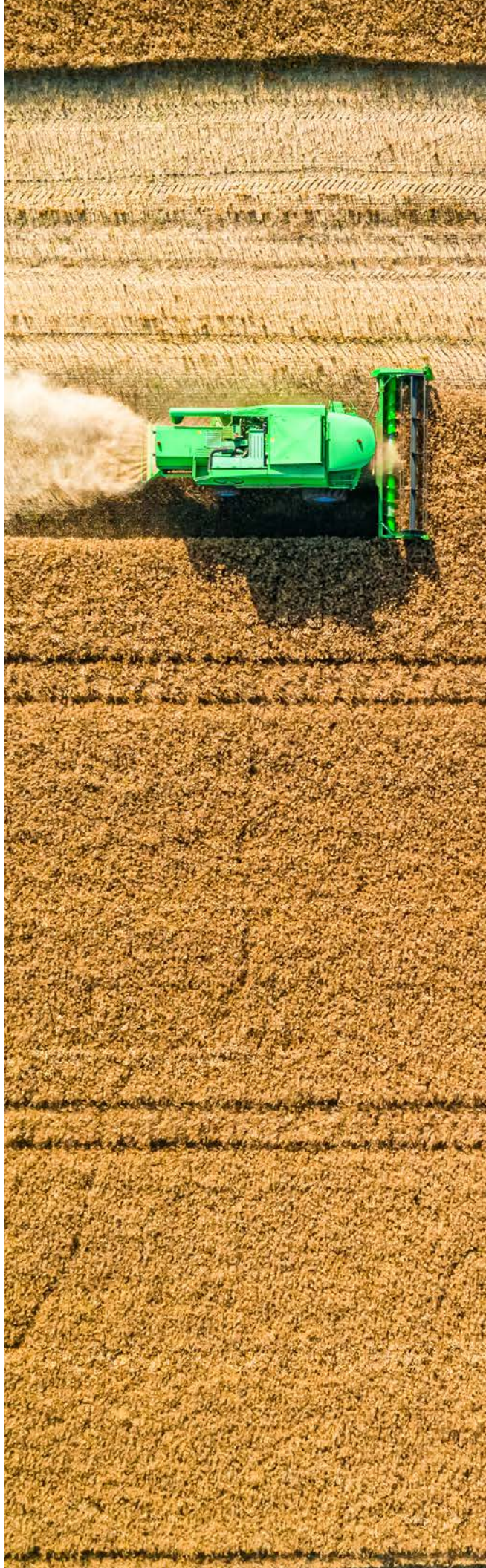
Amid Congressional investigation and federal, state and private antitrust cases, all eyes are on Big Tech. The step up in antitrust enforcement against the digital technology behemoths and their alleged abuses of market power is, by all accounts, good news. Successful cases could restore competition, which would benefit smaller businesses and American consumers alike. And after decades of under-enforcement of the antitrust laws in the United States, these cases could deliver some base hits—and even home runs—for a critical area of law enforcement.

But the outsized media, political and social attention paid to the tech industry has diverted focus from other important sectors. There are monopolies and domestic cartels elsewhere—in healthcare, pharmaceuticals, media and communications, as well as food and agriculture. These industries produce goods and services that are essential to the health, safety and well-being of consumers, and even to national security, which is why antitrust laws must be enforced against violations in these sectors, too.

The food system has been particularly fertile ground for rising concentration, the emergence of dominant firms and formation of domestic cartels. Some of the largest players have been allowed to engage in anticompetitive mergers and practices that are as serious, if not more so, than those of which Big Tech stands accused.

Much like their counterparts in the tech sector, many of the largest food and agriculture corporations have acquired their way to dominance by gobbling up rival businesses. This has occurred across the food system, including digital farming startups, biotechnology firms, food manufacturers, flour millers, farm machinery manufacturers and grocery store chains. But nowhere has it been more pronounced than agricultural inputs.

In acquiring competitors both small and large, the six biggest agricultural biotechnology firms collapsed rapidly into the Big Three—Bayer, DuPont and ChemChina. This wave of consolidation, which was met with little resistance from antitrust authori-





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ties, gave these corporations control of proprietary, multi-level systems of traits, seeds, agrochemicals and digital technology that limit farmers' choices and lock them into limited cropping systems.

But some parts of the agricultural sector are rife with other damaging antitrust violations that we haven't seen in Big Tech. This includes alleged conspiracies to fix prices and allocate markets—practices that are made possible by high levels of consolidation and concentration.

One of the most notable examples of this is in beef packing, where the top four firms now control about 85 percent of the national market. Given the market power that the packers possess, it comes as no surprise that they have allegedly abused it: On multiple occasions, these packers have been accused of colluding to pay ranchers less for cattle and charge consumers more for beef.

However, this behavior isn't unique to the beef-packing sector. Similar allegations of price fixing have been leveled against tuna, chicken, turkey, egg, pork and peanut producers, among others. These cartels are especially egregious because processors allegedly collude on both the sell and buy sides, hurting both farmers and consumers—including independent restaurants and grocery stores.

Beyond anticompetitive practices, rising concentration has implications for our national food security. Concentration-driven bottlenecks along the supply chain make the entire food system vulnerable to disruption, a fact that has become painfully obvious during the pandemic. Following a rash of COVID-19 outbreaks at meatpacking plants, national meat processing capacity declined by nearly half, resulting in supply chain breakdowns and price gouging that affected millions of Americans—many of whom were already experiencing food insecurity.

If disruption in the food supply system weren't enough, the communities that support our food system are also at risk. Foreign companies now own a non-trivial portion of the United States' farmland and food system. These entities not only resist food labeling and regulations that protect and inform consumers, they also take jobs and resources out of rural communities, accelerating social and economic decline and suppressing the growth of independent businesses that would contribute to revitalization.

Kudos to antitrust enforcers for finally taking aim at Big Tech. Monopolization cases—if they produce meaningful results—will improve the welfare of hundreds of millions of people that engage in online search, social networking and shopping. But we should not stop there. Americans depend on a safe, functional and resilient food system at least as much as they depend on their social media networks or ability to search the internet. Antitrust enforcers must turn their attention there next.

Rob Larew is president of National Farmers Union, which represents 200,000 family farmers and ranchers across the country.

Dr. Diana Moss is the president of the American Antitrust Institute, which is devoted to promoting competition that protects consumers, businesses and society.



What's On Your Table?

It's Maple Syrup Time



Diane Tiry

Administrative Assistant

My husband and I are looking forward to the upcoming maple syrup season and wondering how much sap and resulting syrup we might end up with, all depending upon the weather, of course. It is a lot of work, but a fulfilling and fun hobby that gives us a great sweetener to use in baking or tea and for pouring over our pancakes and French toast. I actually used maple syrup in my home canned tomato soup last fall instead of brown sugar.

This syrup season will be a bit sweeter even, as I'll be enjoying it in retirement. I will be retiring from Wisconsin Farmers Union in March after 13 years of enjoying meeting the many members who I feel are family. Perhaps this space may become a place where a different guest foodie can share their favorite recipe(s) with the WFU family. I have tons of craft projects, as well as lots of other bucket list items that I look forward to accomplishing. I will not be sitting still except to rock an upcoming grandchild due in September. I will be watching what WFU is up to and you all will be in my thoughts and prayers.

Read on for maple syrup recipes that I will be pursuing in the coming weeks.

MAPLE MUSTARD-GLAZED HAM

www.myrecipes.com

For a classic flavor profile, you can't miss with this sweet glazed ham. The combination of Dijon mustard and real maple syrup beats anything you'll get from a flavor packet.

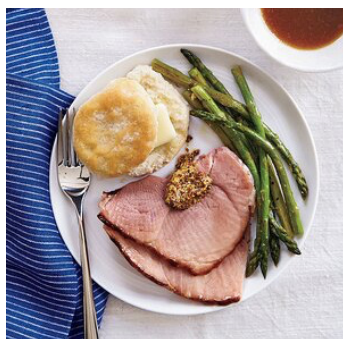
Ingredients

- 3/4 cup packed brown sugar
- 1/3 cup Dijon mustard
- 1 7- to 8-lb. boneless ham
- 1/2 cup pure maple syrup
- Whole-grain mustard, optional

Directions

1. In a large slow cooker, stir together brown sugar and mustard until sugar dissolves. Place ham in slow cooker and rub mustard mixture all over. Pour maple syrup over ham. Cover and cook on low until heated through, 4 to 5 hours.

2. Remove ham and let rest, loosely covered, 10 minutes. Pour sauce into a serving bowl to serve as a side to the sliced ham. Top with a dollop of whole-grain mustard, if desired.



Maple Magic by Joanna Zubell – 1980

In the first warm spring days usually the last weeks in March, the sugar maker turns his thoughts and steps toward his maple grove. He firstly gets out his boiling equipment, tanks, spouts and buckets and thoroughly cleans and scalds them as the first step to make a delicately flavored product of high quality. He next makes a road or path to every tree when the snow is still quite deep, and taps the tree with an auger (or in larger maple orchards, a power tapper), places a spout in the opening, hangs on a bucket, puts on a cover, and if the weather is fairly warm the tree will begin to flow, drop by drop.'

SWEET POTATO CASSEROLE

www.myrecipes.com and Jiselle Basile

This classic casserole often straddles the line between side and dessert (indeed, you can enjoy the leftovers both ways). Dial down the sugar to steer the dish back to savory, and add a crunchy oat and nut topper. A drizzle of maple syrup before serving gives a lovely sheen.

Ingredients

- 3 lbs sweet potatoes, peeled and chopped (about 8 cups)
- 1/2 cup 2 percent reduced-fat milk
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted and divided
- 1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 3/4 teaspoon kosher salt, divided
- 1 large egg, beaten
- 1 cup old-fashioned rolled oats
- 2/3 cup pecans, chopped
- 3 tablespoons almond meal
- 3 tablespoons maple syrup, divided
- 1 tablespoon canola oil

Directions

1. Preheat oven to 375°F.
2. Place potatoes in a large saucepan; cover with water. Bring to a boil; reduce heat, simmer 6 minutes or until tender, drain, and return to saucepan. Add milk, 1 tbsp. butter, and vanilla; mash to desired consistency. Stir in 1/2 tsp. salt and egg. Spread potato mixture in the bottom of an 11x7-inch glass or ceramic baking dish coated with cooking spray.

3. Combine remaining 1/4 teaspoon salt, oats, pecans, almond meal, and 2 tbsp. syrup in a bowl. Add remaining 1 tbsp. butter and canola oil; toss to coat. Sprinkle oat mixture over potatoes. Bake at 375°F 18 minutes or until surface is golden. Remove from oven; drizzle with 1 tbsp. maple syrup.



Tiry announces March retirement

Long-time Administrative Assistant Diane Tiry has been the voice who answers the phone and the first face visitors see at the Wisconsin Farmers Union state office in Chippewa Falls. Before she sets sail into retirement, we checked in on some of her favorite moments through the years.

Share some your backstory with WFU. I began working for the Farmers Union in 2008. My very first convention was in downtown Eau Claire. My husband and his family were very involved in Farmers Union, and he had earned his torchbearer award and attended All-States camp in Bailey, Colorado. Joe and I were busy taking over the farm and starting a family and had attended a few local meetings. Once our kids were old enough, they attended Farmers Union camp.

What was it about Farmers Union that drew you in?

I was at a point in my life where I had been organizing 4-H events and wanted to do more in the dairy/agricultural field. Farmers Union fit in perfectly with my farming experiences and background.

What are some of the changes you've seen in the organization over time?

WFU had been led by a president directing all events and activities and then hired executive directors to do more of the day-to-day operations. Staff have taken on more project-led events and activities. I have seen an awakening of sorts in that there are more younger leaders throughout the state taking on more leadership opportunities and organizing around important agricultural issues.



Do you have any favorite memories from your time with WFU?

I was not very good at understanding when a fellow staffer or member was using sarcasm in their conversation. It was a foreign language to me, but they have taught me well over the past couple of years. One of my favorite memories was when I pulled a joke on Wally Lueder, then District 8 Director, at a board meeting lunch in Wisconsin Rapids. He was joking with me earlier in the day about chickens. At lunch time, I asked the waitress to put a wooden chicken between two pieces of bread for his chicken sandwich. He turned beet red when he received the sandwich and we all had some laughs as he was trying to guess who did that to him. He was the sweetest and kindest director, sort of like a big-hearted Grandpa.

What lessons from your time at WFU will you take with you into retirement?

I am so thankful for all of the computer and life skills I have developed through the years stepping into new technology. I am less fearful of learning new skills. Also, I think I'll carry with me the lesson of communication by listening to people and learn how I can help them. I always want to be able to step forward and get my hands dirty by helping out wherever I am needed.

Photo by Danielle Endvick

Left: Tiry outside of the WFU State Office building in Chippewa Falls.

You have done so much behind-the-scenes work for Farmers Union, especially when it comes to convention. What fuels your passion for the work? I remember a statement by Sue Noble of the Vernon County Economic Development Association, "Failure is not an option," which has stuck with me through the years.

What are you most looking forward to in retirement?

I am looking forward to putting myself into completing the many projects on my bucket list. I also have a new grandbaby due in September and another son hopefully getting married in the coming year. Then there are more horse trail rides to accomplish and sites to see.

What hopes or advice do you have for WFU and its members?

WFU's mission statement of being a member-driven organization committed to enhancing the quality of life for family farmers, rural communities and all people through educational opportunities, cooperative endeavors and civic engagement, has been around for a long time. It is the heart and soul of the Farmers Union triangle of legislation, cooperation and education. My hope is that every member can work together to find that common thread to creating an organization that lives, works and breathes for all farm families, agriculture, and our rural communities. WFU will always be close to my heart!





The Chippewa Herald, 1931:

Flambeau-Birch Creek Farmers Union Takes Drastic Forward Step

From the Flambeau-Birch Creek Local of the Farmers' Union comes a report of a rousing meeting held last Thursday at which the members pledged themselves to use their determination to make a success of the union, and accomplish what the members declare will be long needed reforms. This members declare, can only be done through co-operative buying and selling. Along with those major objectives are a host of smaller ways of putting the union to work for them, embodied in the following resolutions:

- "1. Our livestock shall be hauled, if by truck, by only union men.
- "2. We will sell our livestock only through union hands.
- "3. Any one wishing to join the union may do so, upon the consent of the investigation committee, by paying \$1.50 and \$1.00 per month until paid up.

"4. Unanimously decided to support only union members for school or town office and only union minded men for county office.

"5. Decided to have a big all day meeting; a union rally supreme. The date and details will be announced as soon as they are definitely arranged.

"Besides the above named resolutions there was an interesting discussion on our milk marketing problem. This problem is being thought over by every intelligent dairyman in the state and out of the combined efforts of our locals we are eventually going to put the solution of this problem into effect.

"Our next meeting will be an open meeting on Feb. 12. A fine program will be given. Lunch will be served and a hearty invitation given to all you farmer folks who are not all ready a member to join our union and help us carry on the fight for getting control of the things that will bring us farmers into our own."

"Let's hear from some more locals."



Submitted by National Farmers Union Honorary Historian Tom Giessel

This cartoon from 1945, which depicts a farmer receiving two cents from a ten cent loaf of bread. That yields a Farmers Share of 20 percent in May 1945, compared to 0.0326 percent today, with the National Farmers Union January 2021 Farmers Share reporting the farmer gets thirteen cents from a \$3.99 loaf of bread. If a farmer today enjoyed the same ratio of the consumer dollar paid for bread as in 1945, she/he would be compensated 80 cents from every loaf. The image, which ran in the *Farmers Union Herald*, is a perfect illustration of true corporate "efficiency." This illustrates how the retailer has become more efficient at "skinning" both the consumer and the farmer.

NOW.

If you have hard work to do,
Do it now.

To day the skies are clear and blue,
Tomorrow clouds may come in view,
Do it now.

If you have a song to sing,
Sing it now.
Let the notes of gladness ring
Clear as song of bird in spring,
Let every day some music bring;
Sing it now.

If you have kind words to say,
Say them now.
Tomorrow may not come your way,
Do a kindness while you may,
Loved ones will not always stay;
Say them now.

If you have a smile to show,
Show it now.
Make hearts happy, roses grow,
Let the friends around you know
The love you have before they go;
Show it now.

Author
Unknown

Shared by
NFU Honorary
Historian Tom
Giessel

The Farmers
Advocate
August 23,
1906



DATCP launches farm support groups

In a continued effort to help Wisconsin farmers access mental health resources, the Wisconsin Farm Center at the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) is launching a series of virtual farmer support groups.

The support groups began in February. "These groups are designed to bring farmers and farm couples together so they can share ideas, provide encouragement, and support each other through challenging times," said Jayne Krull, director of DATCP's Ag Resource and Promotion Bureau, which houses the Farm Center.

Support groups will be offered at different dates and times to accommodate farmers' schedules:

- 8pm, fourth Monday of every month
- 1pm, first Tuesday of every month
- 8pm third Thursday of every month (farm couples)

The support groups are open to farmers and their spouses at no cost. Participants can be located anywhere in Wisconsin and must register in advance. Each session will be 60-90 minutes long and will be held on Zoom. Sessions will be limited to 20 attendees per session, with a couple counting as one attendee.

Sessions will be led and moderated by peer leaders that are farmers who have experienced stress and anxiety while operating their farm. A licensed mental health provider with extensive experience in serving farmers will also be on-hand at each session to offer additional support as needed.

To register for a session or for more information, visit <https://FarmCenter.wi.gov>.

Extension offers free Farm Produce Safety Plan workshops in March

Extension has a few Farm Produce Safety Plan Workshops scheduled in March 2021. These will be online live via Zoom and are free to Wisconsin Fresh Produce Growers.

This is for growers who already participated in the Produce Safety Alliance Grower Training.

If you are interested in developing a plan for your operation, you can start by reviewing the templates we provide at the training, and start on your own. During the workshop we focus on writing a produce safety plan for your farm. This plan will help you to create standard operating procedures (SOP's) and record keeping strategies that will help you to fulfill the reporting requirements of the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) Produce Safety Rule. This training is not the training required by the FSMA Produce Safety Rule and will not result in certification. This program is conducted via Zoom. You'll need access to either MS

Word or Google Docs. This program is free, but registration is required.

March 3, 2021, from 10am to 12 pm

March 4, 2021, from 5 am to 7 pm

March 16, 2021, from 10am to 12 pm

Register at <https://fsmaproducesafety.wisc.edu/on-farm-food-safety-plan-workshop/>

Butchery program scholarships offered

Wisconsin Farmers Union is offering \$1,000 scholarships for students pursuing a one-year technical diploma in the Artisanal Modern Meat Butchery Program at Madison Area Technical College in Madison. For details, view the scholarship application at www.wisconsinfarmersunion.com or email info@wisconsinfarmersunion.com.

Farm, biofuel leaders embrace EPA's new position on small refinery waivers

On Feb. 22, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced that it is supporting the Tenth Circuit Court's January 2020 decision in Renewable Fuels Association et al. v. EPA. After careful review of the decision, EPA's new leadership agrees with both the court and the biofuel litigants that small refinery exemptions were meant to be temporary and that only pre-existing exemptions may be "extended" by the agency.

EPA notes it "agrees with the court that the exemption was intended to operate as a temporary measure and, consistent with that Congressional purpose, the plain meaning of the word 'extension' refers to continuing the status of an exemption that is already in existence."

The four petitioners in the case—the Renewable Fuels Association, National Corn Growers Association, American Coalition for Ethanol and National Farmers Union—released the following statement:

"Our nation's biofuel producers and farmers appreciate EPA's careful review of the Tenth Circuit Court's decision, and we are pleased the agency's new leadership is reversing the previous administration's flawed position on small refinery exemptions. This announcement marks a major step forward by the Biden administration to restore the integrity of the Renewable Fuel Standard and honor the intent of Congress. We wholeheartedly agree with EPA's conclusion that the small refinery exemption was intended to be a temporary measure and we are pleased to see the agency confirming that only previously existing exemptions may be extended."

Last month, the U.S. Supreme Court granted a request from two refiners to review the Tenth Circuit case, even though EPA did not ask the high court to examine the ruling. Arguments before the Supreme Court are expected in the spring.



CHAPTER CHATTER

PEPIN-PIERCE – The Pepin-Pierce Farmers Union and Ellsworth Public Library co-hosted Inga Witscher from Around the Farm Table for a Midwinter Smorgasbord program on Feb. 13. Among the recipes presented to the group were Aquavit cocktails and Swedish Rye bread for open-faced sandwiches. You can view the program at <https://youtu.be/pvSWH-hVu538> and catch Inga's show at www.aroundthefarmtable.com.

POLK-BURNETT – The Polk-Burnett Farmers Union hosted its first virtual chapter meeting on February 15, with 18 participants joining the networking. WFU encourages chapters to stay connected virtually until we can gather safely again!



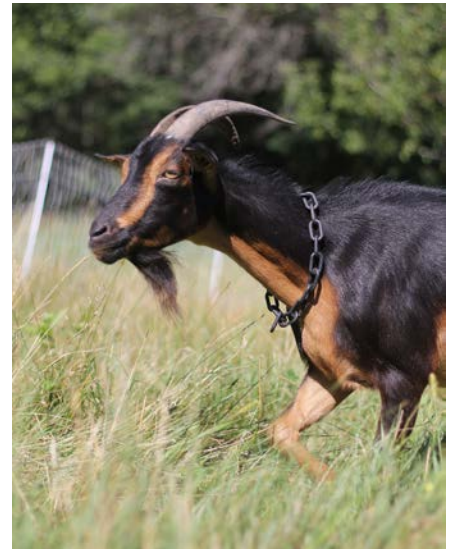
COVER PHOTO CONTEST HONORABLE MENTIONS



Grandkids at milking
Mike Miles & Barb Kass
Polk-Burnett Farmers Union



Snow on the blossom
Ginna Young
Chippewa County



San Clemente goat at EB Ranch
Berglane Photography/Brittany Olson
Submitted by Erin Link, Dunn County
Farmers Union

Submit your Chapter Chatter or WFU cover photo contest entries to Danielle at dendvick@wisconsinfarmersunion.com.
The winning cover photo earns a Farmers Union hat and bragging rights! Vertical, high-resolution photos preferred.

FARMERS UNION HAPPENINGS

All WFU events are being held online due to the pandemic, until further notice.

RSVP for these events and more:
[wisconsinfarmersunion.com/events](https://www.wisconsinfarmersunion.com/events)

Local Initiatives Grant Deadline
February 15
[wisconsinfarmersunion.com/chapters](https://www.wisconsinfarmersunion.com/chapters)

Spring Into Conservation!
Northwest - Wisconsin
Women in Conservation
March 2, 10am-2pm &
April 6, 10am-12pm

Spring Into Conservation!
West Central - Wisconsin
Women in Conservation
March 2, 3-5pm & April 6, 3-5pm

Spring Into Conservation!
Northeast - Wisconsin
Women In Conservation
March 3, 12-1:30pm &
April 7, 12-1:30pm

Spring Into Conservation!
Southeast - Wisconsin
Women In Conservation
March 3, 6-7:30pm &
April 7, 6-7:30pm

WFU Budget Organizing Workshop
Tuesday, March 9, 2-4pm

**WFU Meat-ing:
Labor Struggles & Solutions**
March 11, 12-1pm

WFU Budget Organizing Workshop
Friday, March 19, 11am-1pm

**WFU Meat-ing:
Educational Opportunities &
Workforce Development**
March 25, 12-1pm

WFU Budget Organizing Workshop
Monday, March 29, 6-8pm

**WFU Meat-ing:
Creative Marketing Solutions**
April 8, 12-1pm

MEMBERSHIP

Tap into online educational offerings



Kirsten Slaughter
Membership & Education Organizer

Even though we are not able to go to winter conference and events together, there are still a lot of places that you can find free online events to connect with speakers and participants. Here is a list of a few websites that I have found great educational offerings and resources.

Wisconsin Farmers Union Events

We are always adding to our line-up! [wisconsinfarmersunion.com/events](https://www.wisconsinfarmersunion.com/events)

UW Extension

You can filter by topic to make it easier to find what you are interested in - <https://extension.wisc.edu/events/>

U of M Extension

<https://extension.umn.edu/courses-and-events>

Penn State Extension

<https://extension.psu.edu/shopby/webinars>

Field to Fork Weekly Webinars from NDSU Extension

www.ag.ndsu.edu/fieldtofork

Cultivate Safety: Work Guideline Booklets

cultivatesafety.org/work-guideline-booklets/

DATCP Farm Center for Online Farmer and Farm Couple Support Groups

https://datcp.wi.gov/Pages/Growing_WI/FarmCenterOverview.aspx

The Farmer's Share

<https://nfu.org/farmers-share/>

Linking New & Underserved Farmers with Conservation Resources

renewingthecountryside.org/conservation_connections

Grants available for WFU chapter activities

Grants are available to Wisconsin Farmers Union county/local chapters through the Local Initiative Grant Program, which seeks to increase local WFU outreach and visibility, provide education on farm and rural issues, expand participation, and create collaborative opportunities with other organizations.

Grant applications are reviewed quarterly with deadlines of February 15, May 15, August 15, and November 15.

Learn more about the Local Initiative Grant Program at www.wisconsinfarmersunion.com/chapters or by calling 715-723-5561.





State Office: 117 W. Spring St.
Chippewa Falls, WI 54729

Legislative Office: 108 S. Webster St., Ste. 201
Madison, WI 53703

(715) 723-5561

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WFU NEWS COVER PHOTO CONTEST

SUBMIT YOUR BEST RURAL LIFE PHOTOS!



The winning photo earns a Farmers Union hat! High-resolution vertical photos preferred. Send your photo entries and a brief description to Danielle at dendvick@wisconsinfarmersunion.com