



FUTURE OF FARMING AND
RURAL LIFE IN WISCONSIN
wisconsin academy of sciences, arts and letters

Project Recommendations

INTRODUCTION

The accompanying recommendations are the fruits of two years of labor on Future of Farming and Rural Life in Wisconsin Project, a Wisconsin Idea Public Policy Program of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters.

They are the product of numerous citizen engagement opportunities, beginning with a conference at Wingspread in Racine in November 2005 and continuing through six regional forums throughout the state in 2006. The forums and related citizen engagement opportunities resulted in input from hundreds of citizens. They identified opportunities and constraints to healthy and sustainable farming and rural life in Wisconsin.

Based on summaries of this input and their own knowledge, experts/stakeholders in four general topic areas were then invited to develop visions and recommendations during a series of meetings held at the Wisconsin Academy in Madison in late 2006 and 2007. The topic areas are Community, Food Systems, Land Use/Conservation and Production Agriculture/Forestry.

The recommendations were compiled and shared with participants for feedback. Recommendations were vetted in follow-up meetings of committees and project leadership.

Finally, a 23-member project coordinating committee reviewed recommendations and made final comments and changes.

The results of this work are offered for your consideration.

A final set of recommendations will be released as part of the project's final report in summer 2007, following further review at the statewide Future of Farming and Rural Life conference May 14-15 and by the project coordinating committee.



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COMMUNITY LIFE RECOMMENDATIONS

There are no limits to the range of issues that affect the viability of our rural communities, as we learned in forums and discussion groups throughout the course of the study. Just as healthy cities need healthy countrysides, so, too, healthy countrysides need strong, viable communities. The definition of the word “community” itself can be elusive and changeable, according to circumstance and subject matter. Indeed, a community can be a collection of people within a geopolitical boundary, but it can also be a group of people with common interests, whether economic, social or cultural. The following set of recommendations recognizes these variations, sometimes subtle, sometimes stark.

Among the hundreds of topics that emerged from discussions throughout the course of the study, a few stand out as crucial to the future of rural communities. These include health care, rural education, infrastructure, recognizing and reacting to economic forces, the need for efficient government and the benefits of rich arts and cultural opportunities in rural areas.

HEALTH CARE

Gaps in health care for rural populations are well documented. A recent Farm Bureau survey showed that almost one-third of farmers in Wisconsin have no insurance or have only catastrophic coverage, with 14 percent of farmers having no insurance, and 17 percent having only catastrophic coverage. This is consistent with a 2002 University of Wisconsin-Madison Program on Agricultural Technology Studies (PATS) study of dairy producers that showed 20 percent did not have insurance coverage. Of those who indicated they had health insurance in the Farm Bureau survey, 64 percent said they privately purchased their own insurance, with 36 percent obtaining coverage from their own or a spouse’s off-farm employment.

Beyond agriculture, rural populations in general struggle to acquire affordable health care. Rural residents often travel long distances to access providers and they are statistically less healthy than urban residents.

Concerns about health care were voiced at each of six regional forums held as part of this study. Forum participants also viewed health care as part of a larger set of concerns affecting economic viability of Wisconsin farms. While most often seen as a constraint, health care concerns were also seen as an opportunity to bind rural and urban residents, since health care coverage is a concern to people in both settings.

The study's health care recommendations follow:

- Pursue an overall goal to improve the health of Wisconsin agricultural communities by providing all citizens access to affordable, high-quality health care, and enhancing the delivery of preventive health care to all sectors of the population. Determining a basic level of care to which citizens are entitled will facilitate achievement of this goal.
- Convene a summit of stakeholders to address issues of access to affordable health care. Stakeholder groups should include but not be limited to health care organizations, insurers, agriculture organizations, farmers, business, government agencies (both local and state) and citizens. The summit objective should be to quantify the economic and social costs that can be attributed to the lack of affordable health care and access to health care services, and escalating medical costs. Further, the focus should be to develop recommendations for specific goals and objectives with funding sources identified for a statewide plan to address health care access and preventive health measures. Strategies should also be developed to activate citizens to open dialogues with policymakers about the importance of rural health care to agriculture and rural communities.
- Identify models and develop strategies to provide preventive health and occupational health services to agricultural populations. The Farmers' Health Cooperative of Wisconsin, created in 2007 by the Wisconsin Federation of Cooperatives, seeks to provide health insurance for farmers. The program should be monitored to determine if it serves as an effective delivery system, and, if so, policy-makers should assure that resources are directed to the program as part of the state's effort to assure health care coverage for as many citizen as possible.
- Policymakers and other government leaders should recognize that as health care needs of rural populations are addressed, health care access encompasses mental health, oral health, preventive health services and care of chronic medical conditions.
- Develop a population-based approach that focuses upon achieving statewide goals through regional and local collaboration to address the disparities in health care access. Successful models should be explored and enacted to meet health care access goals. These include but are not limited to the Shawano County Rural Health Initiative, the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health rural initiatives, federally qualified health centers, federally funded dental

clinics, and Meritor Hospital and Marshfield Clinic rural health initiatives. Pilot programs should be developed or enhanced to improve community health.

- In lieu of a comprehensive statewide plan for coverage, BadgerCare and other programs should be expanded in the interim to provide coverage to help address the health care needs of citizens who do not now have access due to age, family status or current methods of determining financial assistance. Particular attention should be focused on provisions to help farmers qualify.
- Improve health literacy to help Wisconsin citizens become informed health care consumers. Current school health curriculum requirements should be assessed, and increased focus should be provided to students at early ages. This includes the need for physical education programs at all levels to help combat the alarming rate of childhood obesity, a condition that can lead to severe and chronic health issues in adulthood.
- Develop an interdisciplinary approach to preventive health such as the AgriSafe occupational health screening/education program to serve farmers and the agricultural work force (www.agrisafe.org/). Particular emphasis should be focused on prevention of injuries and on drug- and alcohol-abuse prevention.

EDUCATION

The challenges of rural education in Wisconsin are many. At the K-12 level, enrollment declines lead to reduced state aids, while transportation, energy and other fixed costs escalate. While rural schools do many things well and remain the centerpieces of community life in rural communities, these and other challenges threaten their continued viability. Wisconsin ranks below the national average in college graduates per capita, a situation that is even more evident in rural counties. School-age populations are expected to continue to decline in the vast majority of rural counties across the state. As these trends continue, rural K-12 students may find it increasingly difficult to compete for entry into higher education or qualify for desirable employment, and the mandate of providing equitable educational opportunities for all students is being severely threatened.

Support for training in rural careers is also frequently lacking, both in K-12 and other educational systems. Agricultural business programs are also lacking in institutions of higher education.

In the area of career education, the changing nature of the agricultural workforce requires new skill sets for managers and owners.

With these factors in mind, the study recommends the following:

- Review the current school financing formulas, and if found necessary make changes that provide equitable opportunity for all Wisconsin students. The Wisconsin Legislature should undertake this action. Consideration must be given

to reduced efficiencies associated with declining critical mass such as transportation, debt service, program development and students with special needs. The school aid formula must also address educational issues related to rural poverty. Examples of needs would include access to technology, adequate meals, and multi-lingual and multi-cultural training.

- Review the role of Cooperative Educational Service Agencies. Consideration should be given to aligning CESAs with the Wisconsin Technical Colleges both in service areas and programming. Restructuring the mission and financing of the regional CESAs would afford them the potential to better serve the needs of rural school districts.
- Provide incentives that will cause school districts to combine resources for the purpose of spreading costs. Areas of early consideration might include: general administration, business and finance, information technology, curriculum development and specialized instruction. To be effective, combined programming must be structured in a manner that insures permanency.

There are governance issues in the Wisconsin educational system. Wisconsin is one of only a few states that elect the chief state school officer. The Wisconsin District Technical College Board members are appointed and serve without confirmation by an elected body. In many K-12 districts, the turnover rate of the chief administrator is very high.

The study recommends these steps:

- Consideration should be given to the establishment of a state school board similar in structure to the University of Wisconsin Board of Regents and the Wisconsin Technical College System Board. A state school board would advocate for the needs of local school districts throughout the state and help develop statewide policies and standards for educational programs and services provided by local school districts. Local control of operations would remain the authority of local school boards. Appointments to the board should coincide with CESAs districts, thereby assuring that the board includes rural representation.
- District technical college board members should be either elected or appointed and confirmed by elected officials.

To better address rural education needs, the study recommends the following:

- Develop a seamless educational system, including K-12, technical colleges and universities, that encourages and supports training for those interested in agriculture and rural development. Ease of credit transfer and sharing of services and technology are examples of cooperative approaches that should be enacted.

- Require the Department of Public Instruction to maintain staff support for rural programming.
- Support budgetary programs of UW-Extension and the K-12 systems that will expose more youths to the economic and social opportunities associated with farming and rural life.
- As a means of continuously identifying needs and advocating for agricultural educational programming at all levels, a Wisconsin Agricultural Education and Workforce Development Council should be established.
- Efforts to recruit and train nontraditional workers to address the decline in the potential pool of farm and forest workers should be enhanced. These efforts are imperative to assuring the economic and social vitality of rural communities. The Wisconsin Technical College System must be the lead organization in providing a broad spectrum of programming – from training entry farm, forest and food processing workers to assisting beginning farmers and entrepreneurs, to providing established farmer investors with continuing education. To meet these needs, the WTCS must establish across district lines greater cooperation and collaboration in curriculum development and program delivery.
- Expand current programs in the University of Wisconsin System and Wisconsin Technical College System that provide farm financial planning assistance to address the needs of the diverse range of commodity sectors in the state.
- Increase agricultural-related business programming in the University of Wisconsin System business schools and develop programs to serve Wisconsin’s agricultural and forestry sectors.
- Provide production agriculture managers in Wisconsin training in new skill sets to address the changing business structure in agriculture. Specifically, there is a growing need for human resource management training. Programs teaching such skills are lacking in agriculture schools at present and would be valuable additions. Similarly, operators and managers need expertise in financial and risk management. More emphasis is needed on programs that focus on professional growth and development of the people who work in agriculture and on providing accessible and affordable learning opportunities across the career span.

Resources directed toward basic and applied research conducted by unbiased third-party scientists is nearly always a wise investment. For many years, federal granting authorities and the state of Wisconsin have allowed the erosion of funding for applied research – the vehicle for making basic discovery applicable to Wisconsin’s natural, economic and social resources. The study recommends:

- Provide greater financial support for applied research and outreach at the University of Wisconsin College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, University

Extension and other public and private institutions in the state, particularly in the areas of natural resource management, renewable energy, production diversification, farm transitioning, and the social implications of applying new technologies. The University of Wisconsin is a national leader in winning competitive grants for basic research in the life sciences. Support for the programs of these recognized scientists must be continued and enhanced. A strong agricultural and forest-based economy that fosters innovation depends on maintaining these capacities.

GOVERNMENT

Wisconsin has a strong history of local governments. Strains on local budgets require new strategies to provide residents with needed services. In addition, various regions in Wisconsin possess distinctive economic strengths and potential that – if better understood and developed – can provide economic development, job opportunities and other desirable results for residents and communities within these regions. Cooperation beyond geopolitical boundaries will be necessary to achieve these results.

The study recommends the following:

- Towns, villages, cities and counties must cooperate to deliver services they provide in the most efficient and effective manner. Local fire protection provided in many rural areas by volunteers is an example of cooperation. However, as citizens expect higher levels of services such as emergency medical services and paramedics, local governments need to recognize the benefits of working cooperatively to meet the needs of “community” beyond political boundaries.
- State and local governments should undertake a review focusing on what level of government is best suited to provide certain services. For example, human services, including general relief, was moved to the county level in the 1980s. County jails and even some regional jails have replaced municipal lockups. The review should focus on what other services should be provided at the county level to be the most effective and efficient yet provide the needed level of services. Law enforcement is one example.
- Provide state financial incentives to support regional economic strategies. Regions in Wisconsin possess distinctive economic strengths and potential that if better understood and developed can provide economic development, job opportunities and other desirable results for residents and communities within these regions. Enhanced regional approaches with support from the state may help to address concerns at the local level that “Madison doesn’t care about us.”

- Meet rural infrastructure needs to assure that rural businesses have the necessary tools to meet 21st century challenges. The governor should create an interagency panel to develop a public-private plan for a coordinated infrastructure system addressing needs in transportation, energy and telecommunications services. For example, rural high-speed internet service and other telecommunications services necessary for innovation are lacking in some rural areas in the state.

RURAL COMMUNITIES, REGIONS AND RESIDENTS

Rural communities and regions in Wisconsin enjoy many positive characteristics that add up to high quality of life. At this same time, rural areas are challenged by such factors as aging populations, changing land values that affect taxes, declining opportunities for young people and entrepreneurs, and infrastructure gaps. Healthy countrysides rely on healthy communities, and vice versa.

With this in mind, the study offers the following recommendations:

- Seek and replicate models that provide access to public transportation in and amongst rural communities, where residents often drive long distances to meet daily needs. Communities are encouraged to access new funding for start-ups, expansion or planning of transportation systems through programs such as the federal Supplemental Transportation Rural Assistance Program administered by the state Department of Transportation. Embracing means of transportation that consume less land, energy and infrastructure resources is encouraged.
- Close gaps in high-speed internet and other telecommunications services in rural Wisconsin with an eye to the needs of today and the future, and develop strategies to deliver telecommunications services to rural areas across the state. The Rural Electrification Cooperative system is a possible model. Gaps in these services exist in rural areas and are impediments to economic development, innovation, entrepreneurial behavior and educational services.
- Undertake strategies to enhance distance learning and related technologies. On a regional level, technical college campuses have the capabilities to serve as major information centers for distance learning and related technology. The study recommends enhancing capabilities, establishing programs that raise public awareness about the potential of these systems and encouraging cooperation among local, regional, state and national entities to embrace this potential and make it available to citizens.
- Connect 21st century jobs and economic development strategies to rural communities, with the intent of providing opportunities for rural citizens to earn living wages. To achieve this, Wisconsin should enhance collaborative opportunities among community action agencies, workforce development boards,

local and regional economic development entities, units of government and other partners. As these strategies produce successful models of rural community development activity, these successes should be communicated to policy-makers and citizens so they can be replicated in other communities and regions.

- Identify and replicate models that successfully promote arts and cultural activities and their connection to rural quality of life. These activities play an important role in assuring the vibrance of rural communities and regions. Examples include the “What We Need Is Here” sustainability effort initiated by arts and community organizations in the St. Croix Valley in western Wisconsin, the Northern Lakes Center for the Arts in Amery and the Spring Green Arts Coalition. Arts and cultural awareness begins at an early age, and rural youths must be provided with opportunities to participate and experience these amenities. Communities and school districts in rural Wisconsin should place emphasis on programs that provide these opportunities for youths, and philanthropists are encouraged to generously support these programs.
- Rural communities should embrace sustainability principles. Several communities in Wisconsin have adopted sustainability principles that address many aspects of community life, including healthy lifestyles, food, recycling, composting, energy and transportation, construction and development. The communities of Ashland, Bayfield and Washburn in northern Wisconsin are among the first to take these steps. Other communities are encouraged to take similar steps, and policy-makers at the state level should consider programs that reward sustainability activities in Wisconsin communities and regions.
- Collaborations that educate rural residents about the benefits of ethnic diversity and celebrate diversity should be encouraged. Work force needs and other trends are leading to increased ethnic diversity in rural communities, creating both challenges and opportunities. Direct-learning activities, festivals and media campaigns can help raise awareness, and collaborations of communities, businesses, educational institutions and the state are encouraged.



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FOOD SYSTEMS RECOMMENDATIONS

As it relates to this study, the term “food systems” refers to that portion of the agricultural industry that processes, prepares, packages, markets, distributes and otherwise moves agricultural commodities from producer to consumer. It is cheese plants, cooperatives, vegetable processing facilities, meat packers, food distributors and similar businesses. But as with other sectors of Wisconsin agriculture, food systems is a diverse category that also includes direct-marketing on farms, farmers’ markets, community-supported agriculture ventures and an array of other means of moving food from farms to folks.

As they did with production agriculture, participants in Future of Farming forums identified this diversity as a major strength. Whether processors were preparing commodity cheese for national markets or value-added products for local and regional consumption, they were seen as being important to the overall health of Wisconsin agriculture.

Food preferences are driven by many social, cultural and economic forces, and these all affect the people and businesses that provide the products. There are people alive today who remember living in a world without pizza. Today, mozzarella cheese tops the list of cheeses produced in Wisconsin, and pizza is as common as apple pie.

In this business climate, innovators enjoy both opportunities and challenges, given the often rapid change in consumer preferences.

Issues in today’s food system world also involve terms like “food security” and “community food security.” The term “food security” refers to the nation’s ability to produce enough food within its borders and protect the safety of its food supply from intentional human sabotage or natural destructive agents. It also refers to the producer’s ability to produce without having to take economically or logistically unreasonable measures against sabotage. It also addresses the processing, transporting, distributing and marketing infrastructure that protects the safety and quality of food we produce and eat.

“Community food security” is sometimes defined as meaning reliable access to affordable, nutritious, safe food. Sometimes “culturally appropriate” is added to that definition of food.

STRENGTHENING FOOD SYSTEMS

Throughout the course of the study, it was determined that a broader understanding of food production, food systems and food preparation is needed to strengthen connections among those who produce and process food and those who consume it.

The study recommends the following:

- Develop effective strategies to encourage “Wisconsin Grown” branding, including consumer education and food system sector cooperation. For example, Wisconsin should capitalize on its cheese-making tradition to be leader in the artisan cheese movement. Support must be provided for marketing programs that define Wisconsin products as safe, traceable and of high quality, achieved through both self-monitoring and government oversight.
- Increase flexibility and responsiveness to the needs of food systems and consumers on the part of public institutions. For example, state and local government purchasing of Wisconsin and locally grown foods should be a priority, even in cases when cost is a possible deterrent.
- Develop inter-sector business collaborations to guarantee a reliable supply of locally grown products of consistent quality, not just for direct markets, but also retail, restaurants and institutional markets.
- Increase Wisconsin citizens’ understanding of the opportunities that food processing offers to make agriculture economically relevant to urban and rural communities.
- Develop a more organized approach to consumer education on food and food systems. A public/private collaborative effort should be undertaken to enact a public education campaign to provoke inquiry about the nature of food production and processing. State institutions can facilitate efforts through forums and other activities that bring groups together and provide face-to-face learning opportunities.
- Place emphasis on quality, service and the ethics of sustainable agriculture, in order for Wisconsin to retain and grow the future of its farming food systems and assure the trust of consumers. Examples include the Healthy Grown Program developed through a collaborative effort by the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association, conservation groups and the University of Wisconsin.

- Provide increased resources to support curriculum development focusing on food production, food systems and food preparation in Wisconsin K-12 schools. Emphasis on these topic areas is also recommended in Wisconsin technical colleges and universities.
- Open new regional markets for Wisconsin products. Wisconsin should ask for consistency in federal rules governing the movement of agricultural commodities across state lines and advocate for changes in rules that would allow for the sale of state-inspected meat for interstate commerce
- Conduct a periodic survey of Wisconsin residents' access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate foods. DATCP should conduct this survey and convene a multi-sector group to discuss findings and implications.
- Embrace innovative strategies to encourage urban agriculture. Urban agriculture is an important tool for education about the nutritional, healthful and energy-saving aspects of locally grown foods. Communities are encouraged to undertake efforts to increase understanding and application of the values supported by agriculture. Cooperation with garden clubs and community groups such as Master Gardeners can foster better understanding of local foods, and state policymakers are encouraged to provide funding for grants and technical assistance to support educational activities.

INNOVATION

Consumers choose food for a variety of reasons, from cost to cultural preference to perceived or real health benefits of their choices. While Wisconsin has the ability to produce foods meeting the diverse needs of consumers, mechanisms are required to assure that these products are readily available and safe and that innovators can achieve success.

The study recommends the following:

- Sufficient resources should be provided to the Agricultural Innovation Center of University of Wisconsin Extension to assist in the completion of new business plans and market feasibility studies that promote value-added or other agricultural innovation ventures.
- Support research on the relationships between food production, preparation and healthy eating. Evaluating these relationships has implications for understanding the current obesity epidemic, and has implications for future food production systems.

- Focus research on the implications of increased local foods consumption on Wisconsin food exports and national and international marketing strategies. For instance, many of Wisconsin's dairy products are exported, which raises questions about the net effect of the growth of the local foods sector on the movement of products. Research should also focus on the value of the "Grown in Wisconsin" label versus labels that are more specific. Research focusing on the impact of emerging local foods systems on the environment will also be beneficial.
- Direct research toward new roles for Wisconsin cooperatives, which have traditionally been an important part of the food system. For example, there are opportunities to retain and build investment within rural communities through the formation of new cooperatives, especially in the areas of renewable energy and specialty production, and through tools such as preferred stock for cooperatives and the new cooperative law that allows for investment by nonmembers.



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LAND USE AND CONSERVATION RECOMMENDATIONS

Wisconsin's working agricultural and forest lands provide an array of public benefits, many of which are often taken for granted by those who receive them. Sustainably managed lands enhance the quality of our air and water, provide habitat for a diversity of wildlife, provide sources for renewable energy, store carbon, provide the setting for a multitude of recreational pursuits, and provide the raw materials for jobs in both rural and urban communities.

Assuring the capacity of these lands to continue to provide this array of benefits long into the future necessitates careful assessment of the factors that affect land use and decisions regarding the management of these lands.

One such factor is population growth. Wisconsin's population is estimated to grow robustly in the early 21st century. Projections peg the state population at 6.42 million people by 2030, up 1 million from the 2000 census. Rural Wisconsin will be affected in many ways by this growth, including the impacts of sprawl and other conversion of working lands to other uses. Recognizing that population will increase, rural communities and regions must determine how to grow in a manner that best serves the vitality of communities and their residents, provides economic development opportunities within communities and preserves the working lands that support their populations. Healthy cities can only exist if we have healthy countryside.

WORKING LANDS PRESERVATION

Loss of prime working lands was identified time and again as a threat throughout the course of this study. At the same time, strategies to encourage preservation of these lands were identified as necessary and desirable by citizens across the state.

With these factors in mind, the study recommends the following:

- Create a statewide purchase of development rights grant program to preserve working lands with minimum 25-year easements. The program should work in partnership with local governments and organizations and with federal agencies such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service, which can enhance funding opportunities with its Farm and Ranchland Protection Program.

- Establish an agricultural enterprise areas program that allows for designation of farmland areas for fixed periods of time for preservation from non-farm development and clustering of agricultural activities. These areas would be established based on voluntary agreements among farm owners within broad parameters set by local and state guidelines. Mechanisms should be developed and/or enhanced at the state and county level to identify critical agricultural areas for protection, identify growth areas and land use changes that will impact agriculture, and determine causal factors. Utilize GIS and demographic trend data (much already exists at the UW Land Information Center) and enhance local monitoring strategies to identify patterns of land use changes.
- Enhance efforts under way to maintain large blocks of working forest lands. For example, Wisconsin's participation in the federal Forest Legacy program, in combination with the State Stewardship fund, has resulted in long-term protection of working forest lands through the use of conservation easements to purchase, development, public access and sustainability rights. Mechanisms that maintain these lands in private ownership, while assuring long-term maintenance of the public values these lands provide, are in use and should be expanded. The state's Managed Forest Law also is an important tool for sustaining forest land and the public values they provide.
- Concentrate development through planning strategies that reward projects with smaller lot sizes and common green space amenities while increasing urban density. Redevelopment/revitalization of existing residential/commercial sectors should be encouraged and rewarded.
- It is also recommended that steps be taken to preserve agricultural and forest lands on the urban fringe for food, fuel and value-added production and interaction among rural and urban community members.
- Replicate effective community planning programs that preserve natural resources and working lands, enhance local economies and support local schools and other community assets. Comprehensive planning at the local and regional levels must be applied to accomplish multiple goals, including education of community members.

SHARPENING EXISTING LAND USE TOOLS

The need to preserve Wisconsin's working lands has been recognized for decades, and policymakers have employed a number of strategies to achieve this goal. These strategies have enjoyed varying success. In some cases, effectiveness has been eroded over time. In others, the tools already in hand remain effective.

As it relates to these tools and strategies, the study recommends these steps:

- Continue the use-value assessment provisions of state tax law. The state should also undertake an assessment of the current state tax code to evaluate its impact on working lands and open space preservation and the viability of farm/forest operations.
- Develop tax policies that recognize the value of agricultural and forest land preservation and that provide consistency in formulation of preservation strategies.
- Update the Wisconsin Farmland Preservation Program, created in 1977 to preserve agricultural resources by supporting local government efforts to manage growth. So that it will continue as an effective tool for those purposes, it is necessary to update the existing program to improve agricultural planning and zoning, increase tax credits and improve the flexibility of local governments to administer the program.
- Monitor development of farmland preservation provisions of the federal Farm Bill and how these may mesh with state and local farmland preservation efforts.

PROTECTING PRECIOUS RESOURCES

Just as Wisconsin's agricultural diversity was recognized throughout the course of the study as a major strength, so, too, was the value of our land and water resources. Conservation of these resources for the array of services they provide is essential to state's long-term economic and environmental well-being. It is also in keeping with Wisconsin's rich conservation legacy.

The study recommends the follow:

- Support the "greening" of the federal Farm Bill through emphasis on conservation programs such as the Conservation Security Program that reward producers for conservation stewardship, and through the establishment of quantifiable conservation objectives. Sufficient funding to monitor and assess environmental benefits of conservation programs is essential.
- Provide landowners with cost-sharing incentives to enable them to make production and land management decisions that benefit the broader community as part of their rights and responsibilities as landowners.
- Empower nongovernmental entities interested in preserving working lands. Initiating and supporting the continued development of nonprofit organizations – such as land trusts – can provide assistance to planners, landowners and government officials in understanding the legal and technical issues and opportunities associated with working lands preservation. A grants program

administered by DATCP and similar to the DNR's grants programs for rivers and lakes should be employed to enable groups to formulate and enact strategic plans.

- Create an environment that encourages farmers and forest land owners to provide increased access to their land for hunters and other outdoors enthusiasts. One possibility is adding a voluntary public access component to use value tax assessments that would reward landowners for providing public access.

LAND USE EDUCATION

Education across all sectors was identified throughout the course of the study as a necessary component of effective strategies to preserve and enhance working lands and natural resources.

To increase understanding across sectors, the study recommends the following:

- Engage rural and urban stakeholders in dialogue through forums and structured activities to assure long-term, ongoing education of multiple audiences about Wisconsin's working lands and their relationship to the state's social, economic, cultural and ecological health. Applying the DATCP Working Lands Initiative public input model to achieve this at the county level will help to accomplish these goals.
- Develop a program to use "Farmer and/or Forestry Ambassadors" to educate diverse audiences about the importance of preserving working lands and sustainable land use.
- Employ successful existing models such as the conservation partnership fostered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service and county Land Conservation Departments to abate landowner fears of government. These models should be enhanced and replicated to demonstrate how landowners and representatives of governmental agencies can partner to achieve economic and environmental goals of producers.
- Identify and quantify the full range of benefits derived from working lands to assure adequate support for efforts to preserve and conserve these lands. State agencies and researchers should educate the public and policy-makers about benefits derived from working landscapes, such as ecological services and related social, cultural, economic and environmental benefits.



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PRODUCTION AGRICULTURE/ FORESTRY RECOMMENDATIONS

Wisconsin has more than 30 million acres of agricultural and forest lands. The impact of these lands on the state’s economy is enormous, and touches every community and individual in Wisconsin. The greatest impact is felt in our rural communities. Keeping these lands productive in an increasingly competitive world marketplace is critical to maintaining the viability of our rural communities and, by extension, the entire state.

Production agriculture’s strength in Wisconsin will continue to be its diversity. There is potential to build value and distinction for Wisconsin from this diversity, whether producers sell to local markets or those in faraway places. The wide variety of production agriculture types should be celebrated and be mutually supportive of one another. The production of renewable resources from our forests is also likely to grow in importance. Turf battles among various types of production agriculture must be avoided if diversity is to flourish. There is room for all sizes and types of farming systems, including dairy, livestock, fruit and vegetable growing and others. Some traditional small operations will struggle for a foothold, but new types of small operations, such as those employing low-input investment and management practices and/or value-added activities, offer growing opportunities.

HELPING MID-SIZED FARMS

Mid-sized farms present the single largest challenge for production agriculture and show the largest statistical decline. This so-called “agriculture of the middle” needs the attention of public policies to allow producers in this group to be successful or to transition their operations.

The study recommends these actions:

- Provide business planning grants, investment tax credits and other means of securing investment capital for transitions such as modernization, expansion and conversion to alternative systems. Traditional business development financing is often tied to job creation, but consideration needs to be given to the capital-intensive nature of agricultural production and the spin-off potential of the agricultural economy.

- Assure favorable tax treatment of farmland inheritance that allows stakeholders in family farms sufficient equity to transfer ownership from one generation to the next.

RURAL LABOR ISSUES

The expansion of Wisconsin agriculture is increasingly dependent upon nontraditional labor, including migrants. Because the state's rural labor supply has changed, new strategies to meet the needs of owners, managers and laborers are required.

The study recommends the following:

- Advocate for an effective documented worker program. Recognizing the commonality of labor needs with other business sectors, including manufacturing, tourism, service industry and others, agriculture should cooperate with these sectors to support such a program.
- Provide for the basic training of farm workers and managers for the 21st century, including providing literacy, second-language training and social acclimation.
- Provide owners-managers access to education and information about the social, economic and legal needs of their workers so they are better prepared for an effective labor-management relationship.
- Create a favorable environment for agricultural career opportunities for migrant and nontraditional labor sources, including training for rehabilitating workers and assisting migrant workers to move from labor to management to ownership.
- Identify and communicate about successful new agricultural models that mitigate the impact of labor shortages.

INVESTING IN THE FUTURE

Agriculture provides more than \$50 billion annually to the state's economy. To assure that this vital sector remains strong, and to encourage new farmers and agribusiness entrepreneurs, the study recommends:

- Consolidate all state government programs that promote and address the expansion of agriculture food production and processing into the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection.
- Target state grants to startup operators and existing operators making major adjustments in their business operations. Developing entrepreneurialism requires education and access to capital.

- Build upon the angel investment network for agriculture now known as Badger AgVest and ensure that access to potential investors is possible in all regions across the state.
- Expand new and beginning farmer programs. These efforts should encompass identifying the needs of new and beginning farmers, including those from nontraditional sectors, and providing opportunities for self-education, networking, capacity building, peer learning and internet access.
- Through public/private partnerships, expand capital available for rural businesses. For example, providing grants and loans to cooperatives and proprietary production and processing plants to make adjustments will help move a portion of the sector from traditional commodity activity to specialty and value-added production and marketing. The Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection should be empowered to continue to expand grant programs that support these conversions.
- Develop new cooperative strategies that meet the needs of 21st century producers. As farming operations become more diverse in size, level of investment and mission, mature cooperatives must reinvent themselves as it relates to the accumulation of critical mass, governance, management of capital and product development.
- Maintain and, preferably, increase production levels through both numbers and production per unit in Wisconsin's dairy and livestock sectors. In relation to other upper Midwest states, Wisconsin has advantages for dairy and livestock production through competitive property taxes for land, diverse market opportunities, reliable and competitive capital sources, strong animal health and food safety compliance, and reliable, efficient service providers. These advantages can best be maintained by assuring that production levels are maintained and/or increased.

FEDERAL POLICY

Federal farm policy and other federal programs have major impacts on agriculture across the country. These policies affect what crops are grown, land use patterns, farm size and types, the makeup of rural communities, marketing and many other aspects of rural life and agriculture.

Recognizing these facts, the study recommends these approaches:

- Support federal farm policy that moves away from commodity payments but provides safety nets for milk and other commodities, provides for income protection for small- and intermediate-sized farmers and enhances conservation titles within the Farm Bill. Farm policy should encourage market-driven production systems supported by safety nets. The rural development title of the

federal Farm Bill should focus on strategies that broaden and enhance diversity in rural economies.

- Support research that identifies whether federal policies and programs need updating, with particular attention to whether there are biases toward particular sectors in commodity production. Many federal policies and programs provide infrastructure that supports the marketing of agricultural and forest goods (e.g., grading, food safety, process certification, forest certification).

REGULATION

Regulation does not have to be a burden to production agriculture and may provide benefits in the form of consumer confidence and protecting producer investment, such as an effective system of animal identification.

The study recommends the following:

- Continue practical research on topics like nutrient management at Wisconsin Discovery Farms to assure that regulation is fact-based, pragmatic and effective.
- Apply regulations judged as needed to protect the quality and safety of the food supply and the long-term preservation of the natural resource base with consideration for the producers' ability to be competitive in the marketplace.
- Focus regulation on the "bad actors," with the majority of producers operating more freely under greater self-enforcement.
- Assure that regulation is based on unbiased, sound science. The agricultural sector must improve in its anticipation of future regulatory needs.

BIOENERGY

Wisconsin is well-positioned to enjoy success in the flourishing bio-economy. Throughout the course of this study, the potential and challenges of the bio-economy emerged as a major consideration for many participants. In that regard, the study recommends:

- Develop broad-based bioenergy potential in rural communities beyond corn-based ethanol through research, economic incentives, enhanced infrastructure and capital investment.
- Also, Wisconsin should be agile in reacting to change brought about by the new bio-economy and aggressive in obtaining funding for research and development from federal and other sources to complement the state's commitment. Areas of interest include understanding and managing how the production of renewable energy by agriculture will impact other sectors, such as livestock. Also, grant

programs and research activity spearheaded by the USDA Forest Products Laboratory in Madison to identify renewable energy options for woody biomass offer promise for Wisconsin's forested working lands.

FORESTED WORKING LANDS

Wisconsin's working forest lands are challenged by an array of factors. Maintaining productive forest lands is an increasing challenge due to land values and the fact that many of the benefits derived from sustainably managed forest land are not traded commodities. As a result, the loss of those benefits is realized by society, but not by the individuals involved in the land transaction or decisions made about management of that land.

The capacity of forest land to be productive is in part affected by the size of forest blocks. As ownership size decreases, the ability to efficiently manage individual blocks also decreases. Further, the ability to manage forest landscapes becomes much more difficult. Wisconsin's largest blocks of forest land have traditionally been owned by forest products companies. These lands, which were in excess of a million acres statewide, have undergone a significant transformation in the last decade. The vast majority of these large blocks are no longer owned by forest products companies. They are now owned by real estate investment trusts and timber investment management organizations, rather than by companies that produce value-added products from the wood produced on the land.

These lands provide a suite of economic, environmental and social benefits, and provide jobs to rural communities in both forest products and tourism.

To maintain the capacity of these forested lands to provide these benefits for the long-term, the study recommends the following:

- Increase the use of state working forest easements. These easements allow the land to remain in private ownership while the public acquires rights in these lands that are critical to providing the benefits we all enjoy. Specifically, working forest easements include development, public access and sustainability rights. The State's Managed Forest Law (MFL) is also an important tool for sustaining forest land and the public values they provide. The MFL is important not only for the large blocks of forest land but also for smaller ownerships, which too provide an array of public benefits.
- Enhance incentives that foster private investments into the productivity of forested land, and that foster cooperation across ownerships. Facilitating cross-boundary work on smaller parcels can improve the economic viability of producing renewable products on a sustainable basis from these lands.
- Further develop forest products marketing strategies through cooperatives and associations to help owners of working forests derive optimum value from

sustainable forest management and forest products utilization.

There is a growing understanding that the relationship between agriculture and forestry can provide new revenue streams for producers.

The study recommends the following:

- The Legislature should establish a focused agroforestry program in Wisconsin. The recommendation includes creating a focus in the DNR Division of Forestry and the research and Extension functions in the University of Wisconsin System. Thousands of acres of woodland – both on farms and in private woodlots – are available for multiple-use practices advanced through agroforestry.

FUTURE OF FARMING AND RURAL LIFE IN WISCONSIN CONTACTS:

Tom Lyon, Project Co-Chair, 608-423-1557, barbietl@bminet.com

Stan Gruszynski, Project Co-Chair, 715 346 3767, stan.gruszynski@uwsp.edu

Wilda Nilsestuen, Project Director, 608-263-1692 ext. 12,

wnilsestuen@wisconsinacademy.org

Bill Berry, Project Communications Specialist, 715-341-9119, billnick@charter.net

About the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters

The nonprofit Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters connects people and ideas from all areas of knowledge and all walks of life to advance thought and culture in our state. The Wisconsin Academy's many programs include an art gallery for Wisconsin artists; a quarterly magazine about Wisconsin thought and culture; public forums such as the Academy Evenings lecture series; and the "Wisconsin Idea at the Wisconsin Academy," a public policy program that brings the public together with a diverse array of experts and stakeholders to find solutions to statewide problems. The "Future of Farming and Rural Life in Wisconsin" is an initiative in that program. Find more information about the project and the Wisconsin Academy at www.wisconsinacademy.org or www.wisconsinacademy.org/idea.