

Farmers say Walker's Budget Damages Farm Research, Schools and Conservation Input

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As Farmers come in as part of Ag Day at the Capitol, they focus on parts of the state budget that hurt rural communities. That includes rural schools, conservation, on-farm research, the Natural Resources board, the spring Conservation Congress, funding for the U.W. Extension, 4H, and farm safety. Many wonder why the governor is doing away with needed services.

MADISON - "It's very important that we are here today," the farmer from Independence told me. "In fact, it's more important that we be here than anywhere else." Here was in my Capitol office. Local farmers were visiting as part of Ag Day at the Capitol.

The weather that day was dry and warm. It was perfect for getting early spring chores done. Instead, these farmers drove hundreds of miles to meet with their legislators.

They were on a mission to change parts of the state budget that hurt rural communities. The first thing on their mind – in every group that visited – was rural schools.

"What are you going to do about rural schools?" the Buffalo County man asked me. "Our local school has two referenda on the ballot in April – one to fix the furnace and other delayed improvements; another to continue to keep the school open".

"See this binder?" I showed him a large binder full of pages with red and green Post-It notes.

“This is the Cliff Note version of the budget: It’s over 500 pages.”

“Everything in red I’m trying to get rid of. Everything in green is money I’m trying to get for education, the UW and other cuts,” I explained. Red notes far outnumbered green ones. Changes to agriculture and conservation were among the notes I flagged in red.

We talked through the farmers’ problems: managing tillage, conservation, chemical applications and nutrient management – i.e. when to spread manure. Many of the management questions farmers had to answer were assisted by on-farm research.

The flagship system of on-farm research is Discovery Farms. At twenty farms across the state, scientists monitor details like water and nutrient flow, erosion and soil structure, to help farmers develop best practices.

Thousands of farmers and ag support folks visit Discovery Farms to learn first-hand from U.W. Extension staff, scientists and the farmers themselves. The research brings a steady stream of knowledge to help preserve land and protect water for all of us.

Farmers also strongly opposed taking away the power of the citizen Natural Resources and Ag Department boards. “We just got a farmer on the Natural Resources board,” one farmer said. “This takes away our voice,” said another.

We talked about spring Conservation Congress meetings. Folks gather by the hundreds in school gyms around the state. Anglers and hunters use wisdom they’ve gathered over decades to make recommendations related to conservation. For example: should the pan fish limit at the local lake be changed?

The vote goes to the state Conservation Congress board, made up of members elected by their neighbors, and on to the Natural Resources board. Policy is made from the votes of those affected by the decisions. But the governor’s proposal would eliminate the input of the Conservation Congress by taking away the power of the citizen Natural Resources Board.

Many farmers also served on town boards. More than once I heard about the governor's proposal to take away towns' ability to hire property assessors. "This just doesn't make sense," one farmer told me. "The counties don't want to take over the assessors, the state hasn't given money to do this. And we lose our powers."

We talked through other farmer concerns including funding for U.W. Extension, 4H, and farm safety. The conversation came back to schools and education. "Our schools pay for the independent charter schools in Milwaukee. I don't think that's fair," said one farmer. "My children already spend an hour and a quarter on the bus," said another.

"You know I was just appointed to the environmental education board," said a third. "I really don't understand why the governor is doing away with environmental education. These programs help school kids learn about Wisconsin's natural resources."

As he got up to leave one of the farmers gestured to my budget binder still sitting on the table. "I like the way you did that," he said, referring to the red and green tabs.

"It's a big budget with a lot of bad in it," I nodded. "You've got to eat an elephant one bite at a time."

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