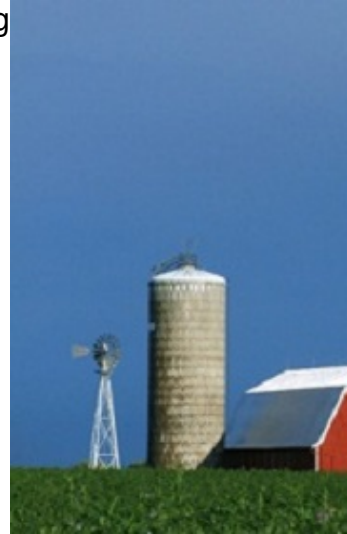


Eat Your (Local) Vegetables!

Written by Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31
Wednesday, 08 November 2023 11:50

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Sen. Smith writes about the “Invest in Agriculture, Grow our Future” package of bills that provide support for farmers while making it easier for Wisconsin consumers to access healthy, local food.

MADISON - Wisconsin's proud agricultural history has been a part of our identity as a state for centuries, and it will remain an integral part of our state's future. As a State Senator who represents farmers and agricultural producers across much of western Wisconsin, I'm delighted to join my colleagues in supporting legislation designed to boost our agriculture industry. This bill package – “Invest in Agriculture, Grow our Future” – focuses on harnessing the power of our farms and local agricultural producers to contribute to the ongoing health of our communities.



When consumers have affordable access to fresh, local farm products, they are less likely to rely on processed foods for the majority of their diet. Access to healthful food is a key aspect of ongoing physical health and preventative healthcare. What's more, local production of food reduces how far food needs to travel to get to your kitchen table, meaning fresher food and a reduced carbon footprint.

The best place for our local, fresh foods is our schools. For years, Wisconsin has successfully managed a farm to school program to connect schools with nearby farms to provide children

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with locally-produced ingredients for their school meals. One of these bills creates a “farm to fork” program to expand to eligible non-school entities that have cafeterias. It also directs grants for expanding farm to school programs, prioritizing school districts with a high percentage of students who are eligible for free or reduced-price meals under federal law.

The best place to go in your community for locally-grown produce is your local farmer’s market. In order to help more people access the nutritious and local food produced within their own communities, another bill we proposed provides credit and debit processing equipment and services to farmer’s markets and farmers who sell directly to consumers.

These programs will include the ability to process EBT transactions so those who receive public assistance have access to healthy food. Research shows that food assistance programs have twice the impact on households in rural communities than they do in urban communities. While it’s hard to gauge the exact dollar amount, state-supported farmer’s market food assistance (EBT) programs infuse at least twice and perhaps as much as ten times more federal dollars into our local economies, based on similar programs in Michigan and Iowa.

In a wealthy country, no one should go hungry. Yet over 38 million people across the nation suffer from food insecurity, including 427,380 Wisconsinites. Another bill in this package provides grants to food banks, food pantries and other nonprofit organizations to purchase Wisconsin food products, benefiting food-insecure Wisconsin families while contributing to our local agricultural economy.

The flip side of food production is food waste. In 2020 to 2021 the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) reported food waste made up 20% of the trash headed to our landfills, 14.5% of which could have been consumed (this has increased twofold since the last study, conducted in 2009). That’s 294 pounds per Wisconsinite.

To turn this problem into a solution, another one of our bills creates a food waste reduction grant program designed to redirect surplus food to hunger relief organizations and compost the remaining food waste.

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