

**WISCONSIN  
CITIZEN ACTION**



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## **Coalition Asks for Family Farm Protection Act Delivers Almost 6,000 letters to State Legislature**

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Madison, WI -- A coalition of farm, faith, consumer and environmental organizations lined up today at a Senate Labor & Agriculture Committee hearing to testify about the proposed Family Farm Protection Act for Wisconsin. The groups brought with them a wheelbarrow with 6,000 handwritten letters in support of the bill (SB-445) addressed to members of the Wisconsin Senate.

"Wisconsin's farming families are important to our state's economy and they are the backbone of our rural communities," said **State Senator Brian Burke**, lead sponsor of the Family Farm Protection Act. "We can't afford to lose any more family farms in Wisconsin. The Family Farm Protection Act will help ensure the future for farming families and the local economies that depend on them."

Calling the bill a comprehensive vision for the future of Wisconsin agriculture and a major commitment to rural communities, assembly sponsor, **Rep. Joe Plouff** of Menomonie said, "It's important to start thinking now about investing in the future of our farms. Otherwise we'll lose the economic foundations of our rural communities."

Wisconsin's family farms have been going out-of-business at a rate of 4-5 per day. The state lost almost 13% of its farms and over 10% of its farmland between 1987-1997. During this period that number of hog farms dropped by almost 60%, dairy farms fell by 40% and farms with harvested cropland decline by more than 20%.<sup>1</sup> **Wisconsin Farmers Union** believes the state should do more to help farmers deal with industry consolidation and the growing stranglehold that large retailers and food processors have on farm markets. "We must address the concentration taking place in agriculture and the effect it has on farm prices and markets at the state level. We must maintain a level economic playing field for all farmers," said **Gerald Jaeger, of the Wisconsin Farmers Union**, who helped to design the bill.

The proposed Family Farm Protection Act is designed to:

- Invest in a future for Wisconsin family-farms including an aggressive marketing effort for Wisconsin grown products, assistance to state institutions and schools to begin purchasing foods directly from

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<sup>1</sup> UW-Program on Agricultural Technology Studies (PATS) Research Summary No. 4. March, 2000.

## Coalition backs Family Farm Protection Act

Wisconsin farmers and farm co-ops, low-cost strategies for modernization and expansion, the development of new agricultural enterprises and agricultural education.

- Level the playing field so small to moderate sized family farms – the majority of Wisconsin farms – can be economically viable by engaging the University and the Department of Justice in an investigation of the degree of consolidation in the industry, its impacts and what can be done.
- Ensure adequate environmental protection and healthy rural communities by funding research on low-cost conservation practices, funding programs that help farmers put conservation practices in place and by ensuring environmental responsibility for certain large-scale agricultural practices.

“This is a very important day for Wisconsin farmers. “We’ve struggled to get state action while losing one-third of our dairy farms in the last seven years,” said **Jaeger**. “Now finally we are going to have a serious discussion in the legislature about the future of Wisconsin farming.”

**John Peck**, with Family Farm Defenders said there is a growing demand for farm-fresh, locally grown produce, dairy and meat that is not being met because shelf space in many major food retail outlets is dominated – often paid for – by a few major food processors. “Both consumers and farmers are damaged when people can’t find the farm-fresh Wisconsin products they want because our Wisconsin products are locked-out of grocery shelf-space,” said **Peck**.

Faith, consumer and environmental organizations were also on hand to support introduction of the Act, which they say is just as important to rural communities, consumers and the environment as it is to farmers. “Farming is the economic backbone of much of Wisconsin,” said **Reverend Sue Larson, who directs the Lutheran Office for Public Policy in Wisconsin**. “When our farms fail, it creates a ripple effect that impacts the many other rural businesses and farm service industries that they support, which in turn impacts the local tax base and the services that communities can provide to families, children and the elderly.” **Larson** said that **Lutheran Social Services** works hard to keep up with the needs of families affected by the growing rural crisis, but her church perceives a growing need to call for action.

Environmental organizations also applauded the bill, saying Wisconsin’s family farmers were among the best in the nation at implementing conservation practices that protect water quality and preserve soil. The bill includes a proposal for \$2 million per year to go out to Wisconsin farmers for manure management planning, as well as grant funding for transitions to organic production and managed intensive grazing, two profitable and rapidly growing farming methods viewed as environmentally friendly by conservationists. “This bill helps Wisconsin’s family farms continue to do what they do best, produce wholesome nutritious food in harmony with conservation values,” said **Caryl Terrell of the Sierra Club**.

The bill would also tighten the regulations on certain large scale agricultural practices, such as requiring operators of large manure storage facilities to have funds available in case of spills and making corporations jointly liable for cleanup if they effectively control the management of a contract farm. But **Wisconsin Farmers Union** believes most farmers are in favor of reasonable environmental protections. “Some people forget that it is our farm families that work on our farms and live along many of our state’s high quality streams and rivers,” said **Jaeger**. “We, more than anyone, want to maintain a healthy rural lifestyle and want to see those rivers and streams continue to be healthy and be a resource to our families and our farms.”

**Sam Gieryn, spokesperson for consumer watchdog Wisconsin Citizen Action** pointed out that many of the letters asking for the Family Farm Protection Act came from non-farm members of rural, suburban and urban communities. The group collected the letters through its door-to-door canvass, education and outreach programs. “In Wisconsin, almost everyone knows someone who is or has been in farming,” says **Gieryn**. “There has been tremendous support from the general public, especially among the faith community.” The most letters received by a single legislator was 668 letters for **Senator Mike Ellis**. **Sen Robert Cowles** received 560.

Coalition backs Family Farm Protection Act

Responding to questions about how the ambitious Family Farm Protection Act fits in with state government's pressing need to cut its budget, **Senator Burke**, who co-chairs the legislature's Joint Finance Committee, said, "This industry is critical to our state economy and thus critical to the future of state tax revenues. If we neglect and lose our farms and farm-related industries, the budget shortfall will worsen year after year."

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The following organizations support the Family Farm Protection Act:

- Wisconsin Farmers Union
- Family Farm Defenders
- Growing Power
- American Raw Milk Producers Pricing Association
- Dane County Farmers Market
- Lutheran Office for Public Policy in Wisconsin
- Wisconsin Public Interest Research Group
- Wisconsin Citizen Action
- Sierra Club – John Muir Chapter
- Citizens for a Better Environment

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