



JOAN BALLWEG

STATE SENATOR · 14TH SENATE DISTRICT

Senate Bill 72: Technical College Farmer Tuition Assistance Grants
Senate Committee on Agriculture and Tourism
Testimony of Senator Joan Ballweg
February 9, 2021

Good morning, members of the committee. Thank you for hearing this important piece of legislation.

Suicide prevention is something I trust you have heard more about over the past twelve months. Due to the pandemic, and subsequent isolation as people try to socially distance, individuals across Wisconsin and our country find themselves separated from support systems and losing hope.

In September of 2020, Prevent Suicide Wisconsin released its latest Suicide in Wisconsin report. 887 Wisconsin residents died by suicide in 2018, ranking Wisconsin second highest for suicide deaths among our neighboring Midwestern states. Between 2013 and 2017, suicide rates in Wisconsin were higher in rural counties than urban counties. The overwhelming majority of suicide deaths during that same time were male.

When you think of a rural, male population, it is not hard to draw the correlation to our farming communities. In fact, suicide among farmers has been a significant concern of mine for several years.

Last session, I chaired a special task force on suicide prevention. Senate Bill 72 was one of the proposals that came out of this bipartisan committee, which passed the full Assembly and the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Revenue and Financial Institutions. SB 72 recreates a grant program, previously administered by the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, which will provide funds to farmers to take farm management courses through the Wisconsin Technical College System.

Over the course of my work with the task force, we heard from farmers and agricultural professionals who shared experiences working with individuals who felt they were at their wits end. We heard that farm finances are often a significant contributor to stress and could lead to suicidal ideation. We cannot control many of the aspects that cause farmers' stress, but we can help connect farmers with professionals at our technical colleges that teach strong farm management skills and provide support to an increasingly isolated workforce.

Thank you for your time. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.



LOREN OLDENBURG

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 96th ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Senate Bill 72

Relating to: farmer tuition assistance grants and making an appropriation

Senate Committee on Agriculture and Tourism

February 9, 2021

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Ballweg and committee members. I want to thank you for your willingness to hear Senate Bill 72.

Last session it was my honor to serve as a member of the Speaker's Task Force on Suicide Prevention. I enjoyed my learning experiences while traveling across Wisconsin to hear more about how suicide has affected people from all across the state, and discussing what we can do in the Legislature to help. A main priority of mine throughout the work of the task force was focusing on my community, the farming community.

It's no secret that the farming community has been having a tough time. It's as important as ever to recruit young farmers so that we can keep Wisconsin, America's Dairyland. I've said for a long time, if you're a farmer, you're not just a farmer; you are an entrepreneur, accountant, CEO, manager, maintenance worker and so much more. Wearing all these hats, and still running a successful farming operation is a lot to take on, and that's why it is so important that we educate young people who are interested in becoming farmers.

Senate Bill 72 will allow scholarships to be administered by the Wisconsin Technical College System to current and prospective farmers. These scholarships will give farmers the opportunity to have all or part of their tuition covered for courses at a technical college. These courses will provide them with invaluable knowledge on topics like farm, business, and production management. Having access to training like this can help farmers have a better understanding of farm practices as a whole. Not only is this education important, but students will create a support system of other farmers while taking these courses. This will continue to be a benefit to these farmers for years to come.

Last session this bill passed the Assembly unanimously, and also unanimously passed the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Revenue and Financial Institutions. Thank you again for hearing Senate Bill 72, a bill that will help educate and prepare farmers to run a successful farm and allow them to be equipped to deal with all aspects of the farming business.



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TO: Senate Committee on Agriculture and Tourism
FROM: Jennifer Wickman, Director of Government Affairs
DATE: February 9, 2021
RE: Senate Bill 72 – Farmer Assistance Tuition Grants

Dear Chairwoman Ballweg and members of the committee,

Cooperative Network is an association of cooperatives representing a dozen different business sectors in Wisconsin and Minnesota. Agricultural cooperatives make up a significant portion of our membership and include organizations all along the food chain including Organic Valley, Land O' Lakes, Growmark and Genex. Fundamental to all these cooperatives is the financial stability and wellbeing of farmers.

For this reason Cooperative Network was a supporter of the Dairy Task Force 2.0 (my predecessor, David Ward, was a member of the task force) and the Dairy Innovation Hub with centers at UW Madison, UW Platteville and UW River Falls. Senate Bill 72 is related to that package of great ideas for farmers (as well as being a tool to combat farmer suicide). The Dairy Hub will develop educational programs to increase the profitability and sustainability of dairy farms, while this bill will allow farmers to access that education at Wisconsin's excellent technical colleges.

For example, SouthWest Tech in Fennimore is just one technical college providing excellent agricultural education. I happened to be on campus during their last open house and I learned that:

- 97% of their graduates are satisfied/very satisfied with their education.
- 93% were employed within their first year of graduation.
- 85% of graduates are employed within Wisconsin.

Some of South West Tech's programs include:

- Agribusiness management
- Agronomy
- Animal Science
- Crop Operations
- Dairy Technician
- Farm Ag Maintenance
- Livestock Management
- Reproduction Technician

These courses contain critical education for current and aspiring farmers – information that will help farms remain profitable year after year. Senate bill 72 will help more farmers access this education and allow them to make smart and clear-eyed financial decisions about their business. That knowledge helps empowers farmers and is one reason this bill is also a great tool to combat farmer suicide. Cooperative Network asks that you please support this bill.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Wickman

February 7, 2021

Hello,

I am a farmer and current student at Western Technical College's Farm and Business Production Management Program. My husband and I are first generation farmers and when we obtained loans through the Farm Service Agency, we were required to enroll in this program. We are also required to pay the tuition for the program.

This program is not conventional because there is minimal classroom time. Most of the program is the instructor coming to our farm to help with the business side of farming. We have been able to take advantage of more opportunities because we had our financials organized. This is thanks to our instructor.

This program has been especially helpful in the last few years. We were one of the hundreds of family farms that sold their cows in 2018. There was a lot of business to work through when selling out, and our instructor was incredibly supportive throughout the entire process.

As a student of Western Tech, I was connected with the Farm Center, which offers free support to farmers for a wide variety of things. I also was connected with Western's campus counselor. Dispersing the herd was an incredibly emotional process, and over a year later we were still dealing with the repercussions. To have the support and resources of this program has made the process manageable.

This has obviously been helpful as a farmer. However, there are all of us families that worked our whole lives to be a farmer, and now must find something different because farming did not work out. Personally, I had started college fourteen years ago, but did not finish due to the demands of family and farming. Once we were not farming, my options without a degree were limited. It has not been good on our morale to have worked so hard for so long, only to have to start at the bottom again. I have since enrolled in the Marketing Management program at Western as well.

It has been over two years since we sold our cows, and it has taught us a lot. Farming is way more than animal husbandry and crop management. Those are the things that most people refer to as the hard work, but it is what makes it fun for people like us. So that is what we always focused on. We have learned the hard way that the fun does not happen without the real work, and that is putting pencil to paper and having the business organized.

About Abby from Instructor Dona G.:

Abbie Wiedmeyer and her husband are first generation dairy farmers near Norwalk, Wisconsin. The family took advantage of Farm Service Agency farm loans to purchase their farm, cows and equipment but like many, the downturn in milk price forced them to sell the cows in 2018. Although the FSA loans do not pay for tuition in the Farm Business and Production Management program, the program meets the education requirement that the borrowers must meet. With the help of their FBPM instructor, Aimee Schomburg and much financial planning plus 2 years of both Abbie and her husband working off-farm jobs, they have been able to start milking again. The farm has also diversified by raising and selling beef and pork to increase income and keep the farm profitable.

February 8, 2021

Senator Joan Ballweg
Room 409 South, State Capitol
Madison, WI 53708

RE: 2021 SENATE BILL 72

Dear Senate Agriculture and Tourism Committee Members:

My name is Dona Goede and I am an instructor for Western Technical College. I write to you today in support of Senate Bill 72. For over 7 years, I have worked as a Farm Business and Production Management (FBPM) instructor in Wisconsin and have experienced first-hand how needed a program like this is, especially for new and prospective farmers.


The statistics of the age of our farmers and the need for the next generation to take over is well known. Time and time again, I have worked with young farmers that know about the hard work needed, they know how to raise crops and livestock, but they do not know the business side of farming. Our financial institutions want to see balance sheets, cash flows, and return on investment before financing businesses and these are not things that are taught in the barn or around the kitchen table. Wisconsin has a group of individuals that teach these concepts to the next generation, the FBPM instructors in the Wisconsin Technical College System.

As a FBPM instructor, one of the hardest but most important parts of our jobs is telling someone that financially, this doesn't work. Recently, one farm that I worked with for 6 years was forced into bankruptcy just prior to the next generation taking over. The son and daughter-in-law are extremely grateful that we went over the financial picture in detail and they chose not to take on large amounts of debt to keep the operation going as it was. This decision to pivot and head a different direction will keep the farm in the family for many years to come.

We can all agree that financial training is important but this bill also recognizes that when the need is the greatest, the finances are likely at their least. As in my prior example, it may be when a farm is struggling or in many cases, it is when a younger farmer has just graduated from school, be it college or high school. This grant program also shows the next generation of farmers that our legislators want them to succeed and will do what they can to make that happen.

Thank you for recognizing the incredible resource that is the Farm Business and Production Management Program. I hope this grant program can be created to increase the number of new and prospective farmers utilizing the program.

Sincerely,



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