



January 30th, 2024

Senator Ballweg, Chair  
Senator Tomczyk, Vice-Chair  
Members of the Senate Committee on Agriculture and Tourism

**Testimony on 2023 Senate Bill 619**

***Relating to: a transition to grass pilot program and making an appropriation***

Dear Chairwoman Ballweg, Vice-Chair Tomczyk, and Committee Members:

Growing up, it was evident why Wisconsin was considered "America's Dairyland". It was commonplace to see rolling fields of cows dotting the landscape, and even today, our state is still heavily associated with this storied past. Unfortunately, the modern economy has put Wisconsin farmers in a tough spot. To keep up with global markets, farmers needed to scale their operations. Naturally, they found it easier to consolidate their cattle into free stall barns for quicker access than continue to let them roam large sections of pasture.

However, with an increased number of animals living in a smaller, more defined area, local environments began to be impacted. Farmers face a constant balance between remaining competitive with other producers while keeping their crops, soil, and water healthy, and they have come up with some clever ways to get the best of both worlds. The state has even taken a vested interest in some of these innovative practices, funding programs like the Producer-led Watershed Protection Grants, Nitrate Optimization Program, and Cover Crop Insurance Rebate Program.

Another method that has gained a lot of traction lately is called managed grazing. Managed grazing is an organized grazing system where livestock is systematically rotated between different plots of land to keep grasslands in check. This routine has many benefits, including significantly improving soil health and water quality. It also reduces the amount of manure needed to be stored on the farm, further mitigating potential downsides related to spills and runoff.

Senate Bill 619 would establish a Transition to Grass program that would help farmers implement a rotating grazing program. The pilot program would consist of grants that could be used to establish grazing plots, cover the costs of infrastructure needs like fencing, getting technical assistance on grazing plans, among other things. These grants would help farmers move back to the grass-based systems Wisconsin became famous for while remaining competitive in the modern world and being good stewards to the environment.

Thank you all again for hearing this important legislation.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jesse James".

Senator Jesse James  
23rd Senate District  
Sen.James@legis.wisconsin.gov



# TODD NOVAK

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 51<sup>ST</sup> ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

(608) 237-9151

Toll-Free: (888) 534-0051

Rep.Novak@legis.wi.gov

P.O. Box 8953

Madison, WI 53708-8953

DATE: January 30<sup>th</sup>, 2024  
RE: Testimony on Senate Bill 619  
TO: Senate Committee on Agriculture and Tourism  
FROM: State Representative Todd Novak

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Thank you Chair Ballweg and members of the Senate Committee on Agriculture and Tourism for holding a public hearing on Senate Bill 619 (SB 619) which creates a transition to grass pilot program and provides an appropriation.

I authored this bill with Senator James after initially working on this issue during the budget cycle this session. We authored this bill after being approached by stakeholders and local conservation groups that expressed the need for a grazing grant program in Wisconsin.

Two sessions ago, I chaired the Speaker's Task Force on Water Quality with Rep. Shankland. We held hearings throughout Wisconsin, and heard from dairy business leaders, conservation groups, and local family farmers. From these hearings, it was made clear that farmers want to be the leaders in clean water and conservation efforts, but they need the tools and resources to lead in this important effort.

Our task force has led on legislation that was signed into law that has helped farmers implement practices beneficial to water quality, conservation and their bottom line. The Producer-led Watershed Protection Grant Program, Nitrate Optimization Program and Cover Crop Insurance Rebate Program have become successful conservation programs.

SB 619 further expands on the progress made from our work on the Water Quality Task Force by creating a grazing pilot program. The program administered by the Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection provides farmers with grants to transition fields and pastures to grazing areas.

The Transition to Grass pilot program will provide grants to farmers for the following purposes:

1. Assist with establishing perennial forages for rotational grazing of livestock raised in a grass-based managed grazing system.



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2. Provide assistance to establish harvestable continuous cover in marginal areas that can produce supplemental feed for livestock that is raised in a grass-based managed grazing system.
3. Provide a farmer with incentive payments during the first three years of the farmer's transition to grass-based managed grazing systems.
4. Assist a farmer with paying for grass-based managed grazing system infrastructure needs, including fencing, watering, and other livestock management infrastructure.
5. Technical assistance to develop grazing plans, including determining field and paddock layout, infrastructure setup, seed selection, and establishment of rotational grazing patterns.
6. Assistance in navigating grass-based grazing system and grass-fed livestock research and market development initiatives, and market opportunities.
7. Best practices for meeting consumer demand for grass-fed livestock products.
8. Assistance in fostering innovation in and expanding farm and agribusiness strategies in grass-based grazing system and grass-fed livestock practices.

I am proud of the broad coalition of industry stakeholders we have established to support our proposal including: Wisconsin Agri-Business Association, Clean Wisconsin, Dairy Business Association, the Nature Conservancy, Wisconsin Cattlemen's Association, Wisconsin Conservation Voters, Wisconsin Farm Bureau, Wisconsin Farmers Union and Wisconsin Land and Water Conservation Association.

Thank you for your consideration of SB 619.



State of Wisconsin  
Governor Tony Evers

**Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection**  
Secretary Randy Romanski

**RE: Senate Bill 619 Relating to: a transition to grass pilot program and making an appropriation.**

**January 30, 2024**

Chairperson Ballweg and members of the Senate Committee on Agriculture and Tourism:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide information in support of Senate Bill 619 related to a transition to grass pilot program and making an appropriation.

The bill creates a transition to grass pilot program. The program would provide grants to farmers who implement new grass-based managed grazing systems for their livestock. Grants would be capped at \$40,000. These grants would be distributed 75 percent in year one, 12.5 percent in year two, and 12.5 percent in year three. Managed grazing systems are alternatives to continuous grazing with the goal of improving conservation through controlling the density of livestock to maintain perennial grass-based vegetation, ensure regular access to fresh forage, and to reduce soil compaction and erosion.

The bill would create a 0.5 full-time equivalent (FTE) position to support the new pilot program. The pilot program would be funded with a newly created SEG annual appropriation funded at \$500,000 with revenue from the Environmental Fund.

DATCP currently administers conservation and market development grant programs. This program would appeal to the agency's customer base.

DATCP would like to thank the bills authors for agreeing to amend the bill allowing the department flexibility to determine where the program will be placed.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide information on Seante Bill 619.

*Wisconsin - America's Dairyland*

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Date: January 30, 2024  
To: Senate Committee on Agriculture and Tourism  
From: The Clean Water Initiative (Clean Wisconsin, WI Dairy Business Association, Wisconsin Land and Water Conservation Association, The Nature Conservancy)  
RE: Senate Bill 619 – Transition to Grass Program

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We appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony and support for Senate Bill 619 to create a transition to grass program. We want to thank Representative Novak and Senator James for their leadership on this issue and to Chair Ballweg for bringing this important bill up for a public hearing. We are here as the Clean Water Initiative which is our ongoing, four year-old collaboration by Clean Wisconsin, the Dairy Business Association, the Nature Conservancy and the Wisconsin Land and Water Conservation Association to find common ground on water quality and agricultural issues, striving for policies and programs that promote clean water and resilient farms.

In brief, the “Grazing Bill” creates a new program at the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection to provide grant money to help farmers establish managed grazing systems for livestock on their land and technical assistance to increase access to markets and research support.

Managed grazing is more than just pasturing animals. Managed grazing is a farming practice where livestock are systematically rotated through pasture units with multispecies mixes of grasses and forbs to optimize livestock nutrition and the land’s health. In addition to providing excellent feed to pastured livestock, managed grazing on perennial grasslands provides significant soil health and water quality benefits. Managed pastures act like a sponge by absorbing rainfall from even the most intense precipitation events which reduces flooding in rural areas, captures and filters fertilizer and manure nutrients and pesticides, and builds soil health and organic matter through its deep-rooted plants. The program this bill creates would support both transitioning new acres into managed grazing areas as well as landowners choosing to renovate low-productivity pastures into high producing managed grazing systems.

In Wisconsin, grassland acreage has declined 39% over the past two decades and institutional support has likewise declined over a similar timeframe. Prior to 2012, Wisconsin’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) partnered with the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) to dedicate funding to support grazing planning and implementation through the federal Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative (GLCI). Before federal and state funding ended in 2013, this program provided easily accessible funding to support grazing system planning, farmer to farmer engagement on grazing strategies, and the technical support needed to implement those grazing plans. At its peak in the early 2000’s, the program provided a combined total of just under \$1 million in federal and state funding for competitive grants for managed grazing education, technical assistance and research. However, prescribed grazing support from the federal government declined by 55.4% between 2005 and 2020.

Wisconsin's agricultural landscape poses significant potential for expanded managed grazing on livestock operations of all sizes. The 2017 Census of Agriculture noted that only 6,700 of Wisconsin's nearly 31,000 livestock farms practiced rotational grazing at some level within their operations. Since actively milking dairy cows need to make their way into the milking parlor 2-3 times each day, they can be more work to pasture, however milk cows are only about one-third of the state's cattle, meaning over two-thirds of our state's dairy and beef cattle are conducive for grazing, including dry cows and heifers. As an example, a 2021 case study on Brey Cycle Farm in Door County documented the environmental and economic benefits of managed grazing when they transitioned 140 acres out of a corn silage-alfalfa rotation into managed rotational grazing for their dairy heifers and beef cattle. By converting those acres from row crops into productive pasture, Brey's were able to reduce phosphorus runoff by 126 lbs./year and reduce soil erosion by over 200 tons/year, all while saving about \$1.50/head/day in animal management costs through reduced feed, fertilizer and fuel costs on that 140 acres of land.

There is also real evidence that interest in managed grazing is growing among Wisconsin's livestock farmers. NRCS has been the main funder of grazing practices in the state since the end of the Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative, and while over \$700,000 was obligated to grazing related practices in 2022, an average of 75% of applications to NRCS conservation programs have gone unfunded, mainly due to lack of funds. The Wisconsin-born Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship (DGA) Program links current and aspiring graziers in the transfer of farms and grazer skills and knowledge through a carefully designed educational platform that integrates classroom learning with real-world grazing implementation experiences. Since its creation in 2010, the DGA has expanded to 14 additional states and has approved more than 200 mentors to assist beginning graziers in implementing this sustainable form of livestock management. UW-Madison's Grassland 2.0 and NRCS recently launched the Grassland Academy's "Foundations of Grazing Planning" educational program which aims to train farmers and ag consultants to write managed grazing plans. Their debut class was filled in only three days and graduated over 80 agricultural operators and other professionals from the program. Furthermore, county land and water conservation department and state agency staff are experiencing a growing interest in grazing among producers they work with, and an increased demand for technical support on this topic.

Since the Speaker's Task Force on Water Quality convened in 2019, the state legislature has enacted several popular and successful programs to help agricultural producers improve water quality. Much like the Producer-led Watershed Grant Program, the Transition to Grass Program will revitalize the peer-to-peer learning environment that is fundamental to successful, sustainable agricultural conservation practice implementation. The Transition to Grass Program will create the opportunity for farmers to learn from one another at on farm field days, pasture walks and through research participation about the very real money savings and environmental improvements grazing systems can generate. Just like all of DATCPs landowner cost-share incentive programs, the Transition to Grass program would include provisions intended to ensure the funding is appropriately spent.

In summary, we know managed grazing provides significant economic advantages to farmers and tangible environmental benefits, which I expect you will hear more about today from graziers themselves. We also know farmers are interested in establishing managed grazing systems on their farms. However, they need access to resources and expertise to begin transitioning acreage in those systems. Senate Bill 619 provides that need, and the Clean Water Initiative is excited to support this important legislation.

January 30, 2024

TO: Senate Committee on Agriculture and Tourism

FROM: Amy Penterman, Dairy Producer, Thorp, WI (Dutch Dairy)

SUBJ: Support for Senate Bill 619, Transition to Grass Program at DATCP

Good morning, Chairman Ballweg and committee members. My name is Amy Penterman. My husband Sander and I own/operate Dutch Dairy in Thorp. At our farm we have 900 milking cows and farm 1200 acres to support our operations. In addition to our milking cows, we have 9 beef, 100 young stock, and 180 heifers. We are a permitted CAFO and follow very stringent local, state and federal regulations to maintain our permit. I also serve as board member and past President of Dairy Business Association. Thank you for holding this hearing today on Senate Bill 619 which will create a transition to grass program at DATCP.

Managed grazing is more than just pasturing animals. It is a way to provide alternative uses for ag land that incorporates regenerative and sustainable agriculture practices into existing farming operations. I'd like to talk today about my own experience in recently converting five acres of land to grazing for our nine beef cows. This was a small first step, but it was not just a simple process. It required work with an agronomist and included significant upfront costs. I convinced my husband it would be a great idea to graze our beefs cows and assumed we would put up a fence and start grazing. Working closely with our agronomist we learned there are special grass varieties that we need to use not only for nutrition but also for soil health. I also assumed we would plant it and a few weeks later we could graze our beef. Not true. The pasture needs to establish a solid foundation before you can graze your animals. My last assumption was to put up a fence and all would be ready to go. Also, not true. Our pasture is near a county road, we needed to ensure no animals could escape. We also allow the snowmobile trails to pass through our fields, therefore we needed to install gates. After this was all completed it cost us thousands of dollars for our 9 beef animals. Imagine a larger scale operations initial costs to get started.

The cost was worth it to utilize the pasture for cow health, feed and manure management. Farms of all sizes could employ a managed grazing system. Large farms, of course, would see significantly higher costs in establishing such a system, and that alone might scare off potential use of grazing. But the benefits to a farm business, the environment and to the animals themselves are worthwhile. The grant funding and expert support is an essential tool that will make many farms take an interest and I would expect we would see the funds associated with the new program fully used. A farm of our size will probably never graze the entire herd. However, there are opportunities to graze our dry cows or our heifers, which is a smaller number of animals that would be impactful.

There are many benefits to grazing: cow health, hoof health, nutrition and overall body composition. Properly managed pastures act like a sponge and absorb water in heavy rainfall events. Manure is a natural fertilizer. With tight margins, grazing can help reduce feed costs and reduce daily labor costs. Although grazing has been a common farming practice it is new to many farmers, access to industry professionals and education on properly setting up your pasture will help make the transition a success.

Again, thank you, Chairman Ballweg and committee members. DBA is committed to regenerative and sustainable agriculture practices that help the environment and improve the production business model of animal agriculture. SB 619 is a step in the right direction. If empowering farmers with options that will improve land and water resources while maintaining a vibrant business model that builds on the farming heritage of our state is the goal, then the transition to grass bill will be a great assist. Grazing recognizes an all-of-the-above approach to improving water quality and puts another tool in the toolbox of sustainable agriculture. I appreciate your time today and look forward to answering your questions.





**Land Resources & Environment Department**  
**505 Broadway, Baraboo, Wisconsin 53913**  
(608) 355-3245      [www.co.sauk.wi.us](http://www.co.sauk.wi.us)

January 30, 2024

Senator Joan Ballweg  
Chair, Senate Committee on Agriculture and Tourism  
State Capitol Building, Room 409 South  
Madison, WI 53707

RE: SUPPORT SB 619 Transition to Grass Pilot Program

Dear Committee Members,

On behalf of Sauk County Land Resources and Environment Department, I ask that you support SB 619 and provide financial support to farmers transitioning to rotational grazing systems. In my department, we work with farmers and rural landowners to install conservation practices that protect our land and water resources. Traditionally, our department was focused on installing “hard” practices such as concrete barnyards and grassed waterways. However, over the years, many dairy operations sold their herds and converted to cash grain operations and no longer had a need for “hard” practices to be installed on their farms. Knowing that many of these retired dairy farmers still had an interest in raising livestock, we made a concentrated effort to reach out to them to assist them with converting their land to rotationally grazed pasture. We emphasized the financial and social benefits that come with rotational grazing. These were selling points the farmers were very interested in, and we knew on the back end, there would be environmental benefits we were interested in - increased soil health, increased organic matter and carbon storage, increased infiltration and therefore reduced runoff, and lower fertilizer needs.

Our efforts have paid off - since 2017, our department has help convert 4,200 acres to rotational grazing. The timeline and process for converting land into rotational pasture is not linear or simple and requires assistance from land conservation professionals who understand cost share program implementation and technical aspects of establishing pasture systems. My colleague, Serge Koenig, is our local expert in rotational grazing systems and is regularly called upon by other land conservation professionals to share his knowledge of this process. But, not everyone has a Serge Koenig or an Extension livestock educator in their office or county. So, there is a need statewide for assistance with rotational grazing and having a position at the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection is essential. This position could not only help with the initial implementation of the grazing system but also serve as a resource in subsequent years as the operation starts to take off and encounters hurdles or obstacles that come along with changing a major aspect of their farm.

This support is what land conservation staff have done over the years...help with overcoming those obstacles and being available to these farmers who are making a huge change on their farm and in their livelihoods. Land conservation staff have spent countless hours at the kitchen tables, barns and in the fields listening to producers in our attempt to better understand them, their families and their operations. These relationships, rooted in trust, take time to develop.

It's from this place of understanding that we attempt to move the conversation towards conservation, particularly towards converting their landscape to perennial vegetation that holds their soil and nutrients in place and allow water to soak into the ground rather than running off causing flooding issues downstream. We talk through the changes they can expect from a working environment standpoint, quality of life standpoint, animal and human health standpoint, and birds and pollinator life standpoint. We also discuss the financial implications of converting their land to pasture.

Preserving and improving the environment is great but if our producers are not profitable then it's not sustainable. The proposed bill would fill in gaps that traditional conservation programs cannot address. People come to grazing at different times throughout the year and their careers. Having another funding source would accelerate the adoption of rotational grazing throughout Wisconsin. Providing grazing payments to producers for years 2 and 3 after practice installation would help smooth out the financial transition to managed grazing. The funding source would also provide the training infrastructure needed to bring new conservationists up to speed on grazing and how to increase adoption.

We appreciate the bipartisan efforts made to bring this bill forward and strongly encourage you to support it. We have seen firsthand the financial, social, and environmental benefits of rotational grazing and we want others to experience that too. Please feel free to contact me with any questions you may have at 608-355-4838 or [melissa.schlupp@saukcountywi.gov](mailto:melissa.schlupp@saukcountywi.gov).

Sincerely,



Melissa Schlupp  
Conservation Manager

cc: Members, Senate Committee on Agriculture and Tourism  
Senator Dianne Hasselbein  
Representative Dave Considine



# Foxhead Regenerative Agriculture Project

foxheadag.org

N6498 State Road 49, Green Lake, WI 54941

(920) 212-8952

grow@foxheadag.org

Thank you for considering the Transition to Grass Pilot Program and for the opportunity to speak with you today.

I am here with two hats on. First, I am here as a farmer.

- My family is building an agroforestry farm, which integrates trees with crops or pastureland. This system provides multiple benefits like producing a crop, in our case -fruit and nuts - plus forage for livestock, while also offering wind and snow breaks, protection from extreme weather, erosion control, water management, and soil conservation. Producing multiple crops on the same acre of land is especially important for small farms like us to be profitable. Grazing our dairy cows in the alleys between our chestnuts, walnuts, and hazelnuts is an integral part of this system.
- However, establishing this system has come with challenges. While NRCS was able to offer cost-sharing to plant our trees, they could not cost share any grazing infrastructure because the farm was already in pasture, and not previously in row crops and transitioning to pasture. Although it was in pasture it lacked proper fencing, a watering system, and was severely overgrazed.
- Farmers, like us, who don't qualify for NRCS have little opportunity for cost-sharing elsewhere. We keep going on our own because we are passionate and determined. However, we've already lost two years of income and of perennial growth while we've sourced our own fencing and installed it ourselves. Good pasture doesn't happen in one growing season like conventional ag. Luckily our county provided a no till drill to plant seed and help improve our pasture to provide the nutrients our animals need, but not all counties are able to offer that. We still do not have a water pipeline and so the cows trek from the pasture to the water point daily creating a rut through the pasture, taking away forage, and slowly creating erosion issues.
- A program like Transition to Grass would've enabled us to put the pieces of our system in place the first year, instead of installing it in pieces as our budget and time allows. The 3-year payment structure this bill offers would also be a great benefit. Over one year, a perennial farmer can't see much growth or change. With 3 years, we can begin to see the system in operation and can make tweaks or changes that weren't visible in year 1.

My second hat is director of Foxhead Regenerative Ag Project, a nonprofit based in Green Lake County. We work to build equitable community, land access, and support for regenerative farmers to thrive.

From my work with other farmers, I can definitively say that there is not enough support for farmers to get started or expand perennial agriculture.

- If we want more farmers trying these systems which care for our soil, water, wildlife habitat and more, we need to lower the barriers. Make it an easy entry. Show that the risk

is not all on them and that the state supports them. Have staff at our state dept of ag dedicated to grazing. Have local organizations with boots on the ground staff to come out, walk the farm, answer the questions, soothe their concerns. Right now, I can hand them a few info sheets, point them to some youtube videos, but if they need cost-sharing resources I have to tell them sorry, if your land wasn't previously in row crops, there's not much we can do.

- Grants like this program proposes will support our farmers to provide more than food, fiber, and fuel. These grants would be paying farmers for ecosystem services which provide clean air, water filtration, productive soil and carbon sequestration. It's just that these services have never been considered in our economy before. That is changing as we realize how valuable these services really are.
- Getting the grazing system in place is only half the battle. Once we have a product to sell, we have to find somewhere to sell it. Our farmers need help finding markets, finding and keeping customers, and making the whole system financially viable. We need to remember that today's farmers have more than just a farm to run. They have to handle the whole business side of things as well, from packaging to distribution, to marketing, websites, social media, and customer service. They have a lot on their plate. When that plate gets too full, too heavy, they get out of the business. We lose all those services, we lose local food, rural economy and community. We lose our next generation to jobs in the cities. We lose our family farms to megafarms and housing developments.
- History has shown us that it's cheaper to invest in preventing resource degradation, even when it sounds expensive, than trying to clean it up later. In any case, this is more than resource conservation. Supporting this program is investing in Wisconsin's people, in farmer livelihoods and local economies, in our rural communities, in our pollinators and grassland habitats, in our local food system, and in our children's future.
- As one farmer said "Farming that provides public benefits deserves public investment." Supporting the Transitions to Grass Pilot Program provides benefits to all of us and is worthy of our investment.

Thank you for your time and support of this important bill.

Shelly Rothman  
Executive Director  
Foxhead Regenerative Agriculture Project  
(FoxRAP)



**Testimony of Chuck Anderas, MFAI Associate Policy Director**

**Public Hearing, Senate Committee on Agriculture and Tourism, January 30, 2024**

The Michael Fields Agricultural Institute (MFAI) is a non-profit organization helping rural and urban farms and agricultural communities in Wisconsin and beyond be environmentally, economically, and socially healthy. We work closely with farmers across the state and nation. Our long history of working with farmers transitioning to managed grazing includes serving as Collaborator for the Uplands Farmer-Led Watershed Group in southwest Wisconsin.

MFAI supports many conservation practices as a way to achieve water quality goals and strong farm businesses, and managed grazing systems stand out as profitable, practical, and optimal for conservation outcomes. We appreciate the Legislature's leadership on grazing, and we wholeheartedly support SB619 to create the **Transition to grass pilot program** through DATCP.

Well-managed grazing represents an opportunity for healthy communities, profitable businesses, and thriving ecosystems. Grazing promotes the vitality of Wisconsin's communities, economy, and natural resources. To see more grazing on the landscape, Wisconsin's agricultural community needs grazing technical assistance, education, and research as well as investments in marketing, processing, and supply-chain development. This bill contributes to those critical steps of the development of the grazing industry, and contributes to meeting the growing demand for working lands conservation programs that isn't currently met by federal programs (*see attached map*).

**Well-managed grazing is critically important for:**

- Restoring healthy rural communities and farmer livelihoods
- Improving water quality, soil, carbon, wildlife, and pollination benefits
- Reducing flood risk, soil runoff, and well contamination (*please see attached infographic for more information on flood risk reduction*)
- Meeting the rapidly increasing consumer demand for grass-fed products
- Providing opportunities for beginning and young farmers

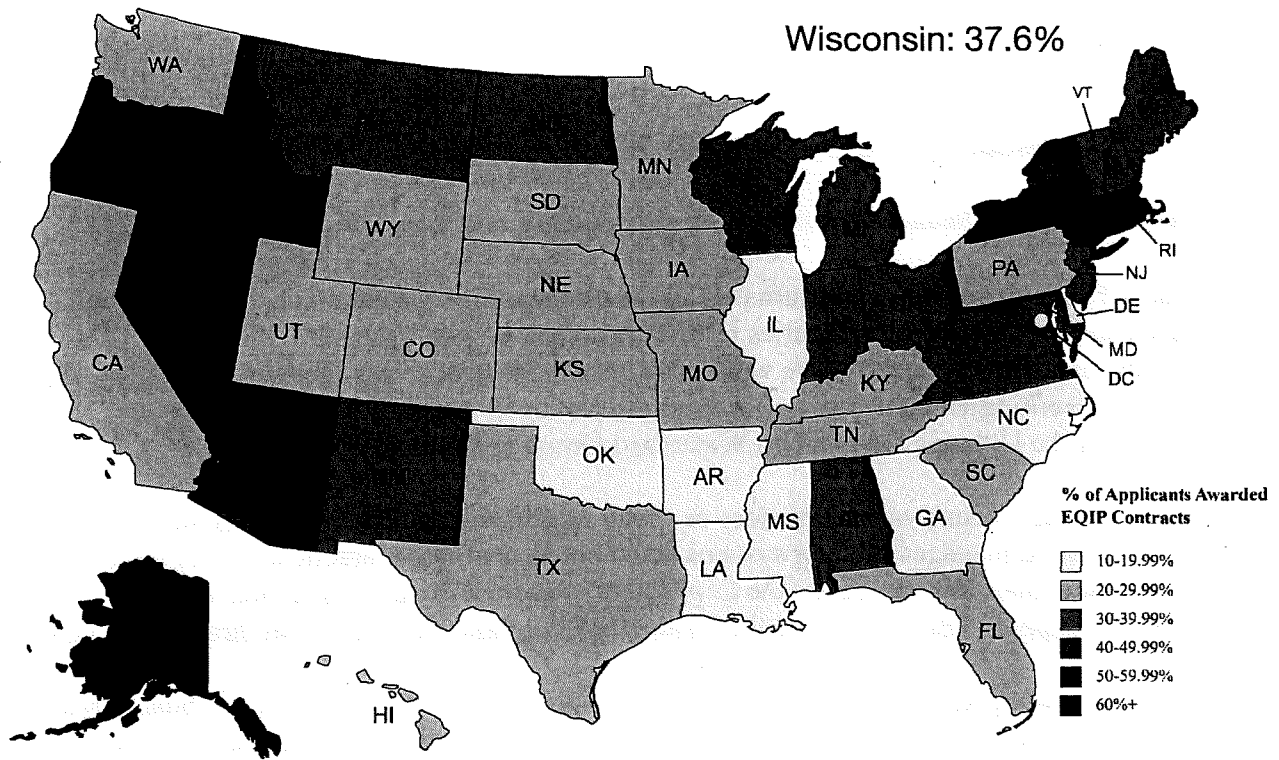
According to a 2017 report from the National Institute of Building Sciences, \$1 spent on pre-disaster mitigation saves \$4-7 in disaster relief. Investing in grazing is a wise financial decision because it will increase water infiltration and reduce flood risk to our state's infrastructure, among many other benefits.

MFAI is asking for your vote to pass SB619 out of committee, and we hope to see a vote on the Senate floor soon. For more information, please contact Chuck Anderas, Associate Policy Director at Michael Fields Agricultural Institute: (612) 469-2582 or [canderas@michaelfields.org](mailto:canderas@michaelfields.org).

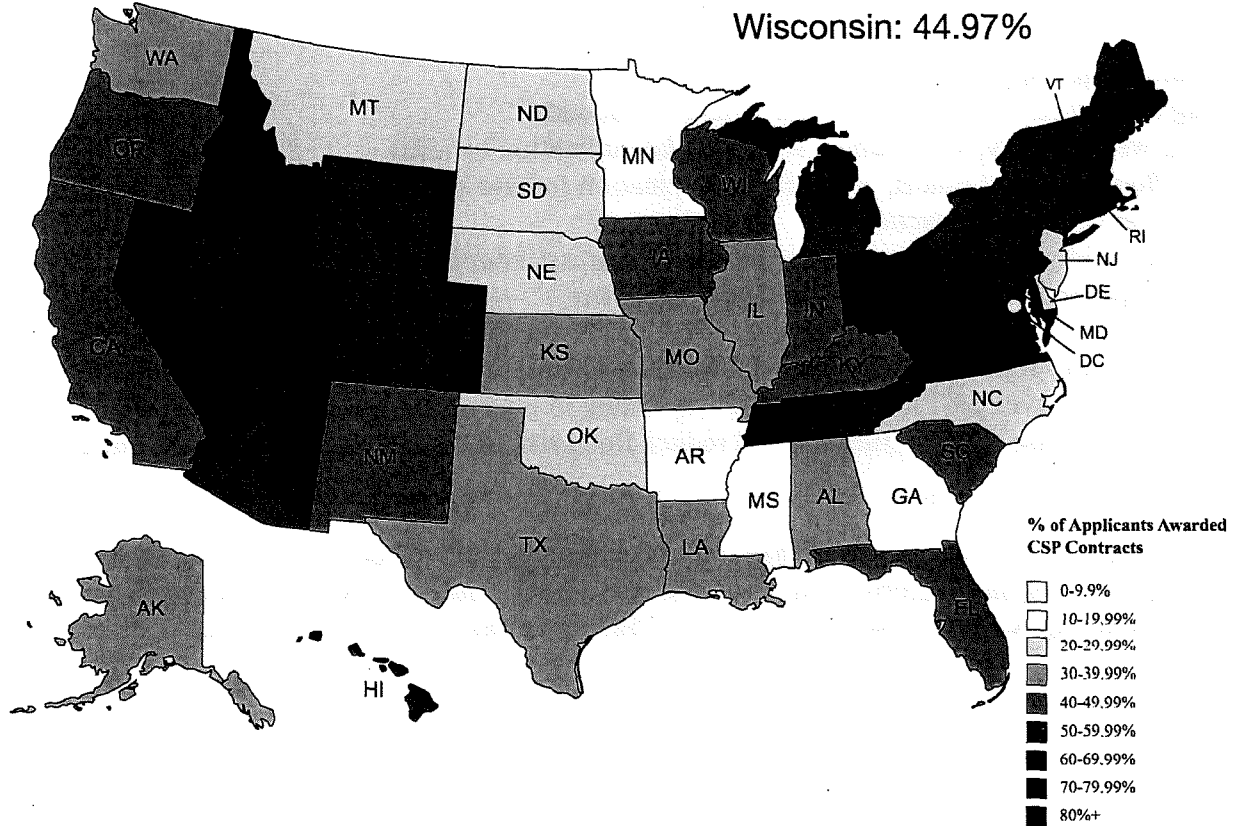
Sincerely,

Chuck Anderas

**Map 1: Percentage of EQIP Applicants Awarded Contracts, FY 2023**



**Map 2: Percentage of CSP Applicants Awarded Contracts, FY 2023**



Maps created by IATP with mapchart.net using USDA data.

# Surface water runoff is a destructive force during heavy rainfall.

When roads, bridges, and culverts washed out across the Midwest, short-term emergency repairs cost taxpayers \$114 million in 2018-2019 alone.<sup>1</sup>

Bridge repair or replacement cost  
\$20,000 - \$100,000

Road maintenance cost  
(resurface 1/2 mile)  
\$8,000 - \$30,000

Culvert replacement cost  
\$5,200 - \$32,200

Investment in well-managed pasture and hay can slow water down and prevent costly damage.

Well-managed pasture and hay plants have well-developed root systems in the ground year-round.

These root systems soak up more water than annual roots. Less surface water runoff means less erosion, flooding and damage during heavy rainfall.



**9 inches** of rainfall absorbed by soil under well-managed pasture and hay crops.<sup>5</sup>

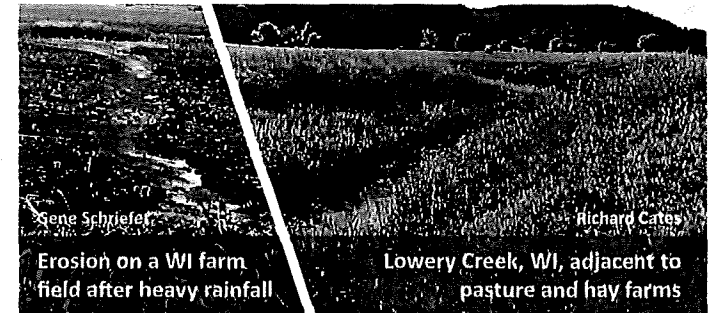
Annual plants have less dense, seasonal roots.



**3 inches** of rainfall absorbed by soil under corn and soybean crops<sup>5</sup>

## Invest in Farmers

Farmers and landowners can create conditions that protect infrastructure.



Gene Schrieler  
Erosion on a WI farm

Richard Cates  
Lowery Creek, WI, adjacent to pasture and hay farms

"As many small dairy farms have gone out of business, the land has lost well-managed forage land. Roads bordered by well-managed crop and pasture land seldom need ditching. Roads bordered by crop land that is poorly managed often need maintenance after every heavy rain event."

JACK HERRICKS

Jefferson Township Chairman, Monroe County, WI

**Learn more** about how productive, well-managed pasture and hay ground can protect infrastructure.

[www.greenlandsbluwaters.org](http://www.greenlandsbluwaters.org)



Midwest Perennial Forage Working Group

<sup>1</sup> FWA emergency highway repair allocations, 2018-2019. <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/pressroom/fhwa1918.cfm>

<sup>2</sup> Averages for IL, IA, MN, MO, WI; non-National Highway System bridges; 2017.

<https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/bridge/nbl/sd2017.cfm>

<sup>3</sup> Average Annual Cost for Road Maintenance. USDA Forest Service.

[https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE\\_DOCUMENTS/fseprd528063.pdf](https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd528063.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> 2015 Maintenance Culvert Cost Data Analysis. MN DOT.

<http://www.dot.state.mn.us/bridge/hydraulics/culvertcost/2015%20Drainage%20Maintenance%20Data%20Summary%20-%20Final%20Version.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Averages of measurements in June, August, and October/November. | L. Bharati, K.-H. Lee, T.M. Isenhardt, and R.C. Schultz. 2002. Soil-water infiltration under crops, pasture, and established riparian buffer in Midwestern USA. *Agroforestry Systems* 56:249-257.

Good morning. Thank you for your interest in Senate Bill 619.

In 1968 Wisconsin had 71,000 dairy farms dotting the landscape while sending white gold to the local creameries and sending bus loads of children to the rural schools. As of today we have approximately 5,690 dairy farms left. In just over 50 years we've lost 65,310 dairy farms. Farms that pastured the cows, raised forages and small grains and whose bovines left a small carbon footprint while keeping our rivers and lakes clean.

Many here today have witnessed the negative environmental and social effects on our communities from the loss of these dairy farms.

Our small dairy farms are struggling right now, and quite frankly, have been for many years.

The Transition to Grass Pilot Program offers much needed funding for both our dairy and non dairy farmers looking to establish or improve a grazing system.

As an organic beef farmer who has practiced managed intensive grazing (MIG) for over 20 years I can assure you a \$40,000 grant when we were starting out would have felt like we won the lottery!

There's not another single agricultural practice in my opinion that offers more environmental protections than managed grazing does. Benefits include; Carbon sequestration, increased organic soil matter, water infiltration, reduction of nutrients running into our lakes a streams, both increase in plant and animal bio-diversity. It's a win-win for all species, humans included.

We need to revitalize our small, rural communities and have more caretakers of the land; not fewer.

Thank you for voting Yes on Bill 619

Chris Kees Winkler  
4th Generation FarmHer  
Durand, WI



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## **Testimony of Mikayla Birschbach, Young Farmer, Fond du Lac County**

**Senate AG Committee hearing: Transition to Grass Pilot Program, 29th of January, 2024**

Dear Senate Committee,

First I want to thank all of you for being here and representing us. Without you our voices and viewpoints wouldn't be heard. Thank you again.

My name is Mikayla Birschbach, and I am an aspiring young farmer. As a young farmer I don't have the infrastructure or resources to fully realize my farm dreams and goals. Grazing requires infrastructure and knowledge that isn't readily available to many aspiring farmers or established farmers wanting to transition. This bill would provide farmers with access to technical grazing support and financial resources. This access would fulfill their dreams of coming back to the land and farming it with the respect and devotion the fruitful hills and valleys of Wisconsin deserve.

I have experienced first hand what transitioning to grazing can do for the farmer, the animals and the land. I have had the privilege to witness hundreds of swallows, bluebirds, and dragonflies descend upon a pasture to perform various dives and swoops to snatch insects in midair. I have also had the privilege to watch small swarms of swallowtail butterflies and monarchs flit lazily around a pasture rich in clover, vetch and blooming alfalfa. I have also heard the testimonies of farmers who found joy again in farming. Farmers who were ready to sell it all have found a new purpose in their farm and their lives. This bill would not only have an effect on regenerating the land, but also regenerating the farmers themselves.

This is why I urge you to vote yes on this bill. For the land and the farmers who steward it.

Sincerely,

Mikayla Birschbach

With reference to Senate Bill 619 – Transition to Grass Pilot Program

30 years ago we converted all of our crop land to perennial pasture with managed grazing. The main motivation was to save soil from erosion on our hilly, Driftless area farm in Vernon County. A concern for financial return was secondary for us but important. In the ensuing 30 years we have improved soil health, virtually eliminated erosion and its attendant phosphorous loss, provided habitat for pollinators and had a consistent and acceptable financial outcome from the sale of beef cattle.

Here in Wisconsin a clever person can easily develop highly productive pasture systems producing and feeding high quality forage for ruminants. This is due to our abundant water resource, climate and good soils. As a consultant to both my local Land & Water Department and to UW I have seen the way this can be done with good financial result.

It is especially effective for developing replacement heifers for large dairy operations yielding cost savings on raising replacement heifers. In aggregate this is a substantial number given that there are approximately 400,000 heifers added to the State herd each year.

In addition to the opportunity for the dairy industry there can be a significant impact on the specialty beef supply chain in the State – specifically the “grass-fed” beef industry. This impacts producers, suppliers, processors and retailers.

The reason the opportunities are still slow to be developed is primarily the uncertainty it presents to people making agricultural enterprise land-use decisions. Do I have the capability to make it work? Can I get sustained financial return? How can I afford the establishment of this new system?

The legislation you have out for comment has the element to address these concerns when added to existing efforts by public and private actors in this space. A key to making the legislation impactful is having service providers – governmental and NGO – to help producers put plans in place to make it work. It seems that some of the funding would support that.

I encourage the State to pass this legislation.

Jim Munsch  
S1064 Bagstad Lane  
Coon Valley WI 54623  
608-498-2634

**Testimony in favor of the Wisconsin Transition to Grass Pilot Program  
January 30, 2024**

My name is Laura Paine. I am a retired beef farmer from Columbus and a long-time grazing educator with over 30 years' experience. I have dedicated my personal and professional life to this field because I value Wisconsin's landscapes and rural communities and I recognize how these things that I love have been shaped by livestock farming. Managed grazing of perennial grasslands a uniquely effective tool for protecting Wisconsin's water resources AND the economic viability of livestock and dairy farms. The Transition to Grass Pilot Program can be a catalyst for reversing decades of losses of family farms and ensuring clean water for future generations.

I had the honor of managing DATCP's Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative grant program for eight years between 2006 and 2014. During that period, the program transitioned more than 11,000 acres per year to well-managed perennial pastures. Working with the communities that benefited from that program, I was a first-hand witness to the effectiveness of using targeted state resources to achieve conservation and economic goals. I know from personal experience that any change to a farm's system brings with it costs and risks, The current bill's proposed combination of staffing, cost-share funding and technical assistance can help minimize financial risks for farmers and pave the way for a successful transition.

A state investment in managed grazing can not only support individual farms but signal to citizens a shared support for farming practices that are both economically and environmentally sound. Managed grazing is a win-win option, contributing to farmer profitability while protecting natural resources and economic vitality for rural communities. I believe it is a wise investment of Wisconsin tax dollars.

Laura Paine  
N893 Kranz Road  
Columbus, WI  
608-338-9039  
lkpaine@gmail.com

**Testimony by Tom Kriegl for information only on Wisconsin Senate Bill 619 January 30, 2024**

For long it has been widely understood that bare ground is subject to soil erosion which then contributes to many other problems including more frequent and more severe flooding, contamination of surface water and groundwater, damage to roads and buildings and more.

For long it has also been widely understood that forages such as grasses and some legumes are much more effective in covering ground and therefore in minimizing soil erosion and its many problems than most grain crops, the acreage of which has increased significantly in Wisconsin in the last several decades. Too much of the increased acreage of grain crops has occurred on marginal land which can be very productive in grazing systems.

Plenty of research (including research I've completed) shows that land covered by forages and grazed by livestock not only minimizes problems like soil erosion but can also be economically competitive with grain crops.

It is also widely understood that overall, federal government programs **favor grain crops and confinement livestock operations relative to grazing livestock operations which often encourages more grain production which leaves more ground bare leading to more erosion.**

In addition, even when an alternative practice (like management intensive grazing relative to confinement) offers significant advantages there is a reluctance from individual producers to switch because switching from one practice to another can involve some one time costs.

**Consequently, implementation of Senate Bill 619 should help level the playing field between grazing and non grazing systems and improve soil and water conservation by reducing soil erosion along with the problems caused by erosion.**

Sincerely

Tom Kriegl

Farm Financial Analyst Emeritus

University of Wisconsin Center For Dairy Profitability

University of Wisconsin Extension

University of Wisconsin Center Integrated Agricultural Systems Research Fellow

[tskriegl@wisc.edu](mailto:tskriegl@wisc.edu)

608-356-4373

**Testimony of Jason Cavadini**  
**UW-Extension Grazing Outreach Specialist**

**Public Hearing, Senate Committee on Agriculture and Tourism, January 30, 2024**

As the Grazing Outreach Specialist for UW-Extension, it is my goal to develop programming that results in more acres of Wisconsin farmland being converted to well-managed, grass-based agriculture. Yes, perennial, grass-based agricultural systems can deliver tremendous economic and environmental outcomes that cannot be ignored. But there are a couple other benefits of grass-based agriculture that deserve more attention. First, perennial grasses are one of the only universal solutions to our state's environmental challenges. Second, grass-based agriculture is one of the only feasible entry points to agriculture for aspiring farmers. Simply put, the **Transition to grass pilot program** will absolutely result in the most commonsense solution to Wisconsin's natural resource concerns as well as the most feasible option for people to get into farming.

The diversity of topography, soils, and environments across the landscape is what makes Wisconsin special. But this is also what makes solving our soil and water concerns so difficult. While we tend to think there is no universal solution, perennial grasses may be the lone exception. Perennial grasses are particularly well-suited to all of Wisconsin, from the southern prairies to the Northwoods, from the Driftless area to Lake Michigan. While perennial grasses may require a little different management from place to place, what remains consistent is their ability to support high quality livestock agriculture, improve our soil and water resources, rebuild ecosystem function, restore farm profitability, and sustain rural lifestyle and communities.

The economic model for grass-based livestock agriculture may be the only real chance remaining for small farms to remain on the land, for transitioning farms to stay in the family, and for new farmers to get a start. As an owner of a small, grass-based livestock operation in North-Central Wisconsin, I can personally attest that my lifelong dream of raising a family on a farm never would have materialized without the opportunity that grazing provided. As a result, it has become my professional goal to see as many rural Wisconsin citizens share this same experience. While we have struggled for years to determine that best way to do that, I believe the Transition to grass pilot program is just what is needed.

As the UW-Extension Grazing Outreach Specialist, I support any program that results in more perennial grasses on the landscape, more grass-based livestock agriculture, and more opportunities for aspiring farmers. I am grateful for the Legislature's leadership on grazing, and I support SB619 to create the Transition to grass pilot program through DATCP. I am asking for your vote to pass SB619 out of committee, and I hope to see a vote on the Senate floor soon.

Jason Cavadini: (715)650-2748, [jason.cavadini@wisc.edu](mailto:jason.cavadini@wisc.edu)

Sincerely,

Jason Cavadini



505 Science Drive, Suite A, Madison, WI 53711 (608)-215-7156 [www.ducks.org](http://www.ducks.org)

1/29/2024

To: Senate Committee on Agriculture and Tourism

Re: Senate Bill 619 – Transition to Grass Pilot Program

Chair Ballweg and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of Senate Bill 619.

Ducks Unlimited, Inc. (DU) is a non-profit conservation organization dedicated to the conservation, restoration, and management of wetlands and associated habitats for North America's waterfowl, recognizing that these landscapes also benefit people. Grasslands in addition to wetlands are a priority focus. The Transition to Grass Pilot Program established at the Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection would provide grant money and technical assistance to help farmers establish managed grazing systems for livestock on their land which fits in with DU's mission. Managed grazing operations provide many ecological benefits along with high-quality forage for cattle and financial benefits for producers.

Waterfowl habitat is the top focus for DU. In Wisconsin, priority breeding waterfowl species such as Mallards and Blue-winged Teal nest in grasslands adjacent to wetlands. Wisconsin has seen significant grassland loss, and this impacts the number of breeding waterfowl the state can support. Newly established and managed grasslands for grazing can provide critical nesting habitat for waterfowl. Managed grazing systems also provide important water quality benefits which is a newer area of focus by DU. Grasslands reduce runoff and sedimentation into Wisconsin's waterways and wetlands, decreasing the amount of nitrogen, phosphorous, and other pollutants.

DU's agricultural program has been scaling up grazing efforts and will soon include a new Grazing Biologist positioned in Northwest Wisconsin. The position will work with landowners to develop grazing plans that incorporate wildlife friendly practices. The Transition to Grass Pilot Program would provide another funding source in addition to federal Farm Bill programs that would support landowners in their efforts to establish and improve grazing operations.

DU is asking for your vote to pass Senate Bill 619 out of committee. A state investment in managed grazing will provide benefits to local communities by supporting farmers as well as improving water quality and habitat.

Sincerely,

Tally Hamilton

Regional Biologist



Andy Williams  
Wisconsin Regional Field Representative  
Pheasants Forever, Inc.  
p. (402) 984-3161  
[apwilliams@pheasantsforever.org](mailto:apwilliams@pheasantsforever.org)

1/29/2024

To: Senate Committee on Agriculture and Tourism  
Re: Senate Bill 619 – Transition to Grass Pilot Program

Chair Ballweg and ranking members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of Senate Bill 619.

Pheasants Forever, Inc. (PF) is a national non-profit with a mission to conserve pheasants, quail, and other wildlife through habitat improvements, public access, education, and conservation advocacy. We believe that agricultural practices that are meant to maximize farm production can equally be used as tools to solve natural resource concerns and improve wildlife habitat. As Wisconsin's land ethic hero, Aldo Leopold, shared "The central thesis of game management is this: game can be restored by the creative use of the same tools which have heretofore destroyed it -- axe, plow, cow, fire, and gun."

Our context is based on the reality that conservation efforts in Wisconsin are insufficient to achieve desired targets for water quality, soil health, and wildlife habitat, while we also acknowledge that agricultural profitability is more tumultuous than ever. Our goal is to support win-win solutions that will encourage farmers to adopt practices that will improve their profitability and long-term sustainability. We believe that greater adoption of well managed grass-based grazing can do just that.

We advocate not for removal of livestock and grazing but bringing more of it and applying it in a different way, adapting and rotating to suit the needs of the livestock and the landscape. In essence, this way of grazing mimics the bison herds that used to roam Wisconsin where many animals use a small part of the land for a short time followed by a period of rest from grazing. The goal of this pilot program is to help farmers manage livestock efficiently, rotating their herd through a portion of their pasture for a short period of time each year. The rest of the year, that part of the pasture is at rest providing numerous ecosystem services.

Pastures managed in this rotational style produce a mosaic of grasses, legumes, and wildflowers of varying height and density due to timing and duration of grazing. This adaptive grazing yields dramatic increases in the types and amounts of insects and pollinators, which are the foundation to the food chain essential for grassland birds and other wildlife. And well managed pastures reduce erosion and filter sediment to improve water quality. Many studies find more birds on rotationally grazed pastures because these farms simply have what birds want and need: various habitat types for shelter and nesting, food sources, and adequate water sources. What is surprising is that in addition to creating habitat, rotational grazing also produces grass with higher forage quality that in turn creates a return on investment. This means that over time, farmers who graze this way can grow more pounds of beef per acre. Truly a win-win for the farmers, cattle, and birds!

We ask that you vote to pass SB 619 out of committee and bring this forward-thinking pilot program to the Senate floor. We thank the bill authors and all that have supported it so far, it serves as a great example of the creative use of the same tools that made Wisconsin strong.

Sincerely,

Andy Williams  
Wisconsin Regional Field Representative

Pheasants Forever's mission is to conserve pheasants, quail, and other wildlife through habitat improvements, public access, education, and conservation advocacy. Pheasants Forever is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization. Your donation is tax deductible under the fullest extent of the law. [See how your donation is used.](#)

Prof. Adena Rissman, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Legislative testimony, Senate Agriculture Committee

January 30, 2024

Hello! My name is Adena Rissman and I'm a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Thank you to Senator Ballweg and the members of the Committee for having this hearing. I'm here for informational purposes only.

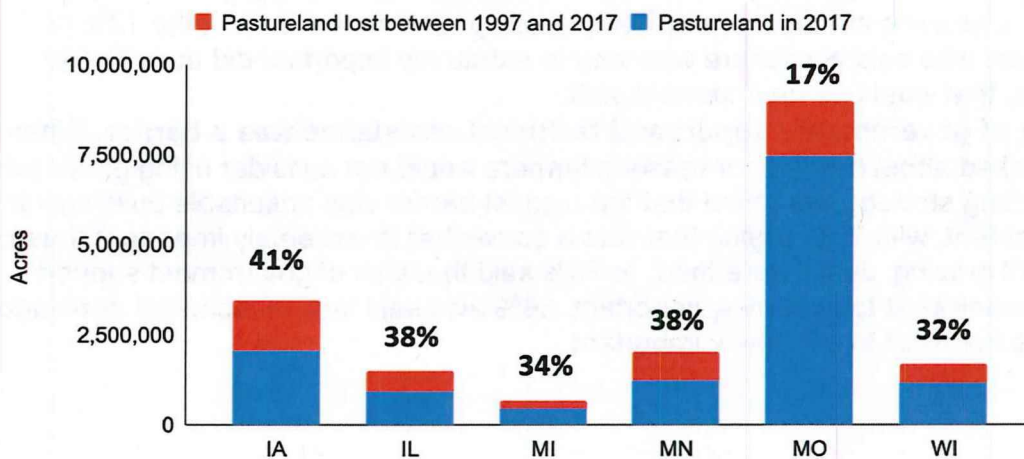
My research focuses on how policy can help private landowners in forestry and agriculture produce food and fiber in sustainable ways. I serve as the policy team lead on the Grassland 2.0 project which is a collaborative project funded by USDA for producers, researchers, and public and private sector folks to develop pathways for grassland-based agriculture. This is designed to increase profitability, production stability, and nutrient and water efficiency while improving water quality, soil health, biodiversity, and climate resiliency.

We have learned what it takes to transition to grazing through over 130 interviews, several workshops, and a survey of Wisconsin dairy farmers. Our findings show growing support for enhancing profitability, sustainability, and community well-being through increased adoption of managed grazing. However, we found significant barriers such as up-front capital requirements for cost-share, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient government support to facilitate a transition to perennial grass-based agriculture.

Thank you for the chance to share some of what we learned. I also want to give a shout out to the farmers who have fed us along the way - I'm looking forward to a delicious pasture-raised turkey thawing in my cooler at home right now.

### Pasture is declining in Wisconsin

Wisconsin had 1.1 million acres of non-woodland pasture in 2017, a decline of 32% from 1.7 million acres in 1997.



Percent of non-woodland pasture lost across the Upper Midwest between 1997 and 2017. Source: Agricultural Census 1997 and 2017 (USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, 1997, 2017).



**We heard from many producers in interviews that financial and technical assistance was critical for helping them get started with grazing.** It can be expensive to put up fences and install pipes for water before cows or sheep are even out on the land, much less turning a profit. Technical assistance is critical and sometimes limited, as there can be long waiting periods to get a grazing management plan. We also heard concerns with federal programs like EQIP that they were oversubscribed, time consuming to get started, and had extensive paperwork. We've seen from the example of the producer-led watershed program that state efforts can serve an important role in allowing for fast, flexible, and innovative actions, even if they provide less overall funding than federal programs. We heard how those programs are crucial for farmers to learn from each other, creating a space for sharing innovations.

### **Dairy farmer survey results**

This year, I worked with a group of economists and other social scientists at UW River Falls and UW Madison to survey dairy farmers. We heard from 660+ farmers with a 33% response rate, which is a relatively high response rate for farmer mail surveys these days. These results show the perspectives of one pathway into managed grazing, in which an existing dairy or livestock farmer transitions into rotational grazing. The other is that a new farmer starts off grazing from the get-go, and their perspectives are not included here.

We learned that 82% of survey respondents do not already practice management intensive rotational grazing, which means moving cows every 4 days or more often. From those not already rotationally grazing:

- **Cost sharing would be helpful for some dairy farmers to help support their transition to managed grazing.** 38% of dairy farmers who do not rotationally graze said that cost sharing would be somewhat to extremely important for helping support their use of managed grazing with their dairy animals. We recognize that most dairy farmers won't transition to rotational grazing, but we've seen a growing interest in dairy heifer grazing, and so if even just the 12% of farmers who said cost share was very to extremely important did transition to grass, that would be an important shift.
- **Lack of government support and technical assistance was a barrier.** When we asked about barriers, or reasons farmers would not consider using grazing as a feeding strategy, we found that the biggest barrier was unsuitable buildings and equipment, with 75% saying that was a somewhat to extremely important reason for not grazing. Just over a third, or 36% said that lack of government support was somewhat to extremely important. 36% also said lack of technical assistance was somewhat to extremely important.

More broadly, we asked existing dairy farmers their views on water quality and policy. We know that many farmers and organizations are working to improve agricultural management and sustain well-managed grazing operations to reduce runoff and leaching of phosphorus and nitrogen into the waters and wells of Wisconsin. Here's what we learned:

- **Water quality and soil health matter to farmers.** 83% of farmers emphasized the importance of enhancing soil health and 78% stressed the need to minimize nutrient runoff.
- **Protecting soil and water are more important for being a “good farmer” than having the highest milk production.** The majority said it is very-to-extremely important for a good farmer to improve soil health (83 percent) and minimize nutrient runoff (78 percent). Less than a quarter said it is very-to-extremely important to have the highest milk production (20 percent) or the latest technology (14 percent).
- **Dairy farmers support payments for water quality overall.** More than half, or 53 percent, of farmers support paying farmers for improved water quality outcomes, while 14 percent oppose this.

**In conclusion,** our research finds that Wisconsin is losing pasture acres and the year-round roots they keep in the soil. We saw a decline in state and federal funding for prescribed grazing at the end of the Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative around 2012. Well-managed grasslands, savannas, and other forms of perennial agriculture are presently underutilized. Farmers face significant barriers to adoption in terms of financial and technical assistance. This presents an opportunity for Wisconsin to pioneer a nimble, lower-paperwork approach that complements existing programs and aims to achieve farmer profitability, grow rural communities, keep water clean, build soil health and retain soil carbon, revitalize wildlife and pollinator habitat and biodiversity, and produce high-quality milk and meat.



POLICY BRIEF

# Managed Grazing and Grassland: Policy Trends and Opportunities for Renewal in Wisconsin

AUTHORS

**Adena Rissman**, Vilas Distinguished Achievement Professor, University of Wisconsin–Madison

**Erin Green**, Research Assistant, University of Wisconsin–Madison

**Claire Widmann**, Research Assistant, University of Wisconsin–Madison

Review by the Grassland 2.0 policy team



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# Managed Grazing and Grassland: Policy Trends and Opportunities for Renewal in Wisconsin

## SUMMARY

Grasslands, including prairie and pasture, have declined precipitously on private lands, with tremendous environmental and social costs. This decline reflects the unequal policy support provided to grasslands and managed grazing in comparison with row crops. This policy brief provides an overview of the policy tools and implementation capacity that supports and constrains managed grazing and grasslands in Wisconsin. It is designed as a resource for stakeholders and decision-makers to support the need for policy attention to grasslands and grazing. Grassland area declined 39% over the past two decades in Wisconsin. Institutional support has likewise declined. Wisconsin lost its statewide grazing specialist when the federal Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative funding ended in 2013. Risk reduction subsidies for corn and soy far outpace the support for pasture. Lands that received prescribed grazing practices through the federal Natural Resources Conservation Service declined after 2005 but remained steady in the past decade. These results reveal the policy disadvantage for grasslands and managed grazing in comparison with row crop agriculture for milk and meat production. We end with recommendations for statewide planning, prioritizing grasslands and grazing in agricultural and conservation programs, and support for supply chains and land access. These strategies are critical for renewing our commitment to grasslands, farmers, and consumers in Wisconsin.

## Benefits of Managed Grazing and Grasslands

Producers, researchers, conservationists, and citizens are recognizing the potential of managed grazing. Grazing livestock on grassland offers a relatively profitable and low-cost opportunity for farmers, whose access to high quality forage reduces their feed and manure management costs. Demand for grass-fed products is increasing. The deep roots of perennial grasslands hold and build soils, sequester carbon, help soak up water before it floods our communities, and capture and filter nutrients, keeping them out of our drinking water and air. Managed well, perennial grasslands can support wildlife such as birds, pollinators, and other organisms that make a home in our diverse countryside. Managed grazing systems have great potential to revitalize native ecosystems and meet the needs of consumers and producers alike.

## Declining Grass: Trends in Pasture and Grasslands

Pasture, other grasslands, and savannah have declined substantially in Wisconsin and throughout the Midwest. These losses have continued in recent decades. Wisconsin had 1.1 million acres of non-woodland pasture in 2017, a decline of 39% from 1.9 million acres in 1997.<sup>1</sup> Grassland not including pasture decreased 12% in this time (310,000 acres in 2016, down from 350,000 acres in 2001.<sup>2</sup>) Pasture is located on 45% of Wisconsin farms but only makes up 7% of Wisconsin farmland. In addition, about 15% of Wisconsin farms have woodlands that are grazed.<sup>3</sup> These declines are contributing to problems in agricultural production, water quality, pollinator habitat, and farmer communities.

## Declines in Federal Support for Grasslands and Grazing

### End of the Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative (2004-2012)

Federal funds that support grazing networks and education have declined due to the end of funding for the Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative (GLCI) in 2012. The GLCI supported technical assistance and education for graziers and their service providers. The GLCI was initiated in 1991 and offered by Wisconsin NRCS starting in 1999. In 2004, the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection (DATCP) took over administration of GLCI funds allocated to Wisconsin.<sup>4</sup> At its peak in 2010, the program provided a combined total of just over \$1 million in federal and state funding for competitive grants for managed grazing education, technical assistance and research. The program consistently received more grant requests than funding available. Under GLCI, technical assistance providers created and revised over 2,200 grazing plans for farmers in Wisconsin between 2004 and 2012. The Wisconsin match program was repealed in 2013 under Wisconsin Act 20.<sup>5</sup>

### Grassland Cost-Sharing

The federal government provides cost-sharing to farmers through Farm Bill programs. The most notable programs are the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Grasslands Reserve Program (GRP), and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). In Wisconsin, acres receiving NRCS support for prescribed grazing declined by 55.4% between 2005 and 2020.<sup>6</sup>

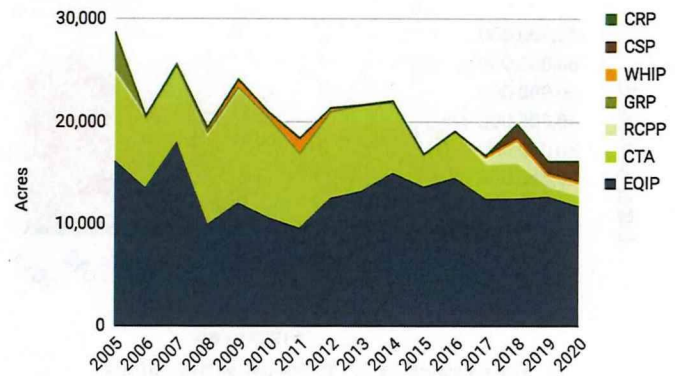


Figure 1. Any grazing land conservation practices including prescribed grazing, forage planting, road access, and fencing by NRCS in Wisconsin. The programs are the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA), Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), Grassland Reserve Program (GRP), Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), and Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).<sup>6</sup>

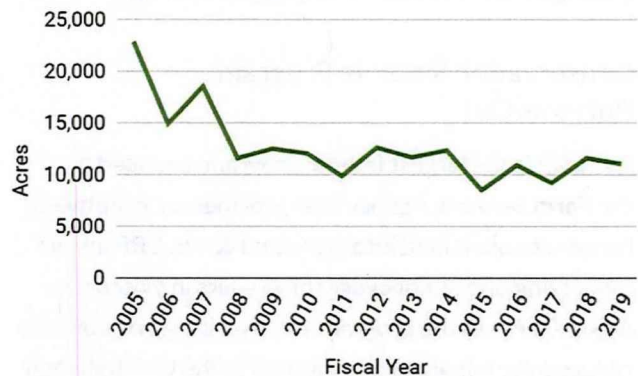


Figure 2. Prescribed grazing practices by the Natural Resources Conservation Service in Wisconsin.<sup>6</sup>

Wisconsin farmers received a total of \$24.3 million from the NRCS for pasture obligations from 2010 to 2019 through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). This is a small fraction (6%) of total EQIP and CSP expenditures in Wisconsin.

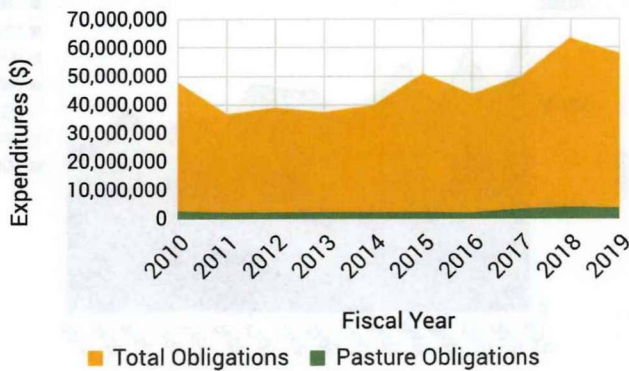


Figure 3. NRCS total and pasture-related funding obligations by fiscal year through EQIP and CSP contracts.

In FY20, NRCS applied conservation practices to 18,763 acres of grazing land to improve the resource base. Through EQIP, NRCS obligated \$968,461 for prescribed grazing across a count of 352 practices in FY20.<sup>7</sup>

### Conservation Reserve Program Bottoms Out

The CRP is the largest federal program managed by the Farm Services Agency that provides an incentive to farmers to plant land into grassland cover. CRP allows for grazing one out of every three years in Wisconsin. Adjustments to the program and the rising price of corn reduced the impact of and interest in the CRP between 2007 and 2020. CRP acreage in Wisconsin declined from 33,515 acres in 2007 to 921 acres in 2020, a 97.25% decrease.<sup>8</sup>

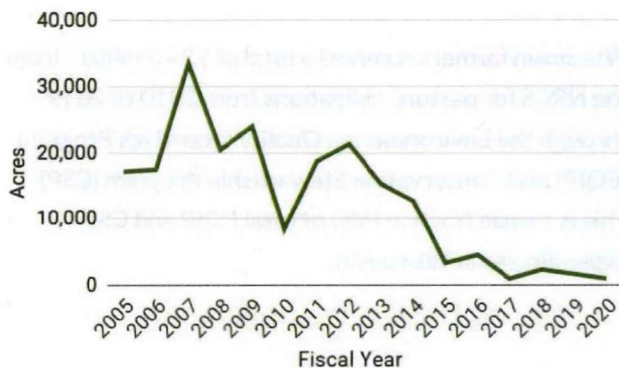


Figure 4. Conservation Reserve Program area in Wisconsin<sup>8</sup>

### The End of the Grassland Reserve Program and Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easements

Conservation easements are perpetual or long term agreements that restrict development and can promote working land uses like grazing. The 2002 Farm Bill introduced the Grassland Reserve Program (GRP), a voluntary easement program under which participants limit housing development and cropping to protect grasslands and their grazing and biodiversity benefits. Wisconsin had 22 GRP easements totalling 3,875.5 acres when the program was ended and brought under the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP).<sup>9</sup> Since then, 17 additional ACEP Agricultural Land Easements have been created in Wisconsin, totalling 1,299 acres, including some grazing lands.<sup>10</sup> Wisconsin briefly had a state Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easements initiative to protect farmland from development.

### Grazing Under-Supported by Federal Subsidies and Insurance Payments

Commodity subsidies and crop insurance provide substantial support for row crops such as corn and soybeans. Crop insurance buffers farmer income against corn and soybean revenue changes as well as risks like flooding and drought. In contrast, the support provided for pasture is less developed. For instance, Whole-Farm Revenue Protection, a crop-neutral revenue insurance policy, was created in the 2014 Farm Bill and can help graziers, but program rules, low payouts, farmer lack of familiarity, and paperwork requirements have hindered adoption. Insurance payments in Wisconsin averaged \$104 million per year for corn, \$35 million for soybeans, and \$6 million for forage and pasture from 2010 to 2019.<sup>11</sup> Commodity subsidies averaged \$91 million per year for corn, \$445 million for soybeans, and \$0 for pasture and forage from 2010 to 2018.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, federal dairy programs have failed to address problems of oversupply. Without market signals that limit annual increases in milk production relative to

demand, small and medium dairy farmers are being pushed out of the market. Milwaukee Journal Sentinel's journalist Rick Barrett documented the crisis in a Pulitzer Center series "Dairyland in Distress". The reports were sobering before the COVID-19 pandemic, and only worsened after. In 2018, Wisconsin led the nation in farm bankruptcies, and lost 700 dairy farmers – nearly two per day. In April 2019 he documented a loss of three per day. On average, milk costs \$17-22 per hundredweight (about 12 gallons) to produce, while the price farmers receive averages \$15.<sup>13</sup> Economic research indicates that if a federal growth management policy was adopted, an average Wisconsin grazing dairy would realize a Net Farm Operating Income increase of up to 74%, and depending on the policy design, average annual milk prices would increase between \$0.73/cwt and \$1.41/cwt. for farms that stayed within production limits.<sup>14</sup>

## State and Local Funds, Plans, and Taxes

From 1999 through 2014, Wisconsin received yearly federal and sometimes state funding for the GLCI, which provided technical assistance, education, and research related to grazing. While Wisconsin no longer has any statewide grants or incentives specifically for grazing and pasture, some grant programs for water quality and wildlife provide funds for creation of grazing and pasturelands or grasslands.

Wisconsin does not currently have a statewide grazing plan. In 2002, Wisconsin released a statewide plan for agriculture<sup>15</sup> that included mentions of grazing, but no plan to incentivize or increase grazing in the state. The Wisconsin DNR is in the process of developing a grazing program for state lands. Some county land and water resource management plans have mentioned the benefits of grazing and grasslands and have set goals to promote grazing.

Wisconsin's 2013 nutrient reduction strategy<sup>16</sup> noted that pastureland was a potential source of nutrient runoff and that prescribed grazing was a best

management practice for non-point pollution control. In the 2017-2019 implementation progress report<sup>17</sup>, the Wisconsin DNR showed that they increased the area of permanent prescribed grazing in the state by 272 acres using soil and water resource management funds.

Some local governments also provide grazing support. Counties have the ability to cost-share managed grazing practices and provide technical assistance if it is identified as a local priority. For instance, Washburn County offers cost-share<sup>18</sup> for fencing, livestock access lanes, stream crossings, watering facilities, and pasture establishment to promote rotational grazing. Other counties such as Columbia, Dane, Lincoln, and Marathon have programs that provide planning and technical assistance as well as funding for farmers wanting to transition to grazing or pasture.

Agricultural land including grazing land has lower tax rates in Wisconsin, but prairie without grazing or haying is subject to higher taxes. Farmers who graze woodlands pay a lower tax rate than woodland owners without grazing. Woodlands enrolled in the state Managed Forest Law cannot have grazing due to resource concerns.

## Organizations Supporting Grazing and Grasslands

GrassWorks<sup>19</sup>, Wisconsin's statewide member-based grazing organization, provides leadership and education to farmers and consumers for the advancement of managed grazing. GrassWorks offers a Grazing Guidebook<sup>20</sup>, presentations, newsletters, field days and pasture walks. They host a statewide grazing conference<sup>21</sup> annually and support regional and local grazing networks.<sup>22</sup> A number of organizations provide pasture walks, education, and information on grazing in their programming and publications. For instance, the Wisconsin Farmers Union typically partners with several Resource Conservation & Development councils (RC&Ds) to host pasture walks for peer-to-peer learning on grazing practices and information

for the general public. Pasture walks, education, and information are also provided by some County Land Conservation Departments, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES), the University of Wisconsin–Madison Division of Extension, and Trout Unlimited. The Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship program, a recognized federal workforce development certification, is based in Wisconsin and serves multiple states. The UW–Madison Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems (CIAS) was created by graziers to meet their research and training needs. CIAS currently holds field days, produces information resources, and organizes courses for the Wisconsin School for Beginning Dairy and Livestock Farmers<sup>23</sup>, typically taught in-person and remotely broadcasted on how to start and succeed in grass-based dairy and livestock farming. The UW–Madison Marshfield Ag Research Station houses dairy heifers that can be used for dairy grazing research, but the UW does not have a dedicated grazing herd. Several UW staff and faculty researchers and their groups focus on grazing and grassland research.

Grassland management and conservation are also supported by conservation and hunting organizations. An annual prairie conference is coordinated by The Prairie Enthusiasts. Several organizations provide information, prairie walks, and management training to landowners including Pheasants Forever, The Prairie Enthusiasts, and the Wisconsin DNR. Prescribed burn trainings are provided by The Prairie Enthusiasts, Fox Valley Technical College, Madison Area Technical College, The Aldo Leopold Foundation, and the

Wisconsin Prescribed Fire Council. Regional networks include the Southern Driftless Grasslands, Central Wisconsin Grassland Conservation Area, and the Mississippi Valley Conservancy.

### Staff Supporting Grazing

State and federal staffing support for grazing has declined in NRCS, Wisconsin’s Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection, UW–Madison College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, and UW–Madison Division of Extension, but increased at Wisconsin DNR. These staff numbers do not include researchers.

County land and water conservation staff also help support graziers. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Wisconsin has 96 Certified Prescribed Grazing Planners<sup>28</sup> who spend a portion of their time on grazing and are employed through NRCS, counties, nonprofit organizations, and private consulting groups. NRCS has a State Grazing Lands Specialist.

### Grass-fed and Organic Labels and Certifications

Consumer demand for organic and grass-fed beef is rapidly increasing. The Nielsen Marketing Research firm found that sales of organic and non-organic grass-fed beef doubled each year between 2012 and 2016. In contrast, conventional beef sales increased by just 7% each year. Despite the market potential for the grass-fed industry, there is little governmental support for American producers.<sup>29</sup>

STAFF DEDICATED TO GRAZING IN 2020, NOT INCLUDING RESEARCH		NOTES
0.3 <sup>24</sup>	University of Wisconsin–Madison Division of Extension	The Extension grazing research specialist retired in 2014.
0.5 <sup>25</sup>	UW–Madison Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems	Number of staff that are working on Wisconsin School for Beginning Dairy and Livestock School.
0.25 <sup>26</sup>	Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection (DATCP)	DATCP had a full-time person supporting 50% grazing and 50% organic farming, from 2006 through 2014. .
2.5 <sup>27</sup>	Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources	Number of staff hours dedicated to grazing has been on the rise at the DNR over the past 2.5 years as development of a statewide DNR public lands grazing program progresses.



Grass-based dairy and meat is often labeled or certified to inform consumers. Some labels are connected to formal governance systems through certification. For instance, milk and meat that are certified organic by the U.S. Department of Agriculture must have cows on pasture 120 days per year for 30% of their diet. Wisconsin had 453 organic dairy farms selling milk from cows with sales of \$126 million as of 2016.<sup>30</sup> A total of 586 organic farms sold \$16 million in products from beef and other cattle. Wisconsin had 51,870 acres of certified organic pastureland/ rangeland in 2016, a 35% increase from 2011.<sup>30</sup>

A few programs require 100% grass-fed, such as Organic Plus Trust and American Grassfed Association (AGA). There are currently 39 farms certified by the Organic Plus Trust and 2 farms certified by the AGA in Wisconsin.<sup>31 32</sup>

Midwest Organic Services Association (MOSA), based in Viroqua, Wisconsin, offers Grass-Fed Beef and Grass-Fed Dairy certifications, which require at least 60% of each animal's feed to be from pasture. MOSA also offers Transitional Organic Verification cost-sharing for those who require support transitioning to an organic production system.

## Public Lands Grazing

The DNR allows conservation grazing in some wildlife management areas across the state. They also have a collaborative project with university extension and private graziers called Grazing Public Lands in Wisconsin.<sup>33</sup> The fact sheet for the program can be found here.<sup>34</sup> This project evaluates the opportunities and challenges of rotationally-grazed livestock for conservation on public grasslands.

## Tribal Grazing

Several Native Nations pasture livestock to promote food sovereignty and provide healthy food and connections to land. For instance, the Oneida Nation educational farm Tsyunhehkwa<sup>35</sup> has a herd of cattle.

The Oneida Nation Farms and Agriculture Center raises steers, cow-calf pairs, and grass-fed bison.<sup>36</sup> The Forest County Potawatomi own and operate a farm called Bodwéwadmí Ktëgan, where they raise pastured chickens, hogs, grass-fed cattle and bison. The Ho Chunk Nation had a bison herd and may again in the future. The Menominee Nation has allocated land for farming operations, is actively developing a food production initiative including grazing, and building an agricultural degree program at the College of Menominee Nation.

## Land Access Assistance for New Farmers

Wisconsin does not have a dedicated statewide program to provide land access assistance to new farmers. However, many land trusts, farm organizations, universities, and local state and federal staff assist people in accessing land to become farmers. The University of Wisconsin–Madison's internationally known Land Tenure Center closed in 2018.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Well managed grasslands, savannas, and other forms of perennial agriculture have a presently underutilized ability to increase farmer profitability, grow strong, diverse rural communities, revitalize biodiversity, build soil health, keep water clean, and sequester carbon. We recommend federal, state, and local governments, civil society organizations, and the private sector consider these actions in order to support a transition to perennial agriculture:

### Coordinate statewide planning

- Develop a statewide grasslands and grazing plan to help guide agencies and entities in coordinating their efforts.

### Prioritize grasslands and grazing in agricultural and conservation programs

- Deploy USDA's existing conservation programs to focus on practices that sequester carbon and improve water quality, including managed grazing, perennials, and agroforestry.
- Expand the support for grassland and managed grazing in local, state and federal cost-share, grant, and loan programs to support grass-based livestock, clean water, flood mitigation, soil carbon, and habitat for wildlife and pollinators.
- Improve training about grass-based livestock systems for producers and public, private sector, and tribal advisors and conservationists.
- Encourage conservation easements that secure grasslands while making managed grazing land more accessible and supporting public recreation opportunities.
- Establish a Perennial Crop Advisor Program within state and federal agencies to train crop advisors on how best to incorporate grasslands and other forms of perennial agriculture into existing cropping systems.
- Enhance local technical assistance delivery through additional resources for county conservation

departments, university extension, and other local technical advisors.

- Prioritize perennial and grassland agriculture in cross-agency agricultural and conservation initiatives that support resilience to climate change.
- Develop and communicate quality standards for grass-based agriculture to achieve desirable environmental and social outcomes.

### Enhance supply chains and farmer opportunities for grass-based milk and meat

- Develop grassland value-added supply-chains by supporting regional processors, aggregators, distributors, and marketers focused on grassland products and their stories.
- Establish funding mechanisms to assist small businesses engaged in establishing supply chains and markets for grasslands and other forms of perennial agriculture.
- Increase support for Tribal climate-smart perennial agriculture and forestry through support for market development and purchasing of food for tribal members and nontribal consumers.
- Explore efforts to better align supply and demand to rebalance the market and reduce overproduction.
- Encourage beginning and historically underserved farmers by providing stipends for mentor farmers, programs offering low-interest loans, land access assistance, and tax incentives, in order to ensure just transitions to perennial agriculture.

Taking these steps will help us transition toward agriculture that better supports farmers, eaters, ecosystems, and rural economies alike.

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[grasslandag.org](http://grasslandag.org)

Michael P. King



Grassland 2.0 is a collaborative group of farmers, researchers, and public and private sector leaders working to develop pathways for increased farmer profitability, yield stability and nutrient and water efficiency, while improving water quality, soil health, biodiversity, and climate resilience through grassland-based agriculture.

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The project is based at UW–Madison and the work is supported by the Sustainable Agriculture Systems Coordinated Agricultural Program grant no. 2019-68012-29852 from the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture.



## Wisconsin Land+Water Conservation Association

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### Schoepps Named 2023 Conservation Farm Family of the Year

When visitors arrive at Schoepp Farms in West Point township in Columbia County, they are instantly struck by the picturesque view of Lake Wisconsin, which is located just adjacent to and downslope of the third-generation farm. However, the view is not the only impressive thing to be found at the 600+ acre operation. For decades, Ron, Dave, and Nancy Schoepp have continued to look for ways to implement and promote conservation practices and soil health principles on their farm. That dedication earned them recognition from WI Land+Water as the 2023 Conservation Farm Family of the Year.

Schoepp Farms is a well-diversified grazing and cash grain operation that grows over 500 acres of corn, soybeans, winter wheat, and alfalfa, as well as 110 acres of grass pastures that are dedicated to raising 200 dairy heifers, 30-50 dry cows, and 15 grass-fed beef. The Schoepps' conservation ethic goes back for decades, beginning with Dave and Nancy's conservation plan in the 1980s, followed by their enrollment in the Farmland Preservation Program in 1988. Ron traces his father Dave's conservation ethic back even further to the 1960s, noting that the plow was always picked up and sprayers turned off when going through waterways. The family added no-tilling in 1991 and converted to all no-till by 1995. In 1997, they frost-seeded red clover into a winter wheat field and Ron introduced rotational grazing to their operation.

Their 30-plus years of no-tilling crops and rotational grazing has made soil erosion almost nonexistent on their operation. Water infiltration and retention have been significantly improved, while crop residue and organic matter increases act like a sponge and enable the farm to withstand droughts and extreme rains with minimal yield losses. These grazing practices allow for portions of the pasture to remain untouched annually until mid-July, providing crucial space for grassland birds to nest. The 60-day grazing rotation also allows native plants to continuously bloom and provide habitat for pollinating insects.

But the Schoepps' work doesn't stop with the implementation of these practices, and conservation education and demonstration have been equally as important to the family. They have hosted numerous events, research studies, field days, and farm tours to promote and educate others on the importance of conservation in farming. "It is truly difficult to emphasize everything that the Schoepps have done to protect land, water, and wildlife integrity for no other reason than genuinely caring about doing so," said Todd Rietmann, Land & Water Resource Management Senior Specialist for Columbia County. The Schoepps were nominated for the award by the Columbia County Land and Water Conservation Department. "They have generously given countless hours and donated their own money towards hastening conservation-related public outreach events. Despite everything that they are already doing and the steps they take each and every day for land and water resources, they are always asking questions and wondering how they can do more to improve their own land and to educate others," added Rietmann.

As part of those educational efforts, Ron has become an active leader in the community, working closely with the Sauk Soil and Water Improvement Group (SSWIG) and the Lake Wisconsin Farmer Led Watershed Council. He has worked with both groups to host events, including Conservation Day by the Lake aimed at educating farmers in the area and Conservation Night by the Lake aimed at highlighting farming practices to local lakeshore homeowners.

As recipients of the award, the Schoepps will also host the state's next Conservation Observance Day on June 23, 2023. The free public event will showcase the family's conservation practices, as well as their impact on the community and watershed. During the daylong event, visitors will have the opportunity to stop at various demonstration stations around the farm, including a rainfall simulator, soil pit, cover crop field, and barnyard.

But for Ron, the event is also an opportunity to celebrate and recognize the support of the very community that these conservation practices benefit. "This isn't just about one person—the name of the award is the 'Farm Family' and I couldn't do this without my family, friends, and community who support this work," said Ron Schoepp. "Without their support—and without the watershed groups and collaborators, agency partners, and nonprofit partners—none of this would be possible."

# Conservation Observance Day

*Schoepp Farm, Lodi, WI*

When visitors arrive at Schoepp Farms in West Point township in Columbia County, they are instantly struck by the picturesque view of Lake Wisconsin, which is located just adjacent to and downslope of the third-generation farm. However, the view is not the only impressive thing to be found at the 600+ acre operation. For decades, Ron, Dave, and Nancy Schoepp have continued to look for ways to implement and promote conservation practices and soil health principles on their farm. That dedication earned them recognition from WI Land+Water as the 2023 Conservation Farm Family of the Year.

As recipients of the 2023 Conservation Farm Family of the Year award, the Schoepp's hosted Conservation Observance Day at their farm on June 23rd. The free public event showcased the family's conservation practices as well as their impact on the community and watershed. During the daylong event, visitors had the opportunity to stop at various demonstration stations around the farm, including a rainfall simulator, soil pit, cover crop field, barnyard improvement practices, rotational grazing, and an optional bus tour to the unique Sauk pasture. Presentations were given by Matt Krueger, WI Land+Water, Executive Director; Randy Romanski, DATCP Secretary; Ann Kipper, DNR, Division Administrator for External Services; Jeremy Bennett, NRCS, Acting WI State Conservationist; Tyrone Larson, NRCS, Assistant State Conservationist; and Gene Schriefer, USDA FSA, State Executive Director.

Over 200 people from around the state attended the 2023 Conservation Observance Day. A hearty lunch was prepared by Lodi Sausage and provided by the event sponsors.

Local and state conservation organizations were on hand to provide information on available programs to implement practices seen on the Schoepp Farm.

***We would like to thank all of the sponsors and donors who helped make this event possible:***

**Major Sponsors:** Meijer, Lake Wisconsin Alliance, River Alliance of Wisconsin

**Community Sponsors:** Alliant Energy, Bank of Prairie Du Sac, Compeer Financial, Culver's, Foremost Farms, Grassland 2.0, Sand County Foundation, Savanna Institute, Schwarz Insurance Agency Inc., Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education, WI Land+Water Southern Area Association, WI Standards Oversight Council,

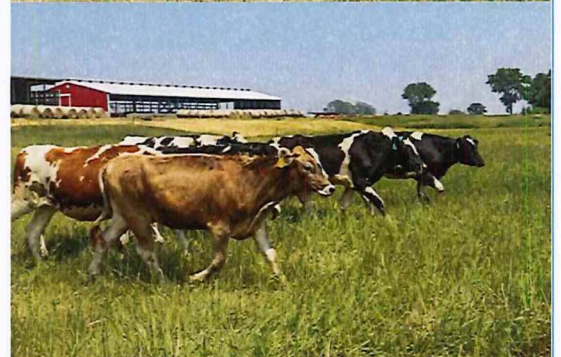
**Friend of the Farm:** Byron Seeds LLC, Hartmann Farms LLC, Premier Co-op



*Schoepp Family*



*Dave Considine 81st District Assembly, Matt Krueger, Ron, Dave, and Nancy Schoepp, Wisconsin State Senator Dianne Hesselbein*



January 30, 2024

Re: Senate Bill 619

Lauren Langworthy - Co-Owner of Blue Ox Farm, Wheeler, WI; member of Wisconsin Farmers Union

Farming skipped a generation in my family. My grandparents left a legacy of stewardship, creative solutions, and contributing to their community. I strive to do the same on our 153-acre beef and lamb grazing operation. When my husband and I started our new farm from scratch, land prices were much higher and opportunities more sparse than for my grandparents. We have had to lean hard on that spirit of creativity that they modeled. Those trends have continued to squeeze opportunities for everyone in the important profession of farming. It's hard to imagine starting a farm today.

Grazing has provided huge opportunities for us as new farmers. We are now networked with hundreds of other farmers who are also recognizing the potential of grass-based agriculture. It takes time and effort to learn to do it well, but it provides significant benefits like low-cost operation after initial investments, reduced erosion and runoff, and the potential to improve the productivity of marginal land. It's a way for beginning farmers to get in and a model for experienced farmers to improve their profitability.

We didn't have the capital to do everything our budding farm business needed all at once, so we relied on sweat equity, conservation programs, wit and grit to build fences, water lines, and develop productive pastures. We took advantage of every resource available, including the amazing network of farmers and ag professionals represented here today. However - as with everything in farming - little setbacks, lack of experience, and unexpected bumps in the road can make a big difference in the potential for success.

My husband and I developed a plan utilizing several years of successive contracts and grants to slowly develop the infrastructure we needed. We had to educate ourselves so that we could be our own advocates throughout the process and we delayed necessary investments until we could cash flow them. However, one missed grant period, unexpected expense, or delayed Farm Bill and we were left redesigning the whole plan.

In today's agricultural economic landscape, we can't rely on a hope that every new farmer will have the savvy, energy, and grit to spend their first decade weaving together resources just to hold on. Good new farmers need support and cultivation if we want our rural areas and food system to thrive.

If we would have had access to a program like the proposed DATCP Transition to Grass Pilot Program that will be created by SB 619, we would have been able to more quickly and effectively build our grazing operation into a profitable business. Support from knowledgeable professionals will help new graziers access and make the most of existing opportunities. Grants will help cash flow necessary infrastructure and manage reimbursement programs in quick succession. Those farmers supported by this program can focus on being good farmers and marketing their products instead of navigating programs and identifying resources. Thank you for helping to make this a reality for the next generation of farmers.





Tuesday January 30th, 2024

Senate Committee on Agriculture and Tourism

**Re: Senate Bill 619; Relating to: a transition to grass pilot program and making an appropriation**

Chair Ballweg and members of the committees, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 619.

Wisconsin Farmers Union's grassroots, member-driven policy reads:

*“Sustainable land-use and farming practices (e.g., no-till or low-till planting, cover cropping, and rotational livestock-grazing) not only protect the environment, but also have the potential to improve farmer economic stability and food security, which benefits all Americans.*

*Wisconsin Farmers Union strongly advocates that permanent groundcover and managed grazing dairy and livestock systems are the Best Management practice to control soil erosion and phosphorus pollution in our nation's freshwater resources.”*

Over time, we have seen conventional agriculture focus heavily on profit margins and highest yields, pushing operations to implement chemical, and technical methods of farming intended to extract agriculture out of the environment.

Managed Grazing is a farming method that recognizes and supports the interdependence between agriculture and the environment. Wisconsin Farmers Union supports the introduction of a Transition to Grass program at DATCP, under SB 619.

This program would provide funding and technical assistance to encourage more farmers to implement livestock grass-based managed grazing systems onto their operations. Managed grazing on perennial grasslands mitigates the impacts of GHG emission, controls soil erosion and phosphorus pollution in freshwater, as well as improves economic stability to the operation. Long term benefits of grazing systems also improve a farm's overall health, and builds its productive capacity, moving operations away from short-term extractive methods of agriculture.



Managed grazing can be implemented on new operations, as well as on established operations, and can be used with any livestock species and adapted to any ecosystem that grows grass. This level of versatility makes grazing central to sustainable agriculture.

We see the unique nature of the 3-year state support structure for the grant and the multi-year funding structure being especially helpful for applicants to overcome hurdles as they implement this system to their operation.

Wisconsin Farmers Union thanks the bill authors for putting forth this legislation that strengthens Wisconsin's environment and biodiversity, animal welfare, public health and nutrition, and the viability of rural economies and communities.

Thank you for this opportunity to share Wisconsin Farmers Union's thoughts on this issue.

Sincerely,

Michelle Ramirez-White

Policy Coordinator, Wisconsin Farmers Union