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February 4, 2020

AB 790

Thank you Chairman Tauchen and members of the Committee on Agriculture for holding a hearing on Assembly Bill 790 which provides almost \$3 million in additional funding for the County Conservation Staffing Grant Program.

This bill is part of a package of bills introduced by the Speaker's Task Force on Water Quality.

As the task force traveled the state, we heard overwhelming testimony in support of the work done by county conservationists. Providing additional funding for the staffing grant program was one of the most frequently heard suggestions.

Current law requires DATCP to attempt to provide funding for an average of 3 staff persons per county with full funding for the first position, 70% funding for the second position, and 50% funding for additional positions. At current funding levels, the state is able to fully fund the first position, but only a portion of the cost-share for the second position. This bill will almost fully fund the state's cost-share directive.

County conservation staff are the boots on the ground when it comes to supporting conservation activities at the local level. These staff work to provide technical assistance to farmers and other landowners as they work to achieve their land management objectives. Depending on the needs of each individual county, conservation staff work on a variety of issues including farmland preservation, groundwater quality, invasive species, soil health, and municipal phosphorous reduction strategies.

There are county conservation agents here today who will speak to the importance of their positions and the need for continued stable support. To preview, some activities that make up a typical "day in the life" of a county conservationist may include walking farm fields and buildings with a local farmer, then sitting down at a kitchen table to listen and learn about their operation and business goals. The conservation agent may then assist in identifying and applying for grants to execute a customized conservation plan or helping write a nutrient management plan.

To provide this kind of support, conservation staff work to develop relationships with farmers and landowners with the goal of becoming a trusted resource when a farmer or landowner is in need of assistance.

Sustained support for county conservation staff will help realize the value of these staff on the front lines of our water quality challenges and allow for additional investment in staff.

Thank you for your time and I am happy to take any questions.

Todd Novak



PATRICK TESTIN

STATE SENATOR

DATE: February 4, 2020
RE: **Testimony on Assembly Bill 790**
TO: The Assembly Committee on Agriculture
FROM: Senator Patrick Testin

I would like to thank Chairman Tauchen and members of the committee for accepting my testimony on Assembly Bill 790 (AB 790).

At a majority of the Water Quality Task Force hearings, there were requests for increased funding for county land and water conservation staff. The statutes direct the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) to fund three staff per county, with a base allocation of \$75,000. The state is supposed to fund the first position at a hundred percent, the second position at seventy percent and the third position at fifty percent. The state has failed to meet this level of funding for the past decade. Currently, the state funds the entirety of the first position, but less than fifty percent of the second.

This bill authorizes an additional \$2,960,000 for fiscal year 2020-21 to support local land conservation personnel. In order to receive these funds, a county must commit to maintain or grow the number of conservation staff they currently have. I understand the financial commitment is a heavy lift, but these individuals are often invaluable to county land owners and farmers. They are the front line in working to put into practice water management programs.

Thank you for your attention and I hope you will join me in supporting AB 790.



State of Wisconsin
Governor Tony Evers

Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection

February 4, 2020

Re: AB 790: county conservation staffing and making an appropriation

Chairman Tauchen and members of the Assembly Committee on Agriculture. Thank you for the opportunity to provide information about AB 790 related to county conservation staffing. My name is Sara Walling, and I am the Administrator of the Division of Agricultural Resource Management at the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection. I will describe the work the department does with regards to county conservation staffing, and how AB 790 might impact those efforts.

Background:

DATCP provides funding to county land conservation departments (LCDs) to support activities that protect and conserve our state's soil and water resources. Eligible funding activities include: land and water resource management plan development and implementation; engineering, design, and installation of conservation practices; cost-share grant administration; farmland preservation program administration; manure storage ordinance implementation, and other related activities and programs. County conservation staff also play a key role in the implementation of the voluntary Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) which is a federal, state, local, and private partnership program aimed at incentivizing

County conservation staff are the "boots on the ground" for implementing nearly all of the state's nonpoint source programs, standards, and regulations. Funding is provided by DATCP to the county LCDs according to a statutory goal. Each county receives a base allocation of \$75,000. As available, remaining funding is then allocated to provide for 100% funding for the first LCD staff position, 70% of the second position and 50% for each position thereafter. The number of county land conservation staff differs from county to county based on a county's ability to fund additional positions after receiving its state staffing allocation. To date, DATCP has been able to support 100% of each county LCD's first position and approximately 50% of the second position, but has never been able to meet the entire staffing goal. Therefore, counties either make due with very few conservation staff--which results in less ability to deliver conservation programming to their county's farmer--support additional staff solely through the county tax levy, or seek considerable outside funding to support additional staff in the LCD office.

Information on the bill:

The bill, if enacted, would increase the appropriation for county land and water staff by \$2,960,900, resulting in a total of \$12.4 million annually for county conservation. Importantly, this funding increase will provide the ongoing base funding which would ensure a more reliable funding stream counties need to retain high quality and skilled conservation staff. While it is unclear at the moment if this additional funding will result in the ability for all 72 counties to hire new staff, we expect this funding will ensure an increase in the number of hours LCD staff committed to addressing conservation issues across the state. To effectively allocate this

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funding and ensure counties meet the obligation to maintain dedicated conservation positions, DATCP would need to work closely with Wisconsin Land + Water Association and the county LCDs to identify how to determine that a county has maintained or increased its number of county land conservation personnel positions at or above the average number of such positions in its 2 fiscal years preceding August 1, 2020. Given our existing close working relationship with the WI Land + Water Association and the county land conservation departments, we feel extremely confident we can work together to ensure this funding provided by the tax payers of Wisconsin will be spent consistent with this legislative intent.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide information on AB 790 as it is currently written. I am happy to answer any questions committee members may have.



WISCONSIN LAKES

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February 4, 2020

TESTIMONY TO ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE IN SUPPORT OF AB790

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of AB790. My name is Michael Engleson, and I am the Executive Director of Wisconsin Lakes, also known as the Wisconsin Association of Lakes. Wisconsin Lakes is a statewide non-profit conservation organization of waterfront property owners, lake users, lake associations, and lake districts who in turn represent over 80,000 citizens and property owners. We are the only statewide association of lake organizations.

Wisconsin Lakes strongly supports the funding for county conservation staffing that this bill would provide.

In many counties, especially the ones rich in lakes, county conservation staff provide crucial services to waterfront property owners and lake organizations. Many of those services relate to improving water quality issues by advising and participating in projects that reduce polluted runoff to the county's surface waters. But county conservation staff can also play a huge role in other aspects of lake management. For instance, aquatic invasive species education, prevention, and control activities within a county are benefited when an AIS specialist is part of the team.

So much of lake management in Wisconsin, however, is done by citizens - often the property owners that live on the lake. When a county has a fully-staffed conservation department to provide help and support to those citizen volunteers, lake management gets done better. This means that the funding in this bill helps to leverage all that volunteer capacity for lake management that benefit from the work of the conservation staff. That's a proven method for successful lake management in Wisconsin, and an excellent reason, on top of many other good reasons, for you to support this bill.

Thank you, and I urge you to support AB790.

Wisconsin Lakes is a statewide non-profit conservation organization of waterfront property owners, lake users, lake associations, and lake districts who in turn represent over 80,000 citizens and property owners. For over 20 years, Wisconsin Lakes has been a powerful bipartisan advocate for the conservation, protection, and restoration of Wisconsin's lake resources.



Wisconsin Land+Water Conservation Association

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Testimony of WI Land+Water Executive Director Matt Krueger

AB 790/SB 723

Assembly Committee on Agriculture

February 4, 2020

Good morning Chair Tauchen, Vice Chair Novak, and committee members.

My name is Matt Krueger, and I am the executive director of WI Land+Water. We are a nonprofit, nonpartisan membership organization that represents 800 county conservation department staff and elected county board supervisors across the state. I am here today, on behalf of our members, to speak in favor of AB 790/SB 723.

I want to first thank Vice Chair Novak and his staff for working to translate the widespread support for county conservation displayed at Water Quality Task Force hearings into this bipartisan bill. I also want to thank representatives Kurtz, Tranel, Kitchens and fellow Task Force members for their commitment and engagement in listening to hundreds of Wisconsinites voice their input on water quality issues.

I'd like to provide some information today on the topic of county conservation funding, which I think is important context to inform discussion of this bill. First, it's important to note that Wisconsin is unique nationally in having a professional conservation workforce 350 people strong, rooted in local communities across the state. We are leaders in conservation, and have been, since the days of the nation's first watershed project in Coon Valley, back in 1933. Our Land Conservation Committees (LCCs) are a conservation delivery model that integrates decision-making across disciplines at the county level, balanced with responsibility for implementing state and federal standards. From a design standpoint, our model is the envy of the rest of the country, and for good reason.

In 1999, Wis. Stats. Chap 92 established that the state would augment existing local funding by providing financial support for conservation departments at an average of three staff positions in each county at 100, 70, and 50 percent. But even at the time this target was codified, the state did not meet its own funding goal, and in the two decades following, state support has languished. In 1997, the state funded \$13 million for county conservation staff—adjusted for today's dollars, that amount would be about \$21 million. Yet today, 23 years later, the state funds \$9.4 million.

This is not offered as a complaint, especially as we discuss a funding *increase* to counties, but rather, to highlight where things were previously, compared to where they are today. I want to be crystal clear that the increase of \$2.9 million dollars proposed in the bill is welcome and necessary, and will result in more conservation on the landscape, period. Provided it is a boost to base funding, as I understand it is, it would be the most consequential funding increase counties will have seen in decades. Yet, that cannot be the extent of our investment in conservation.

The reality is, county conservation departments are being asked to implement an ever-increasing set of programs, without increased funding, and with less people available to do it. With 40% fewer state-funded staff than there were 20 years ago, conservation departments are asked to implement statewide performance standards such as ATCP 50 and NR 151 (including new targeted standards), Total Maximum Daily Loads, Nine-Key Element plans, farmland preservation, Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, producer-led watershed and citizen watershed group support, MS4 stormwater permits, and phosphorus compliance arrangements such as nutrient trading. This is not a complete list. And when combined with the fact that we have not adequately supported sustained, baseline funding of local conservation efforts for the past two decades, we should not be surprised by the contaminated wells and impaired waterways in the news lately.

If I am to convey one message to you today, let it be this: if we are to improve water quality and achieve clean and safe drinking water, and support a viable agricultural industry at the same time, county conservation professionals are the best and most cost-effective solution we have.

Our county conservation staff not only work with farmers to keep soil in place on farm fields so it can grow the next year's crop, but help build its organic matter to better withstand drought and extreme weather events, and ultimately, grow crops with less input. They help waterfront property owners protect their shorelines from the battering waves that literally take from them their biggest investment. They spend years building trust among community members, through early morning pasture walks with producer-led groups, or late-night board meetings in town halls with citizen watershed organizations. Without hesitation, they jump into action after receiving the midnight phone call about emergencies like catastrophic flooding or a manure spill. These folks are trusted leaders in their community, and their work is relied upon to protect Wisconsin's precious soil and water resources.

In return for increasing its investment in conservation, the state will "get" these things and much more, tailored to meet the needs of local communities—which you'll hear more about shortly from county conservation professionals themselves. This is truly an example of an ounce of prevention being worth a pound of cure. On top of that, conservation departments are masterful at leveraging

state and county dollars to bring external grant funding into local communities, amplifying the impact of that initial investment.

Unfortunately, the work of a conservationist is never “done.” Just as regular maintenance on your vehicle or upkeep on your home is a necessary ongoing commitment, so too is investing in conservation. A single flood event could wipe out years of conservation practices installed on a field; a simple change in farm ownership could reset the five-year clock on establishing enough trust to talk frankly and honestly about management practices with a landowner. This work takes time, and it requires sustained support. This bill gets us much closer to that.

Before closing, I also want to highlight two small but essential amendments, which I’ve shared with the bills’ authors, that we are requesting to ensure the bill in current form doesn’t have unintended consequences. Section 2, Line 8 would penalize counties if their department staffing numbers were reduced due to forces outside of their control, such as the loss of a competitive grant—even if they had attempted to retain the grant, and staff associated with it.

We’ve established the funding challenges counties deal with on a daily basis—as such, they regularly augment the local and state investment in conservation with external grant dollars, nearly all of which are short-term and none of which are guaranteed. The loss of a grant that forces a reduction in staffing numbers should not penalize a county. As such, we’d like to see this language specifically tailored to staff positions supported by county levy dollars.

A second provision in the same section, Line 5 states that, should a county reduce its department staffing numbers, DATCP actually “may not make a grant to a county.” This could result in the defunding of whole conservation departments, should a staff reduction occur, and would have the exact opposite effect of the intent of this legislation. An amendment is necessary that ensures DATCP may continue to provide this vital source of funding, commensurate with the maintenance of effort to retain county-funded staff.

WI Land+Water is very supportive of AB 790/SB 723. If passed, it will be an important step toward addressing the conservation challenges we’re facing today, just as we did in Coon Valley nearly 90 years ago.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input, and I’m happy to answer any questions.

February 4, 2020

Dear Members of the Assembly Agriculture Committee:

I am contacting you as a former Chippewa County Supervisor, Land Conservation Committee member and farmer to request that you support AB 790, funding for County Conservation Staffing.

Sadly our agricultural conservation efforts have suffered over the past 10-15 years due to multiple environmental issues/challenges which have demanded and will continue to demand a substantial amount of county land conservation department staff time. The Conservation Department has been forced to limit its workload due to staff and budget limitations.

We are now faced with making up for lost time and are dealing with an escalating rate and level of nitrate pollution in many of our residential wells as well as other important conservation issues including accelerated erosion of our farmland due to poor practices and conversion of grasslands to row crops. The movement away from our traditional landscape of pastures and hay fields to support small dairy farms in Chippewa County to large cash crop enterprises and CAFO sized dairy farms which rely on more corn silage rather than hay in their rations are a contributing factor to many of these serious issues. Since these enterprises are here for the foreseeable future we must foster a dialogue of the issues and work towards solutions.

I believe county conservation departments are one of the better avenues along with farmer lead watershed councils to do this. Thank you for your consideration of this matter and for your support of Assembly Bill 790.

Ken Schmitt

4988 120th Ave.

Colfax, WI 54730



Land Resources & Environment Department
505 Broadway, Baraboo, Wisconsin 53913
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Testimony on Assembly Bill 790
Committee on Agriculture Hearing
February 4, 2020

Melissa Schlupp, Conservation Manager
melissa.schlupp@saukcountywi.gov
608-355-4838

Thank you Chair Tauchen, Vice Chair Novak, and members of this committee for allowing me to make the case for providing counties baseline support for our conservation services as proposed in Assembly Bill 790. The number one message from the Water Quality Task Force hearings was that county conservation departments are the best solution we have to meet clean water goals and address conservation challenges, but they have not received adequate funding.

My name is Melissa Schlupp, Conservation Manager, with the Sauk County Land Resources and Environment Department. In Sauk County, staff work closely with producer-led watershed groups, waterfront property owners, farmers, and rural landowners to install conservation practices on their property that maintain a productive farm and healthy environment. Having funding available to install these conservation practices is important; however, having knowledgeable, staff trained to implement these conservation practices is essential. They spend years building trust-based relationships with their clients, just as a doctor or financial advisor would. In recent years, staff have worked with landowners to convert nearly 2000 acres of poorly managed cropland and pasture to productive, rotationally grazed pastureland. These lands not only infiltrate greater amounts of rain water that alleviates flooding downstream, but are more profitable and support a comfortable way of life for the farmer and cattle alike. The Yanke Family of Loganville, Wisconsin was the 2018 Conservation Farm Family of the year. Although they couldn't be here to testify today, I have attached their letter of support to my testimony.

County conservation departments are relied upon to meet the needs of their local communities. They are proven, and dependable. In 2019, Sauk County Land Conservation staff provided technical assistance to nearly 300 farmers and installed 76 conservation practices that prevented over 1900 tons of sediment from entering our surface waters. It is critical that we provide sustained support for county conservation staff and Assembly Bill 790 is a first step in the right direction.

Water quality and conservation issues have become more challenging in recent decades, but the state has not maintained base-level county conservation staffing support. Current state-supported staffing levels are over 40% less than they were 20 years ago. In Sauk County, additional funding would allow staff to install more conservation practices that protect our surface and groundwater resources by preventing soil erosion and reducing agricultural runoff.

The return on investment for county conservation departments is high—not only do they provide valuable, cost-effective services for their local communities, but they also multiply the impact of state funding several times over, by leveraging federal and private grant dollars. These dollars help to protect our most valuable natural resources while maintaining productive agriculture and supporting local economies. Since 2015, Sauk County has successfully secured \$2 million dollars in additional federal grant funding for installing conservation practices in the Baraboo River Watershed, a watershed that is greatly impaired by phosphorus runoff and soil erosion.

We know that our investments in clean water will yield high returns. On behalf of the Sauk County Land Resources and Environment Department, I strongly urge you to support AB 790.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I welcome any questions you may have.

January 31, 2020

Senator Robert Cowles
Chair, Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Energy
Room 118 South
State Capitol
PO Box 7882
Madison, WI 53707

Representative Tauchen
Chair, Assembly Committee on Agriculture
Room 13 West
State Capitol
PO Box 8953
Madison, WI 53708

Dear Senator Cowles and Representative Tauchen,

Thank you for the opportunity to convince you to support AB 790/ SB 723 and provide counties baseline support for their conservation services.

We are the Yanke family, owners and operators of Echo Y Farms. Our fourth generation farm is located near Loganville, Wisconsin in central Sauk County where we grow 1200 acres of corn, soybeans, wheat and alfalfa and rotationally graze a small herd of beef cattle and contract raise Holstein replacement heifers for a large dairy farm.

We know firsthand how valuable the services are provided by land conservation staff. Since the 1960s our family has worked with the Sauk County Land Conservation Department to install conservation practices on our farm. In recent years, the department has helped us convert 280 acres into rotationally managed pasture and fine tune our cover crop program. These practices help to build healthy and resilient soils that are capable of handling extreme rain events - we know what is good for the land and water is good for our business.

It is because of our commitment to conservation that Sauk County nominated us as the Wisconsin Land and Water 2018 Conservation Farm Family of the Year. As the recipient of this award, our farm hosted Conservation Observance Day in August 2018 allowing us to showcase these conservation practices. The Sauk County Land Conservation Department worked hard to organize this successful event that drew over 300 people to our farm. We couldn't have been more pleased with the turnout and the enthusiasm of those in attendance.

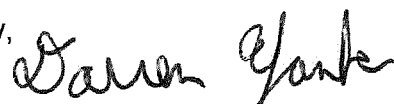
From there, things really took off on our farm. We started organizing more field days to educate our local farmers on the practices we were installing. We also increased our presence on Facebook and now have over 500 followers! We enjoy sharing our successes and failures with the hope that others will see value in the networking opportunities we organize. In 2019, we were among the founding members of the Sauk Soil and Water Improvement Group (SSWIG), a producer-led watershed group focused on promoting soil health practices throughout Sauk County. The creation of this producer led group was heavily supported by the Sauk County

Land Conservation Department. They also assisted our group with applying for and receiving a \$40,000 grant from the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection.

Although we have always been ones to try different things and willing to take some risks, the Sauk County Land Conservation Department has been a valuable partner to work with. We regularly contact them to troubleshoot different issues on the farm and to seek advice on new practices. They are a trusted resource that we can always rely on. We know they are stretched thin and appreciate all of the countless hours they have been available to us.

For all of these reasons, we strongly urge you to support AB 790/ SB 723 so counties can continue to do the great work they do for farmers like us!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dawn Yanke". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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**Testimony of Amber Meyer Smith, Director of Programs and Government Relations
AB 790/SB 723
Assembly Committee on Agriculture
February 4, 2020**

Clean Wisconsin is a non-profit environmental advocacy group focused on clean water, clean air and clean energy issues. We were founded fifty years ago and have 20,000 members and supporters around the state.

I urge you to support SB 723/AB 790 to provide additional funding of nearly \$3 million for county conservationists around Wisconsin. County conservationists play a critical role in helping farmers implement important practices to protect water quality and environmental health all around the state.

County conservationists support farmers in implementing innovative practices, playing an active role in helping farmers develop and implement efforts that have benefits for the farmers and the communities they serve. They are the boots on the ground for cleaning up our waterways, yet their funding has been inadequate for years.

I have heard concerns expressed about this \$3 million being too expensive in the context of the \$10 million Water Quality Task Force package, but I think it's important to put this in context.

In the face of similar water quality challenges, other states have stepped up in major ways:

- Ohio's Governor has proposed the \$900 million H2Ohio program to improve and protect the state's water quality
- Iowa proposed a 1 cent tax increase (expected to raise about \$170 million per year) for the Iowa Water and Land Legacy Fund
- Michigan's Governor included \$120 million to clean up drinking water in her budget
- New York has adopted a \$2.5 billion Clean Water Infrastructure Act
- Minnesota's Governor has requested \$300 million for water quality and water infrastructure upgrades in 2020 alone for the Clean Water, Land and Legacy constitutional amendment.

Wisconsin's water challenges are just as grave as these states, but we are offering nowhere near the same level of investment. A 2004 DATCP analysis estimated implementation of agricultural performance standards to be between \$40 and \$63 million. Adjusted for 2019 dollars, that's between \$53 and \$84 million per year, just to implement the performance standards. By comparison, the nearly \$3 million proposed in this bill is a small amount of money, but it will go a long way to directly fund these critical staff positions in local communities across Wisconsin.

By passing this important funding for county conservationists, you will be taking a necessary step forward for water protection. Please support SB 723/AB 790 to provide \$3 in funding for county conservationists around Wisconsin.

Stan Kaczmarek

February 3, 2020

RE: Support AB 790/SB 723, Funding for County Conservation Staff

Good Morning/ Afternoon

I come before you as a Farmer, Citizen member of the Brown County Land & Water Subcommittee, President of the Brown County Farm Bureau & Wisconsin Farm Bureau Member. I ask that you support AB 790/SB 723 and provide counties baseline support for their conservation services. The number one message from the Water Quality Task Force hearings was that county conservation departments are the best solution we have to meet clean water goals and address conservation challenges, but they have not received adequate funding.

In Brown County, the Land & Water Conservation Department staff work closely with Farmers to meet management goals on their property, while meeting basic conservation standards at the same time. They spend years building trust-based relationships with their clients, just as a doctor or financial advisor would. In recent years, staff have worked with landowners to build the Demonstration Farm Network which is huge win for Farm economics and the environment.

Water quality and conservation issues have become more challenging in recent decades, but the state has not maintained base-level county conservation staffing support. Current state-supported staffing levels are over 40% less than they were 20 years ago. In Brown County additional funding would allow staff to get more Farmer-Producers involved in the Demonstration Farm Network, do water well testing in areas of the county that have Karst Bedrock Formations, & Provide more opportunities for peer to peer learning such as Farmer Roundtable discussions.

The return on investment for county conservation departments is high—not only do they provide valuable, cost-effective services for their local communities, but they also multiply the impact of state funding several times over, by leveraging federal and private grant dollars. This puts more conservation on the land, and brings dollars into local economies at the same time. Last summer I improved a drainage ditch that ineffective in reducing sediment from reaching a nearby stream by installing a new improved grass waterway and tile drainage system. Brown Co. Land & Water Conservation Department designed it with cost sharing from the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service I improved water quality leaving my farm.

Environmental programs are continuing to become more technical in nature and having staff to help landowners navigate those technical aspects is vitally important to maintaining or increasing participation.

Navigating the different stewardship programs can be a daunting task. Farmers know how to farm, having someone there that can point them in the right direction when it comes to the bureaucracy is invaluable for Wisconsin's Environment.

For all these reasons, the Brown County Land & Water Subcommittee, Brown County Farm Bureau, Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation and Myself a Brown County Farmer strongly urge you to support AB 790/SB723 when it comes before you for a vote.

Thank You for your time and support of listening to me.



Comments in support of AB 790 by Grant, Lafayette, and Iowa County conservation departments

Chairman Tauchen and fellow Assembly members,

Thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Lynda Schweikert, I am the Administrator for the Grant County Conservation, Sanitation and Zoning Department. I am here today with Terry Loeffelholz, Lafayette County Land Conservation, Planning & Zoning Manager and Katie Abbott, Iowa County Conservationist for the Land Conservation Department. We are speaking today not only on behalf of our counties, but also jointly as the members of the Southwest Wisconsin Groundwater and Geology study, otherwise known as the SWIGG Study, in support of AB 790 to provide counties with sustained baseline funding.

The Governor's Budget approved an annual increase of \$475,000, totaling \$9.4 million per year. For county conservation staff, the resource management "boots on the ground," this increase is appreciated and necessary, but for too long we've neglected providing sustained baseline funding for basic conservation services and are now seeing the effects. Current state funding levels for county conservation staffing are roughly 30% less than they were in 1997 and are now over \$3 million short of targeted base-level funding as defined in Wis. State Statutes Chapter 92.

In order to provide basic conservation services, we ask your committee to recommend approval of AB 790. With these funds we will be able to continue the work started by the SWIGG study. Our study will only provide us with the "What" and "Where" of our groundwater issues. Going forward we will have to work together to develop and implement "How" we are going to solve and prevent future contamination from occurring. This will not be an easy task to achieve and will take additional staff time and resources to accomplish. Possible outcomes of the study will require increased education on private wells; funding to offset additional well testing; analysis of current septic systems and their effect on the groundwater; and investigations into alternative manure handling methods and technology.

In addition to the SWIGG study influence on our counties, I would like to point out some of the increased demands that are being asked of the Land Conservation Departments: Supporting Producer-Led watershed groups; Helping farmers write nutrient management plans; Responding to natural disasters like flooding; and Working with municipal treatment plants on Adaptive Management, Phosphorus Trading, or Multi Discharge Variances just to name a few. County conservation departments are relied upon to meet the many and diverse needs of their local committees.

20 years ago the Lafayette County Land Conservation Department had a staff of 7; today they have a staff of 4. Based on the budget formula for rural counties they are always looking for ways to keep cost down either by reducing staff or combining positions. With the increase in funding it would help ensure that the Land Conservation Department would not be asked to reduce staff.

While ensuring stable staffing levels is our first priority, we would be strategic to try to increase capacity where we can.

In Iowa County I would request to increase a part-time position to full-time, which would be used to organize more outreach events, increase communications, and promote CREP.

While the funding increase would likely not be enough for a new full-time position in a single County, my colleagues and I may also explore a shared Nutrient Management Planner position to serve farmers in our three Counties.

Any staff increase would require that baseline funding be sustainable, however, so we could attract strong candidates and feel confident investing in the hiring and training process.

If increasing staff hours isn't possible, this funding increase could free up tax levy funds for new projects, such as increasing farmer incentives, funding a demonstration project, or implementing the strategies Ms. Schweikert mentioned earlier.

County Conservation Departments are unique in our ability to develop long-term relationships with farmers, stakeholders, and partners, and in our flexibility to meet changing needs of our communities quickly and creatively. We are constantly trying new approaches, learning from each other, and responding to challenges as they arise. Stable state funding is critical to help us address conservation challenges now and into the future.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today on this important topic, if you have any questions we'd be happy to answer them for you.

January 4, 2020

Assembly Agriculture Committee
RE: AB 790 and AB 795

Dear Committee Members:

I am writing in support of AB 790 and AB 795.

AB 790: Increasing funding for County Conservation Departments is critical to improving the work in agriculture in our local communities. Here in Crawford County our staff do an excellent job. The knowledge and skills they share are used widely, and more resources would strengthen the opportunities for the department and thus for our rural community.

AB 795: Creating a grazing coordinator position, funding for producer-led watershed protection grants, soil and water conservation, and crop insurance premium rebates for cover crops would all be useful here in the SW part of the state. We have many rotational grazing field days in our region, often put on by independent groups as our topography is highly suited to rotational grazing. Producer-led watershed projects are gathering much needed data on water quality in this part of the state, and showing how vital changes are needed to address water quality issues.

Thank you for considering my comments on these bills.

Edie Ehlert
Crawford County
Ferryville, WI



Testimony of Margaret Krome, MFAI Policy Director

Wisconsin Assembly Committee on Agriculture Hearing February 4, 2020

The Michael Fields Agricultural Institute (MFAI) is a non-profit organization focused on advancing sustainable agriculture on a state and federal level. Founded in 1984 in East Troy, Wisconsin, it is our mission to nurture the ecological, social and economic resilience of food and farming systems through education, research, policy, and market development. We work closely with beginning, and experienced farmers across the state and nation.

The Institute has a long history of working on nutrient management issues, including collaborating with UW-Madison and USDA researchers on a 20+ year trial on farming systems, leading cover crops research for many years, convening several statewide meetings on “Rethinking Nutrient Management” from 2011 into 2015 and, more recently, serving as Collaborator for the Uplands Farmer Led Watershed Group in SW Wisconsin.

We want to congratulate the Assembly Speakers Task Force on Water Quality for its leaders’ dedication to listening to farmers and other stakeholders and bringing forward a bipartisan-led package of proposals. The Institute is here today to speak in favor of several of those proposals:

AB-790 - Increasing funding for County Conservation Staffing Grants – The Uplands watershed group’s close collaboration with Iowa County’s Conservationist and her office is a perfect example of the essential role that county conservation staff plays. Without the boots on the ground, farmers’ ability to develop and implement conservation plans is severely compromised.

AB-795 – We support each of the following provisions:

- Creating a Grazing Coordinator at DATCP – The demonstrated value to water quality of the continuous living cover provided by managed grazing systems, the ability of rotationally managed grass-based systems to mediate water infiltration and flow, the relative ease of entry into farming provided by this system of livestock and dairy farming, and the potential for value-added markets and products make it a high priority for significant state investment.
- Funding for Producer-Led Watershed Protection Grants - Demand is growing rapidly statewide for this demonstrably effective outreach and information exchange mechanism on issues associated with water quality.
- Crop Insurance Premium Rebates for Cover Crops (please see handout) MFAI also recognizes the need to increase the staffing at DATCP to support this program.

AB-796: creating a pilot grant program for farmers to reduce nitrate loading, funding research for nitrate loading reduction methods.

For more information, please contact Margaret Krome, Policy Program Director at Michael Fields Agricultural Institute (608) 628-2503 mkrome@michaelfields.org

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I am a first-generation dairyman.

A label that once embarrassed me, now gives me pride and purpose given that the barriers to farm ownership have never been higher or the risks greater.

How does a 28-year-old buy a farm and start a family?

For me, the answer was holistic grazing!

Agriculture is at a crossroads and we need to choose a path that will revitalize our rural communities and regenerate the land that we call home. I strongly believe that holistic grazing should have a role in addressing the challenges at hand.

I have no desire to demonize other farmers. After all, they are my friends and neighbors. I want to see them thrive because without them the infrastructure goes too.

But I also realize that the "high production confinement dairy model" is a race to the bottom. We've been led to believe that production is profit and get big or get out is the only way.

I'd like to offer up my own experience to serve as an alternative.

Out of college, I yearned to farm but working with my uncle on his cattle ranch was not a viable option. So, I went looking for a Herdsman job and managed a confinement dairy in California. The dairy had to operate like clockwork, or the three-time-a-day milking could easily be thrown out of whack. Mixing feed, managing manure, dealing with high producing cows around the clock made me realize that I was a fish out of water and grazing had always been my sweetheart.

I remember asking the dairy's owner if we could devise some sort of equity building scheme. He abruptly said no way, and I went home that night vowing to find a way to achieve my goal. Several months later, I got lucky and found a very successful grazing dairy and cheese company in need of a manager who could eventually buy them out. After 4 years of profit sharing my business partner (A Cheese Legend) and I bought them out in 2014 with a loan package that gave our banker a few gray hairs.

I'd be lying if I said I never looked back, because I do. Yet, when the dust settles, I realize how amazing it is to raise my kids on a Wisconsin dairy farm.

For me, Holistic Grazing checks all the boxes:

- Enjoyable and conducive to family life
- Climate smart farming through carbon sequestration
- Reduces soil erosion and eutrophication of water ways
- Reduces the risks of ground water contamination
- Meets consumer demands and trends
- Is profitable and yields a strong balance sheet
- Adds to the local economy and promotes Wisconsin Agriculture

It is cheaper to fund regenerative agriculture than it is to undo the effects of low margin/high input systems on our communities and environment. We deserve a seat at the table. To disregard what regenerative agriculture has to offer is a tremendous mistake. Now is our chance to build a better future for all farmers.

A small step forward is to appropriate funds that encourage growth of regenerative agriculture. From fully funding county extension agents to a grazing specialist with DATCP, we can give farmers the resources to branch out without losing their shirts. In my own experiences working with my county extension agent, I've found counsel without a sales pitch. He has helped me develop grazing plans that make my business more viable. Therefore I support AB 790, AB 795, and AB 796.

February 4, 2020

Dear members of the Assembly Agriculture Committee,

I urge you to vote in favor of Assembly Bill 790, support for County Conservation staffing grants, and Assembly Bill 795, which would create a grazing specialist position at DATCP, support farmer-led watershed initiatives, and create a cover crops pilot program.

My support for Assembly Bill 790 is based on my own experience as a farmer. Last year I was trying to get assistance from my local conservation office and had to wait for a few months, until they finally assigned me someone from an office further away from me. If we had more funding for staffing then perhaps my county would have had enough staff to help me in a more timely way, which was important for plans I was making in my grazing operation. Now I am set back a year in my plans, which has a financial impact on my family.

On our farm we pasture broilers, sheep, beef and hogs on our farm and on a friend's farm in the Driftless area of Wisconsin. We direct market to our customers. As a new farmer who is grazing multiple species of livestock, I would really benefit from more assistance with grazing planning and education. Assembly Bill 795 would help with this by creating a grazing specialist position at DATCP. I also see a need for more encouragement and assistance with farmer-led watershed programs and the planting of cover crops. Both of these are ways in which we can help protect our watershed, and farmers are in a perfect position to make significant improvements in the quality of our water, which would benefit everyone. But to implement changes on our farms that will be win-win for everyone, we need additional support from government agencies.

In addition to supporting AB 790 and 795, I also want to mention that mobile processing has been a very important part of our farm model. Our customers really appreciate that we can have an inspected mobile processing facility come to our farm, and that is something that I understand we are lucky to have and I hope to see more of in Wisconsin. We are implementing silvopasture and permaculture practices on our farm as a way to ensure a good quality of life in our animals, our land, and our watershed. I feel very grateful to be able to care for these animals and this land. I remember that my grandparents felt the same humble gratitude in caring for their farm, and I know some of my inspiration to farm comes from them.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my views, and I hope you will support Assembly Bill 790 and Assembly Bill 795.

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February 4/5th, 2020

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RE: Public Hearing - IN SUPPORT OF:

AB 790/SB 723: Increasing funding for County Conservation staffing grants.

AB 795/SB 715 : Creating a grazing coordinator position, funding for producer-led watershed protection grants, soil and water conservation, and crop insurance premium rebates for cover crops.

AB 796/SB 718: Creating a pilot grant program for farmers to reduce nitrate loading and funding research for nitrate loading reduction methods.

I am sharing my voice and story to encourage support for the above-listed bills.

Managed grazing saved my farm family, and is the most economically and environmentally viable agricultural system to produce quality meat and dairy products in our state.

I am a 5th generation farmer in the central part of the state. My family farm was a conventional dairy farm (planting corn, beans, hay). During the late 1980's - 1990's when dairy prices dropped significantly, my parents began milking 3 times a day, trying to squeeze every ounce of milk from their herd. My dad tweaked rations and took a seed sales route. They could not work hard enough to make ends meet. It was a tough time. Then they heard about managed grazing and were desperate and curious enough to attend a grazing conference. It changed our family's farm story.

The evidence for the many benefits of managed grazing exists, but there needs to be an advocate at the state level. There was a state Grazing Coordinator in the late 1990's that greatly helped advance research, marketing, networks, and partnerships within Wisconsin's agriculture and conservation groups. I ask that this position is reinstated to enhance Wisconsin's rich agricultural landscape and save other multi-generation farms and family stories.

County Conservation staff and programs are crucial to provide the technical assistance and support to new farmers looking to start grazing and those looking to transition. Additionally, I approached my county to inquire about starting a farmer-led watershed group. I was told that they lacked the resources to support my efforts in our area. Much of our neighborhood is in land managed by a local CAFO. The most recent water test resulted in a nitrate level of 22.3mg/L

(10mg/L is the state health standard). Many of us also got flu-like symptoms after the last manure application this fall.

I speak as a beef farmer and advocate for my neighbors and community. I raise beef cattle on the same pastures as my parents because I believe farming and being a steward of the land is a valuable way of life. I will be a life-long advocate for managed grazing.

Without quality waterways to enjoy and a vibrant and diverse agricultural community, Wisconsin loses so much of what makes it wonderful.

Much appreciation,

Rachel Bouressa

Beef farmer

Member: Wisconsin Farmer's Union, Waupaca County Farm Bureau, FSA County Committee, GrassWorks