



April 20, 2017

Op-Ed: An Introduction to the Wisconsin Veterans Farm Bill of 2017

Wisconsin has strong traditions of military service and agricultural excellence. Our state's men and women have demonstrated their dedication and work ethic on both the battlefield and in the farm field. We have introduced the Wisconsin Veterans Farm Bill of 2017 because we seek to bring these traditions together and make an investment in our veterans, in agriculture, and in the future of our workforce.

In developing this legislation, we looked closely at the model set by West Virginia's Veterans and Warriors to Agriculture Program. In only three years, this program has already helped more than 300 veterans establish themselves in farming, and has offered training to hundreds more. The Wisconsin Veterans Farm Bill of 2017 seeks to facilitate agricultural workforce growth by creating a program administered by the Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection (DATCP) that will reach out to and recruit returning veterans with an interest in farming and offer assistance and training to already established veteran farmers. The average age of the Wisconsin farmer is now 58 years old, and that number continues to increase; returning veterans are young, capable, and ready. They are the workers that we need to ensure the continued strength of agriculture.

In addition to building our agricultural workforce, this bill aims to help veterans reacclimate to civilian life. As our veterans return home, some encounter difficulty when trying to re-enter the civilian workforce, even though they are well trained and possess unique skills. Many veterans return home from war with scars - some are visible, others aren't. Studies show that rigorous physical work like the type that farmers do every day, can have a therapeutic effect for those suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Eight of the veterans involved in the model West Virginia program publicly state that their participation kept them from committing suicide. Transitioning veterans into a steady, rewarding career can do more than just create jobs; it can save lives.

This bill also works to establish branding for goods produced by our veterans. Wisconsin has already created successful brands with the "Something Special from Wisconsin" logo and our Veteran Owned Business logo. The bill instructs DATCP and the Department of Veterans Affairs to work together to create a logo that can be affixed to certified Wisconsin veteran grown agricultural products, giving consumers more information about where their food comes from, and who is producing it.

By working together, we've been able to craft a bill with broad bi-partisan support within the legislature, from stakeholder groups, and state agencies. DATCP, the Department of Administration (DOA), the Department of Military Affairs (DMA), the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA), the Wisconsin Farm Bureau, the Wisconsin Farmers Union, the Wisconsin Corn Growers Association, the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), the Military Order of the Purple Heart, and the County Veteran Service Officer Association all support passage of this farm bill. Most importantly, we have spoken with many veteran farmers who believe this bill could have a positive impact on their lives and the lives of those who served with them. The Wisconsin Veterans Farm Bill of 2017 is a win for our farming workforce, our veterans, and for the State of Wisconsin.

Sen. Patrick Testin (R-Town of Hull)

Representative Evan Goyke (D-Milwaukee)

Sen. Janis Ringhand (D-Evansville)

Representative Ed Brooks (R-Reedsburg)