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Session Series: Wins for Agriculture

Even under divided government, the Wisconsin Legislature and my office were successful in accomplishing a lot of great things for our state this session. I am introducing a new series of columns, which will take a deeper dive into issues we addressed in sectors ranging from agriculture to health to public safety.

In the 2021-22 legislative session, I not only chaired the Senate Committee on Agriculture and Tourism, I also had the opportunity to lead investments in this industry during the budget process as a member of the Joint Committee on Finance (JFC). As an agricultural business owner and someone who cares deeply about Wisconsin's rich farming culture and traditions, I am proud of the strong investments made this session which support all sectors of Wisconsin's agriculture economy.

In the state budget, and through separate legislation for the dairy portion of the program, I was able to secure funding for what is now the Wisconsin Initiative for Agricultural Exports (WIAE). In 2021, Wisconsin exported an all-time high \$3.96 billion in agricultural and food products to 146 countries. However, this success is not guaranteed. Between 2016 and 2020, our state saw declines with an aggregate loss of more than \$64 million.

To increase stability and secure new market footholds, Representative Tony Kurtz (R-Wonewoc) and I introduced legislation which created the framework for the WIAE. In partnership with stakeholders like the Wisconsin State Cranberry Growers Association, Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association, Wisconsin Farm Bureau, Wisconsin Cattlemen's Association and Dairy Business Association, we were able to create actionable goals to increase the value of all agricultural products in our state. Governor Evers introduced a similar program in his state budget proposal which left out some of Wisconsin's top exports including cranberries, ginseng and bovine genetics. Wisconsin currently ranks 13th in the country in agriculture exports. With this innovative and data-driven program, I hope to see growth and real outcomes for our farm families and farm economy.

The pandemic, trade tensions and supply chain disruptions heightened many challenges in the past few years, adversely affecting our agriculture industry. To help support some of our processors, who were stretched thin during this time, JFC approved an increase to the popular Dairy Processor Grant Program. Funding

through this program can be used to address a wide variety of needs including food safety, staff training, plant expansion or consulting services. We also created a new, similar Meat Processor Grant Program which will help foster innovation and facility expansion, as well as allow processors to meet state and federal standards of practice more quickly. Dairy production and meat industries in Wisconsin contribute a cumulative \$70.4 billion annually to our economy. Support for these important programs helps keep Wisconsin the agricultural leader it has always been.

Important work was also done through the Agriculture and Tourism Committee. We heard testimony on a number of bills, rules and programs, including my bill which eases the burden on small family farms looking to transfer farm implements after death. Legislation introduced with Representative John Macco (R-Ledgeview) allows beneficiaries to avoid an often lengthy court process called probate by instead allowing for a Transfer on Death (TOD) for implements. The TOD process is currently used for the transfer of farmland, which allows farmers to continue to work with minimal disruption. This is equally important for equipment. As we know, any disruption in the agricultural cycle can cost important time and revenue in lost production.

Additionally, the committee heard bills on truth in labeling, to provide transparency in marketing imitation meat, milk and dairy products; nitrates, to ensure Wisconsin can better address contamination; and farmland preservation grants, which would increase tax credits and decrease the length of the agreements from 15 years to 10 years to incentivize participation. All of these proposals are important in preserving, nurturing and protecting America's Dairyland and the hard work our farmers, processors, distributors and ag workers do to ensure we are able to continue to produce our quality products.

I am two years into my four year term, so I look forward to building upon the important work done thus far in the next state budget and legislative session. I will take this summer to research proposals, hold listening sessions, tour facilities around the district and assist with constituents navigating state processes. If you have ideas or suggestions for future proposals, please do not hesitate to reach out to my office.

To reach Sen. Ballweg with questions or comments please call (608) 266-0751 or email Sen.Ballweg@legis.wi.gov. Visit her website, legis.wisconsin.gov/senate/14/ballweg, to subscribe to her weekly e-update.

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