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Believe in America's Dairyland

By
Senator Jeff Smith

Take a moment to imagine living on a small family farm. Waking at dawn to a rooster crowing and cows mooing. You head down to the barn to get the cows milked, collect chicken eggs, clean out stalls and feed all the animals before going back into the kitchen to grab breakfast for yourself.

This all too familiar lifestyle for most Wisconsin family farms is quickly becoming an illusion for our next generation of dairy farmers. Our reputation as America's Dairyland is our pride, especially in the western Wisconsin and the 31st Senate District.

Oftentimes I'm awestruck at the beauty of western Wisconsin and the scenic farms nestled in the valleys and hills. People come to Wisconsin for a lot of reasons, but they almost always make sure to leave with some Wisconsin cheese. There's no substitute. My own daughter still finds a way to bring tasty cheese back home after every visit to Wisconsin.

The dairy market crisis is wreaking havoc on Wisconsin farms. We've seen 551 dairy farms close in 2019 already after losing 638 in 2018 and 465 in 2017. Small, family farms are the hardest hit. Farmer suicides have shaken our communities to the core. Farmers face the decision to sell the farm or take on more debt to become bigger. Trade wars, access to credit and years of low milk prices make it hard for young folks to see a future in dairy farming.

At the World Dairy Expo in Madison last week, U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue said, "In America the big get bigger and the small go out." He doubled-down on his comments about small family farms by saying, "I don't think in America we, for any small business, we have a guaranteed income or guaranteed profitability." That statement might help explain why farm subsidies seem to end up in the pockets of the largest operations while the small family farms are left with crumbs. It highlights what we already know. Leaders in Washington don't have any intention to alleviate the dairy crisis in Wisconsin.

It's clear we need to step it up right here in our own backyard. Starting in 2018, the Wisconsin Dairy Task Force 2.0 started meeting and learning from professionals in the dairy industry about the challenges we face.

The Task Force offered 51 recommendations to help Wisconsin's dairy industry. Already, we've enacted the Dairy Innovation Hub idea so farmers can learn cutting-edge dairy farming methods at UW-Madison, UW-River Falls or UW-Platteville. But that isn't

nearly enough – there’s a lot more to do. Here are just a few of the other ideas that came out of the Dairy Task Force recommendations:

- Increase funding for dairy processor grants from \$200,000 to \$400,000 annually.
- Enable new startup cheesemakers by evaluating methods for shared cheese production spaces.
- Reinstate the “Grow Wisconsin Dairy” initiative to help farmers access capital for farm succession and transition planning.
- Conduct a review of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) for self-employed individuals.
- Establish and offer model programs for communities, local businesses and education systems in career path development programs targeting the agriculture career sector.

In the recent budget, Governor Tony Evers also offered critical assistance for dairy farmers in his budget by increasing funding for county Ag Agents, organic and grazing specialists, expanding the Farm-to-School program, expanding the Buy Local, Buy Wisconsin Program and critical farmer mental health programs, just to name a few. Unfortunately many of these ideas were cut or significantly reduced by Republicans from the final version of the budget.

My colleague Representative Don Vruwink (D-Milton) and I recently introduced SB 453/AB 495 to create a small farm diversity grant program aimed at helping small farms try new agricultural ventures. We also teamed up to introduce SB 455/AB 500 which will help families save money when passing their farm onto their extended family.

There’s no shortage of good ideas, but we can do more. There’s too much at stake to tell dairy farmers to “get big or go out.” The dairy crisis doesn’t stop at the farmer’s doorstep. As policymakers and consumers, we must invest in our small family farms and encourage innovation to preserve our farming heritage in Wisconsin.