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WFU grassroots membership sets 2020 policy priorities

ROTHSCHILD – At the 89th annual Wisconsin Farmers Union State Convention Jan. 31-Feb. 2 in Rothschild, delegates adopted policy that will guide the family farm organization's work at the Capitol, in Congress, and across the countryside. Wisconsin delegates will have the opportunity to bring these stances to the National Farmers Union Convention in Savannah, Georgia March 1-3.

"The policy discussion at the annual State Convention is the democratic process in its purest form," said WFU President Darin Von Ruden. "Farmers from a variety of backgrounds come together to respectfully discuss and come to a consensus on the issues impacting their farms and rural Wisconsin."

The following were among the Special Orders of Business that reflect WFU's top policy priorities for the coming year:

DAIRY POLICY REFORM: WFU calls on Congress to establish a mandatory program for managed growth based on market demand and price stability. Such a program should increase farmer profitability by elevating milk prices, preventing overproduction, and reducing milk price volatility. Such a program should also allow for beginning farmer entry, reduce government expenditures, and have meaningful farmer input in development, implementation, and governance.

OVERSIGHT OF LARGE LIVESTOCK FACILITIES & CAFOS: State standards under ATCP 51 regarding acceptance, regulation, and enforcement of CAFOs have failed to enable towns and counties to protect their people, land, water, and health. WFU urges the legislature to amend the statute to require that the findings of the Technical Committee be presented in writing to the Board of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP), and that the Board of DATCP must present a scope statement to the Wisconsin Secretary of Agriculture within 90 days. WFU also supports lifting the preemption of local control of siting of large livestock operations and also approves removing the fee cap in ATCP 51, relying instead on the existing statutory requirement that any fee imposed by a town or county must be reasonable.

CONCENTRATION IN THE AGRICULTURE INDUSTRY: Due to the decline in the vitality of rural communities that has coincided with concentration in agricultural and retail food markets, with family farms bearing the brunt of this injustice, WFU demands that both the state and federal Departments of Justice follow through on the antitrust investigation and aggressively prosecute violators of antitrust laws. WFU urges the federal government to increase its oversight of consolidation and vertical integration in the agriculture industry and to establish a constant dialog within agriculture about market control and antitrust concerns. WFU also opposes the investment in arable lands in all countries by institutional investors, and urges DATCP to vigorously enforce the law limiting ownership by foreign entities to 640 acres of land in Wisconsin.

HEMP: In light of the new realm we find ourselves in with regard to hemp production in the state, WFU supports:

- Formulating an open-source hemp seed-saving program, as well as legislative initiatives to protect farmers' rights to develop new strains, plant hemp seed, and sell hemp seed without unnecessary restriction.
- Lowering the DATCP testing fees for hemp.
- Removing the background check requirement for permitting and licensing applications.
- Raising the allowable THC content of hemp, as defined by state and federal law, from 0.3 percent to 1.0 percent. In order to comply with the current federal standard of .3 percent THC, farmers and state certified processors be allowed to remediate the THC to a level of compliance through the extraction process and re-test the hemp product at its consumer-ready form.
- Removing the ban on individuals applying for hemp licenses that have served and completed sentencing for a non-violent cannabis related felony.
- Adding hemp to the list of prohibited crops in Wisconsin's anti-corporate farming law.
- State appropriated funding for a grant program for building hemp fiber processing facilities that would open market opportunities for more farms to produce hemp in Wisconsin.

BADGERCARE AND BADGERCARE PUBLIC OPTION: WFU supports legislation to create a public option to buy into BadgerCare, available to any resident of Wisconsin no matter their income and inclusion of the BadgerCare public option on the Healthcare.gov marketplace. WFU opposes cuts to funding and/or more restrictive eligibility requirements, including work requirements, for Medicaid and BadgerCare Plus. WFU urges the governor, state legislature and Wisconsin Department of Health Services to pursue a Medicaid strategy that:

- Prioritizes maintaining eligibility for the largest possible number of residents, opting for modest premium and copay increases rather than wholesale exclusion of participants.
- Maintains service delivery centers throughout the state, and not just online, recognizing that many rural residents lack access to high-speed internet.
- Leverages all available federal dollars to support Medicaid programs, including the immediate acceptance of the federal Medicaid expansion funding provided through the Affordable Care Act.
- Incorporates a methodology that recognizes the fluctuating annual income levels that are characteristic of farming and other self-employment.

FAMILY FARMERS SHAPING CLIMATE CHANGE POLICY: Food security, a healthy landscape, climate mitigation, and a prosperous rural America can only be attained through a strong family farm system of agriculture. Farmers and rural communities are uniquely positioned to meet the climate goals set forth in any climate change legislation. Farmers have the available land base for alternative energy and the opportunity to transform farming practices to sequester excess carbon and improve the health of the environment. We need to have a seat at the table as climate change legislation is being developed.

MEAT PROCESSING INFRASTRUCTURE: In order to foster an environment in which family farms have equitable market access and the ability to be economically sustainable and grow, WFU advocates for the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation to offer financial support to increase the capacity of and start new state and USDA-inspected meat processors throughout the state. WFU urges increased support from County Economic Development agencies as well as streamlined regulation from DATCP to help facilitate small-scale processors, as well as processors that offer USDA, organic, Halal, and Kosher certification; as well as mobile and other on-farm processing facilities and use of animal by-products and waste. WFU further supports allowing meat and poultry products sales across state lines if they have been inspected through state, Meat and Poultry Inspection (MPI) programs. WFU supports the formation of cooperatives and other business structures that form to address specific local and regional processing needs, and offers assistance to chapters to do so.

Other highlights from the grassroots policy process included support for:

- The designation that “meat” and products bearing species-specific designations such as beef, pork, chicken, turkey, lamb, fish, etc., must come from the carcass of a slaughtered animal. Products derived from culturing or reproducing animal proteins or tissues outside of the body of a living animal must be clearly labeled as “lab-grown,” “produced in a factory,” “not derived from harvested livestock,” or similar labeling.
- Country-of-Origin-Labeling (COOL) for all meat and dairy products; urged expansion to labeling of all food products distributed and sold in the U.S.
- Discontinuation by Congress, the US Trade Representative, and the Administration of injudiciously applied tariffs, and a shift to negotiating trade relations in a more collaborative, open, and non-confrontational approach.
- A state program to provide aid in maintaining barns, silos, and other traditional farm buildings.
- Creation of a limited purpose driver’s license, permit, or identification card for a Wisconsin resident who has not been assigned a Social Security number or cannot establish legal presence in the United States, which will make transportation safer.
- Efforts to empower Medicare and Medicaid to negotiate with pharmaceutical companies for lower drug prices for Medicare and Medicaid patients and also make those lower drug prices available to Americans with private health insurance. The maximum price for any negotiated drug should be in line with average global prices.
- Support for use of Ranked Choice Voting in Farmers Union board, federal, state, and local elections in order to better capture voters’ intent and to encourage participation of third-party candidates.
- Implementation of a “Labor Gains Exemption” for family farm agriculture. This may be accomplished by increasing the standard deduction for all family members’ contributions to a family owned farm. This standard deduction should be in the form of a refundable tax credit to enable refunds of these credits if no taxes are due.
- An acreage cap on use value assessment for those who are using it as a tax shelter
- Legalization and substantial taxation of cannabis, provided that growers are required to obtain a permit and limited to a specific number of plants or acres, as well as the addition of cannabis to the list of crops under Wisconsin’s anti-corporate farming law, and the retroactive expungement of all nonviolent convictions related to cannabis.
- Inclusion of water quality parameters in nutrient management planning
- Changes to NR 151 that will restrict manure and other waste application rates and the spreading of these materials on frozen soils in areas of the state deemed to be sensitive areas. These sensitive areas would include places with shallow soil depth above Karst bedrock, areas with sandy soils, and areas where the groundwater quality standards are not being met.
- Trading of phosphorous nutrient credits to reduce the amount of phosphorous reaching various bodies of water, granted that such legislation is equally applicable to small and large farms.
- Agronomy research exploring the benefits of composting, compared to other forms of manure storage
- Changes to the eligibility criteria of the Lake Protection Grant: Lake Management Plan Implementation program to include farmer-led watershed councils and the agricultural organizations that support those councils.

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