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Wisconsin
Farmers
Union

NEWS

UNITED TO GROW FAMILY AGRICULTURE



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Editor's Column: Holding Steady in a Wild Year



By Tommy Enright
WFU Communications Director

It may only be March, but 2025 has already given us a year's worth of chaos. From shifting policies to funding freezes, economic uncertainty to unpredictable weather, it has been a rollercoaster for farmers and rural communities alike.

Through it all, one thing has remained steady: the determination of Wisconsin Farmers Union members to stand up, speak out, and fight for a fair food system. In the past couple of months, we have seen an incredible surge in grassroots advocacy. Members have packed hearing rooms, sent letters, testified at the Capitol, and made sure lawmakers understand the stakes for family farmers and rural communities. If you have been part of those efforts, thank you. Your voice matters, and your persistence is making a difference.

In this issue, you will read about some of the ways WFU members are making Wisconsin a better place to live. You'll also find updates on recent town halls, policy discussions, and upcoming opportunities to get involved.

None of this work happens in a vacuum. It happens because people like you step up.

And let's be honest, there is still a long road ahead. Policy fights do not wrap up neatly like the final scene of a feel-good farm movie. They are more like a stubborn calf that refuses to move where you want it to until enough people get behind it and push. That is why we will keep showing up, keep organizing, and keep working to make sure the policies coming out of Madison and Washington, D.C. actually support family farms and rural communities.

So here is to holding steady in this wild year. To those who have already joined the fight, thank you. To those who are thinking about getting more involved, now is the time. Let's keep pushing.

Tommy Enright

WFU Communications Director



From the President's Desk

Uncertainty at the federal level continues to create challenges for farmers, making it difficult to plan for the future. Just a few weeks ago, I spoke to the media about the impact of tariffs on agriculture, only to see those tariffs temporarily lifted on Canada just an hour later. This kind of instability underscores the importance of strong state-level policies that support farmers, rural communities, and local food systems.

Hopefully, Wisconsin will take meaningful steps to invest in agriculture through Governor Evers' proposed state budget. By the time you read this, WFU's Farm & Rural Lobby Day will have already taken place. Many thanks to our members who gathered at the State Capitol to advocate for several key legislative priorities that will help shape the future of farming and rural communities in Wisconsin. Among them, securing funding for farm-to-school programs remained a priority. Ensuring that Wisconsin students have access to healthy, locally grown food benefits both our children and our farmers. We also pushed for renewed support of the Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easements (PACE) program, which helps preserve farmland and protect it from non-agricultural development. Another priority for our members is the continued funding for the Wisconsin Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) program, which has put millions of dollars into the hands of farmers and provided healthy food to communities. We also urged support for expanding Producer-Led Watershed Grants to promote conservation practices like cover crops, no-till, and managed grazing, as well as funding for the Cover Crop Insurance Rebate program, which rewards farmers for implementing soil health practices.



Rural infrastructure remains another pressing issue that we continue to face. The cost of maintaining local roads has skyrocketed over the past decade. Ten years ago, sealcoating a mile of rural road cost around \$18,000; today, that same work costs over \$30,000. Without adequate funding, our rural transportation network will continue to deteriorate, making it harder for farmers to move their products and for rural communities to stay connected. WFU supports legislative efforts to increase funding for road improvements and ensure that rural areas receive the support they need.

While uncertainty persists at the federal level (and may for some time), we remain hopeful that we'll be able to see some progress through Wisconsin's state government. However, the state budget is still under deliberation, and none of the proposed bills or funding priorities have been adopted yet. Several programs that directly benefit farmers and rural communities are being considered, and WFU will keep advocating for policies that strengthen our rural economy, protect farmland, and promote local food systems.

Carin Von Ruden

WFU President

The Real Freeze Farmers Are Facing



By Julie Keown-Bomar
WFU Executive Director

This morning, my thermometer read -15°F on my way to work—but bone-chilling temperatures pale in comparison to the freeze on federal funding and its impact on farm organizations and farmers. Wisconsin Farmers Union (WFU), our members, and farm groups across Wisconsin and the Midwest are feeling the effects.

WFU has five contracts at risk, including a subaward for a Climate Smart grant and Wisconsin Women in Conservation—two of our most popular projects. We've already covered the expenses as required by the contracts, but reimbursements are frozen, and communication from program officers has been minimal. The Iowa Soybean Association reports nearly \$11 million owed to hundreds of farmers for work completed in 2024. Conservation Districts of Iowa, after weeks without NRCS funding, laid off 38 of their 39 staff members.

Ken Meter, a respected food systems analyst and WFU member, is concerned about his organization, Crossroads Resource Center, because multiple consulting contracts are in jeopardy. FairShare CSA recently received a termination notice for its "CSA for All" project, with the notice citing a shift in agency priorities regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Some grants have been abruptly canceled without advance notice; others remain in limbo. As one WFU member put it, "The uncertainty is the hardest part." Reimbursable grants place farmers and nonprofits in a bind—fronting costs for contractors, equipment, and payroll without any guarantee of repayment is simply unsustainable.

One of our members, a Technical Service Provider, underscored the stakes of a freeze on EQIP funds: "We need EQIP funding to implement thousands of conservation projects that prevent millions of tons of soil from leaving American farms every year." These funds are vital for transitioning cropland to managed grazing and covering steep startup costs like fencing, water pipelines, and seed—practices critical to soil health, water quality, and drought resilience. Established during the Dust Bowl to prevent soil erosion, NRCS now faces mass layoffs: 52 employees in Wisconsin and roughly 1,200 nationwide have been terminated, along with Farm Service Agency loan officers and outreach coordinators. Members are already reporting halted expansion plans and concerns about timely access to operating loans.

While a few of our members remain unaffected, they share a growing sense of uncertainty. Most feedback we've received has been critical of the administration's actions, though some expressed hope that the freeze might slow the conversion of farmland to solar farms or encourage local food reliance through tariffs. Still, inflation looms as a significant burden on farmers.

Whatever your stance on federal funding, one principle should be universal: Contracts must be honored. Farmers and farm organizations that have upheld their end of the bargain—doing the work and paying upfront costs—deserve the same in return.

Have you felt the impact of frozen funds?

Share your story at <https://bit.ly/WFUfedsurvey>

Growing Membership & Community: WFU Welcomes Hannah Alden

Hannah Alden recently joined Wisconsin Farmers Union as a regional membership coordinator. Alden will primarily work with chapters and members in Districts 1-4 on the western side of the state as well as support the larger goals of the organization's membership team.



In addition to her work at WFU, Alden runs a small-scale vegetable farm in Clark County focusing on a CSA program and spring plant sales. Prior to becoming a full-time farmer in 2019, Alden worked in community journalism as an editor and reporter for newspapers around the Madison area. She looks forward to getting to know WFU members across the state and helping chapters host events as well as engage their current membership and attract new folks to the organization.

“Our members are working hard in their areas to make connections, create change and support their neighbors,” Alden said. “WFU’s work is crucial not only for rural communities – issues like corporate consolidation, climate change and affordable health care impact everyone. I hope to help our members foster relationships not only between their other chapter members, but also within the broader network of those working toward common goals across the state.”

A Piece of WFU History Available for Purchase

The brick building at 117 W. Spring Street was home to Wisconsin Farmers Union from 1945–2024. With the purchase and redevelopment of the Market on River building and the relocation of the state office, the WFU Board is reviewing all options. Selling the Spring Street building is on of the options and we want members to be aware of this opportunity in case someone from the cooperative is interested in purchasing it.



The building is approximately 4,700 square feet of livable/commercial space with an unfinished and original basement. Currently, its design and layout serve as a mixed-use property, featuring three apartments on the 2nd level, office space on the main level, and a basement that has served as a storage area. It was built in 1937 and is structurally sound, but it will require HVAC updates and renovations, including new windows, updated plumbing, and possible ADA enhancements which could involve structural changes. One notable update to this property is the stunning double deck that overlooks the Chippewa River.

The board would like to see the property redeveloped for a use that is helpful to the community. For more information, contact Jackie Boos, Facilities Director–jboos@wisconsinfarmersunion.com

JULIE BOMAR TO RETIRE FROM WFU THIS SUMMER

After seven years of dedicated service to Wisconsin Farmers Union, Julie Bomar has announced that she will retire this summer. Julie joined WFU in 2018, bringing with her more than 25 years of experience in higher education, Cooperative Extension, and international agriculture and development. Under her leadership, the organization has grown both in membership and in influence, expanding its impact on agricultural policy, rural communities, and cooperative initiatives.

Reflecting on her time at WFU, Julie notes that leading the organization has been meaningful, impactful, fun, a bit gritty, and always inspirational—everything she loves in a job. "If one measures the value of one's life in the company one keeps," she says, "family, co-workers, members, board members, and partners provide a fire hydrant supply of energy and hope every day." Her decision to retire was not made lightly, but she looks forward to putting her energy into the next chapter of her life, which will surely include outdoor pursuits, travel, gardening, foraging, political engagement, and cherished time with family.

"Julie's leadership has been instrumental in strengthening WFU as a force for family farmers and rural communities," said WFU President Darin Von Ruden. "Her passion, vision, and dedication have helped grow the organization in both size and influence. We are grateful for all she's done and wish her the best in this next phase of life."

The WFU Board has chosen a search and hiring committee and plans to post the position soon. If members know of strong candidates, please refer them to the employment page on the WFU website.



DATCP Secretary Randy Romanski (left) with members of the WFU Board of Directors.

SEC. ROMANSKI VISITS WFU HEADQUARTERS

DATCP Secretary Randy Romanski visited Market on River and WFU headquarters on Friday, February 21 to discuss avian flu, as well as upcoming legislative priorities for the organization.

FEDERAL EXECUTIVE ORDER SURVEY

Wisconsin Farmers Union is dedicated to advocating for policies that support family farmers, rural communities, and a fair food system. As part of this work, we want to hear directly from you.

Recent federal executive actions have influenced agriculture, rural economies, healthcare, environmental policies, and more. Have these actions had an impact—positive or negative—on your farm, business, or family?

Your feedback will help us better understand the real-world effects of these policies and strengthen our advocacy efforts.

Find the survey at wisconsinfarmersunion.com.

WFU HOSTS TOWN HALL

Farmers from across western Wisconsin gathered in Chippewa Falls on Feb. 21 for a Wisconsin Farmers Union (WFU) town hall at Market on River to discuss the impact of recent federal policy changes on rural communities. With USDA programs and contracts in limbo due to funding freezes, staffing cuts, and shifting trade policies under the Trump administration, attendees voiced concerns about disruptions to their farms and livelihoods. The event provided a platform to discuss how these changes are affecting local food systems, conservation efforts, and access to critical support programs.

Despite invitations, no Republican lawmakers attended, leaving many farmers frustrated by the lack of engagement from their representatives. However, State Rep. Jodi Emerson, State Sen. Jeff Smith, State Rep. Christian Phelps, and U.S. Rep. Mark Pocan were present to hear farmers' concerns and discuss potential solutions.

Attendees shared personal stories of struggling to access conservation funding, facing market instability, and navigating supply chain bottlenecks. Dairy farmers, grain producers, and specialty crop growers emphasized that these challenges threaten their ability to keep farms running and provide for their families. Farmers also raised concerns about how new tariffs could further disrupt markets and squeeze farm incomes, while rural healthcare workers spoke about the challenges of providing care in communities where hospitals and clinics are already stretched thin. Their message was clear: lawmakers must step up to ensure stability and support for farmers.

WFU continues to call on elected officials to engage with rural constituents, address the funding freezes, and advance policies that strengthen Wisconsin agriculture.



WFU members voiced their concerns about federal actions at a town hall on Feb. 21st.

NFU STUDENT SCHOLARSHIPS

Calling all students, applications for NFU scholarships are now OPEN! Applications are due on April 1. Learn more about each scholarship and the criteria at <https://nfu.org/education/scholarships/>

WFU OFFERING NFU FLY-IN SCHOLARSHIPS

Wisconsin Farmers Union is offering scholarships for members to attend the National Farmers Union Legislative Fly-In, tentatively set for September 8-10 in Washington, DC. The deadline to apply is July 15, 2025. For info, contact Camryn Billen at cbillen@wisconsinfarmersunion.com.

“Everybody Deserves Good Food”

By Erin Thompson,
WFU Communications
Specialist



Since its founding in 1984, Stepping Stones of Dunn County has been an invaluable resource to those facing food insecurity in Northwest Wisconsin. In 2024 alone, Stepping Stones distributed 816,000 pounds of food through their food pantry, serving over 5,000 people in the Menomonie community and beyond.

Mike Racette is the Coordinator for Farmers Feed Dunn County, a Stepping Stones program that partners with Dunn County farmers for the purpose of getting a regular supply of local, fresh food into the hands of the community. In his role, Mike coordinates the receipt of food donations, some purchases, and Stepping Stones' Wisconsin Local Food Purchase Assistance (WI LFPA) Program grants.

As a beneficiary of the WI LFPA Program, Stepping Stones received local food deliveries through the WI LFPA Direct to Farmer grant. Mike was also involved with managing a 2024 WI LFPA Community Partner grant titled, "Farmers Feed Dunn County - Food Diversification Initiative," which aimed to expand the Farmers Feed Dunn County program by acquiring protein from local producers and diversifying produce for distribution to underserved communities in Dunn County.

"Because of our background and our prior connections, we were able to very quickly get involved with WI LFPA," Mike said.

Mike encouraged area farmers to apply for Direct to Farmer grants for the 2023 and 2024 WI LFPA growing seasons. Farms accepted into the program were awarded guaranteed contracts for the season, with their products going to food access programs locally and around the state. The Wisconsin Food Hub Cooperative (WFHC) coordinated transportation of the products from the farms to food access sites like Stepping Stones.



"The WFHC always did their best to accommodate our product requests," Mike said. "And because we're open six days a week, we were able to receive products virtually any time.

Stepping Stones was noticing a need for more animal protein at the pantry, which was the catalyst for their Community Partner grant program. Mike coordinated with farmers in the area that produced eggs, meat, and a diverse array of produce to regularly supply the pantry.

“Every Wednesday we have an egg producer that brings farm fresh eggs which is so great,” Mike said. “We also have a grower who provides just a really nice mix of summer fresh vegetables.”

Products procured through Stepping Stones’ Community Partner grant also supply Project SAM (Share-A-Meal), a weekend kids’ meal program. Mike works with Mary Dirty Face Farm to provide apples for the kids.

“For the farm it’s great,” Mike said. “There’s a guaranteed market with a price that works for them. And for us we have local apples. People know where those apples come from. I hope the funding can continue because we would simply just not be able to do that without this grant.”



As a farmer himself, Mike is knowledgeable about working with and purchasing from farmers. In 1992 Mike and his wife, Patty Wright, founded Spring Hill Community Farm in Prairie Farm, WI. The farm was managed collectively with the foundational values of environmental stewardship, economic justice, and growing community. After nearly 30 years of operating a full-time CSA, Mike and Patty scaled down the operation in 2020 and have shifted more of their time towards organizations like Stepping Stones.

Despite being well connected with other farmers in the Dunn County area, Mike still uses the Wisconsin Local Food Directory to find more farmers near him based on the products they have available. In 2024 he used the directory to connect with Jeremiah’s Bullfrog Fish Farm to provide trout for the pantry.

“Jeremiah’s Bullfrog Fish Farm is just south of Menomonie and they’ve been a provider of these absolutely wonderful fresh frozen trout fillets to the pantry via the WI LFPA Program,” Mike said. “I saw that they were in the directory this year and had been awarded a Direct to Farmer contract. So, I reached out to them through the directory and we were able to have a conversation about them providing trout to Stepping Stones every Friday.”

The Wisconsin Local Food Directory is maintained by Wisconsin Farmers Union as part of the WI LFPA Program with the goal of connecting food access organizations to area farmers.

“[The trout] is an absolutely fantastic and very popular product, but not anything that we could ever afford to purchase on our own,” Mike said. “WI LFPA made it happen.”



Read Stepping Stone’s full story on the Wisconsin LFPA website!

www.wilocalfood.org



WFU Foundation grants focus on supporting rural

2024 WFU FOUNDATION SPONSORSHIPS

- Badger State Farms
- Beyond Organic
- Brown Co. Dairy Promotions Taste of Brown County
- Chippewa County Tech Tour
- Chippewa Falls Main Street
- Chippewa Falls YMCA Annual Strong Kids Campaign
- CORE Community Resources
- The Cornucopia Institute
- Dodgeville Farmers Market
- Driftless Area Land Conservancy
- FairShare CSA Bike the Barns
- Feed My People Food Bank
- Fields of Sinsinawa
- Food, Faith & Farming Network Seed Money Projects
- Grassworks
- Green Lake County Fair
- Huey's Hideaway Children's Museum
- Hunger Task Force's The Farm
- Lakeshore Natural Resource Partnership
- Midwest Manure Summit
- Milwaukee Urban Ag Conference
- Northern Wisconsin State Fair
- OGRAIN Conference
- Operation Bootstrap
- OrganicEye
- Professional Dairy Producers of WI Conference
- REAP Food Group
- Savanna Institute Perennial Farm Gathering
- Second Harvest Foodbank of Southern WI
- Second Harvest Northland
- The Food Group Emerging Farmers Conference
- Wisconsin Association of Ag Educators
- Wisconsin Cattlemen's Association
- Wisconsin Holstein Association
- Wisconsin Outstanding Young Farmer Conference
- Wisconsin Public Radio
- Wisconsin Rural Partners Rural Summit
- Wisconsin Water and Soil Health Conference

By Danielle Endvick

WFU Director of Development

If this magazine lands in your mailbox, you're likely already familiar with the advocacy and community-building work of Wisconsin Farmers Union, but do you know that we also have a foundation that uplifts farmers, chapter initiatives, and projects that enhance life in rural Wisconsin?

The Wisconsin Farmers Union Foundation supports projects and programs for all ages that foster family farming, rural life and public education on the important role of cooperatives and agriculture in society.

Non-profit organizations or individuals with a proposal that meets the WFU Foundation's mission is encouraged to apply! Awards typically range from \$300 to \$1,500. A portion of funding each year is set aside for Local Initiative Grants that provide support to Farmers Union chapters throughout the state.

We're proud of the proposals the foundation supported in 2024 and hope to have a year of competitive applications again in 2025.

Applications are reviewed quarterly, with deadlines of February 15, May 15, August 15, and November 15. To learn more, visit www.wisconsinfarmersunion.com/foundation

2024 LOCAL INITIATIVE GRANTS

- Amnicon-Douglas Farmers Union — Fair Building Project
- Barron County Farmers Union — Resilient Food System Project
- Jackson-Trempealeau Farmers Union — Farmers Garden Market Celebration
- Kenosha-Jefferson-Walworth-Racine Farmers Union — Reorganization Meeting
- Pepin-Pierce County Farmers Union — Regional Dinner
- South Central Farmers Union — Tabling and Recruitment Improvement Project
- Taylor-Price Farmers Union — Film Screening
- Vernon-Crawford Farmers Union — North Crawford Community Pastures Program & Groundwater Modeling Project



MOR AWARDS

MARKET ON RIVER

Market on River has gained attention from the region and has received award recognition!



Market on River was awarded the Top Redevelopment Project of 2024 through Momentum West Wisconsin, a regional economic development organization serving Northwestern Wisconsin counties. The recognition celebrates the economic development created through this investment by Wisconsin Farmers Union.

#2 BEST NEW BUSINESS
#3 BEST PROJECT IN PROGRESS OR COMPLETED IN THE LAST YEAR



Market on River was voted #2 Best New Business and #3 Best Project in Progress of Completed in the Last Year in the Volume One Best of Poll!

This poll is an annual survey where the Chippewa Valley community votes for their favorite local businesses, people, events, and much more.



Above: Founding farmers of the St. Croix Valley Food Alliance.



LOCAL FOOD GETS A LIFT

St. Croix Valley Food Alliance Secures Major Grant to Strengthen Local Food Economy

By Mike Miles, SCVFA Founding Member

After three years of dedicated work and determination building the foundations for local food advocacy, farmers from the Polk-Burnett Farmers Union have achieved a crucial milestone for their primary initiative—the St. Croix Valley Food Alliance (SCVFA). By partnering with Wisconsin Farmers Union state office for fiscal sponsorship, they have received their first substantial grant to help realize their mission: “To strengthen and promote a thriving, resilient, and equitable local food economy in the St. Croix River Valley.” As they move steadily into this work, they have identified three strategic goals to achieve this mission. They aim to bring more economic opportunities to the region, build local food connections, and make local food more accessible to residents.

Member farmers in the SCVFA grow food using sustainable farming practices and sell directly from the farm to consumers. The driving force behind this collective of more than 27 local farm members is a commitment to keeping products local—

sold at farmers markets, farm-based retail stores, and directly to people who want to know where their food comes from. In addition, the SCVFA is working to expand access to farm goods in schools, hospitals, food banks, and other wholesale outlets. Currently, many of these farmers must drive past their neighbors on the way to Minneapolis/St. Paul markets just to generate enough sales to stay in business.

Locally grown food is a powerful driver of sustainable rural development. When dollars spent on everyday essentials stay local, they circulate through the community instead of being extracted by urban financial districts. That is why this local food advocacy effort aims to relieve direct-market farmers of the burdens of marketing and brokerage so they can focus on growing food while ensuring financial sustainability. At the same time, SCVFA seeks to increase the presence of fresh, locally grown foods in stores, restaurants, schools, care facilities, and everywhere people want to eat healthy.

With the support of their first big grant, the SCVFA has hired a Local Food Coordinator who will be dedicated to connecting the dots between sustainable farms and the broader community. They have also secured office space above the Luck Food Co-op in Luck, WI, and are partnering with Whole Farm Strategies to conduct a feasibility study of local farms and markets.

"This grant is a game-changer for this effort," said Kristy Allen of the St. Croix Valley Food Alliance. "For too long, small farms in our region have struggled to compete in a system that prioritizes large-scale distribution. With this support, we can focus on building stronger connections between farmers and our community—making it easier for people to access fresh, local food while ensuring that our farmers can thrive."

The SCVFA is also hosting two more of its popular winter farmers markets on February 16 and March 16 from noon-3pm in the greenhouses of the Acreage in Osceola. Each event will feature two dozen vendors, a pop-up restaurant, and a coffee shop, complete with live music—creating a neighborhood-like space conducive to shopping and catching up with friends. A splendid time is guaranteed for all.



St. Croix Valley Food Alliance Winter Market.



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FUNDING HIGH TUNNELS AT VINE & VIRTUE FARM

This case study details the experience of Shane and Kenna Kanneberg, owners of Vine & Virtue Farm, in working with the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) to receive funding for two high tunnels. Your experience may be different depending on location, practice, year, federal funding issues, and more.



Setting the Stage

Shane and Kenna Kanneberg own Vine & Virtue Farm in Seymour, Wisconsin. They started their farm in 2022 after falling in love with local food. They steward their nine acre farm following permaculture principles. As beginning farmers, they utilize NRCS programs to make conservation improvements on their farm that they otherwise could not afford.



Step 1: Consult the Cookbook

The USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) publishes a catalog of fundable conservation practices each year called the Field Office Technical Guide (often fondly referred to as the “cookbook”). The cookbook contains information about conservation practices, eligibility, and cost-share rates. It can be helpful to take note of specific issues on your farm that you’re looking to address and explore possible conservation practices that could address your concerns. One major factor that will determine if you are eligible for funding is whether or not there is a “resource concern” present. NRCS defines a Natural Resource Concern as, “An expected degradation of the soil, water, air, plant, or animal resource base to an extent that the sustainability or intended use of the resource is impaired.”

Shane and Kenna knew they wanted high tunnels (conservation practice) to extend their growing season (resource concern), and to improve plant and soil quality (resource concerns).



Step 2: Contact Local NRCS

When you have a good idea of some specific conservation concerns or projects you would like to pursue on your farm, it’s time to contact your local NRCS office. Phone and email contact information for local NRCS office staff is searchable by county at nrcs.usda.gov/contact/find-a-service-center.

Wisconsin Farmers Union Conservation Coordinator, Erin Lenninger is available to assist farmers located in the Fox-Wolf Watershed who would like a personal introduction to local NRCS staff. Erin can even attend an NRCS office visit with you!

Shane and Kenna contacted NRCS staff in Outagamie County to set up a time to discuss funding for high tunnels. They expressed a desire for two high tunnels and shared resource concerns that would make them eligible for funding. As a farmer interested in funding, you are a client of NRCS. Don’t be afraid to advocate for yourself and ask for what you need. NRCS is there to serve you!



Step 3: Application Paperwork

After Shane and Kenna worked with their NRCS agent to confirm that the high tunnels would be a good fit for their farm, the paperwork began! Your NRCS agent will guide you through the application process and can complete much of the paperwork for you.

NRCS applications are accepted year-round, but farmers interested in receiving funding during the current fiscal year should apply by November 1. Shane and Kenna submitted their application in the fall of 2022.



Step 4: Buy and Build the High Tunnels

Shane and Kenna were awarded funding for their high tunnel in early 2023 at a rate of \$12 per square foot. The farmers were able to request an advance payment equal to 50% of their funding because they qualified as underserved farmers. Shane and Kenna then found an online retailer that sold high tunnel build kits that were NRCS compliant. They made the purchase, sent their receipts to NRCS, and the parts to construct the tunnel were delivered to their farm.

Next, the farmers constructed the high tunnels themselves, which they cited as a hurdle they faced in this process.



Step 5: Certify the High Tunnels

After the high tunnels were constructed, Shane and Kenna contacted their NRCS agent to let them know. The agent scheduled a time to visit the farm where they inspected the build of the high tunnels. In order to receive the second half of their funding, the practice had to be “certified.” This means that NRCS needed to confirm that the practice was installed correctly, following their guidelines. Shane and Kenna recalled that NRCS was quick to schedule farm visits to certify the practices, which ensures that funding moves along more quickly.

Initially, the doors of Shane and Kenna’s new high tunnels were not attached correctly, so their NRCS agent requested that they make a change. Shane and Kenna corrected the doors shortly after the visit, sent updated photos to their agent, and then received the rest of their funding about a month later.

Total Timeline (~10 months):

Fall 2022: Shane & Kenna submitted their application for high tunnels to NRCS

Early 2023: The farmers were awarded their contract and an advance payment equal to half of the funding

February 2023 - June 2023: Shane & Kenna shopped for and built their high tunnels (this process can go more quickly, but Shane and Kenna chose to wait to build their high tunnels)

July 2023: The farmers received the second half of their funding after the high tunnels were certified



Located in NE WI and need support in navigating next steps for conservation on your farm?

Contact WFU Conservation Coordinator, Erin Lenninger!

elenninger@wisconsinfarmersunion.com // (715) - 382 - 0341

Cutting the Cord: Corporate Medicine Closes Rural Obstetric Unit

*By Kari Esbensen, MS, MA
Vice President, Wood-Portage-Waupaca Chapter
Conservation Farmer and Retired Licensed Professional Counselor*

As the Wisconsin-inspired film *Green and Gold* debuts, telling the story of farmers fighting to preserve their way of life, my rural community is facing its own battle—the closure of our labor and delivery unit. ThedaCare-Froedtert has announced it will shutter the obstetric services at our local hospital, forcing expectant mothers to travel nearly an hour to the Fox Valley for care. This decision disregards the unique challenges of rural life and puts the lives of mothers and babies at risk.

For generations, Waupaca has been a place where babies were born safely, supported by dedicated healthcare professionals. Now, our community hospital joins a growing list of rural obstetric units being closed nationwide. The American Medical Association recently called attention to these alarming trends, warning of increased maternal and infant mortality in underserved areas. Despite these concerns, ThedaCare executives justify their decision while simultaneously building new hospitals in Oshkosh and Fond du Lac, ensuring urban patients won't have to travel more than 15 minutes.

A group of retired local providers—midwives, nurses, and physicians with decades of experience—has come together to fight for this essential service. They've spent their careers caring for rural families, and they know firsthand that labor and delivery can be unpredictable and urgent. Expectant mothers from outlying farms already face long distances and unpredictable weather conditions, increasing the risk of complications during childbirth. Without local care, rural women are more likely to give birth in transit or delay seeking medical attention, with potentially dire consequences.

Among those fighting to preserve local obstetric care is my husband, Dr. Russell Butkiewicz, a family practice physician who provided care to the Waupaca-area for 34 years. His passion for rural medicine was inspired by the University of Wisconsin's long-standing commitment to the Wisconsin Idea, which promotes extending the university's benefits beyond the campus to all corners of the state. From the time we moved to our farm in Ogdensburg in 1990, he was dedicated to providing full-spectrum family medicine—including obstetrics—to our rural community.



Dr. Russell Butkiewicz holding two babies he helped deliver.

Living 10 miles north of the hospital, we learned early on the unique challenges of rural obstetrics. Babies don't wait for convenient timing; they arrive in the middle of the night, during blizzards, or when their parents least expect it. I remember nights when my husband rushed out in subzero temperatures to assist a laboring mother at the hospital, knowing time was of the essence. He never lost a mother or a baby due to anything within his control.

Wisconsin Farmers Union highlighted the crisis of rural obstetric closures in its 2022 article *Laboring to Provide Medical Care*. Now, our hospital is another casualty of corporate decision-making that prioritizes profits over patient well-being. The loss of a labor and delivery unit isn't just an inconvenience—it's a public health crisis. Maternal morbidity and mortality rates are rising, especially for rural women and women of color. The added burdens of travel, cost, and fear of seeking care—especially among immigrant farmworkers—exacerbate these risks.

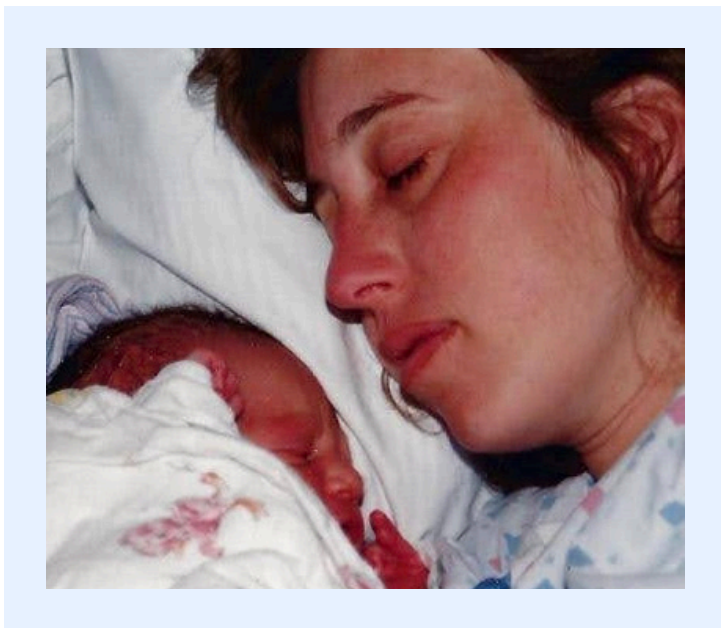
The impact of this closure extends beyond expectant mothers. It's tearing apart our rural healthcare system. Several physicians are leaving the community, with one reportedly placed on administrative leave for speaking out against the decision. Staff who have devoted their lives to serving this community feel betrayed. Local leaders, including the Waupaca Common Council, have passed a resolution urging ThedaCare to reconsider, recognizing that removing obstetric services undermines the very purpose of a community hospital.

Meanwhile, ThedaCare-Froedtert executives are reaping massive salaries under the guise of a nonprofit organization. At the time of the merger, Froedtert's CEO earned over \$3 million annually, while ThedaCare's CEO was paid more than \$2.4 million. Hospital mergers like this one rarely benefit patients. Studies show that consolidation leads to higher healthcare costs and reduced access to services. Rural communities are being sacrificed in favor of expansion in more lucrative urban markets.

Beyond the immediate health risks, the closure of labor and delivery services has long-term economic and social consequences. The Wisconsin Office of Rural Health has documented how losing local healthcare services weakens rural economies, reduces reproductive populations, discourages young families from staying, and accelerates population decline. It highlights the relationship between healthcare access and economic growth, concluding, "We can't survive without rural areas... they're the lifeblood of food, energy, recreation, beauty, and open space."

Healthcare should not be a privilege of proximity to urban centers. Expectant mothers in rural Wisconsin deserve the same quality care and peace of mind as those in Madison or Milwaukee. The decision to close Waupaca's obstetric unit is short-sighted, dangerous, and unjust.

A thriving community needs accessible healthcare, just as it needs strong schools and local businesses. No farms, no medical care, no moms, no food, no life. This fight isn't just about a hospital wing—it's about the future of rural Wisconsin.



The author with her child.

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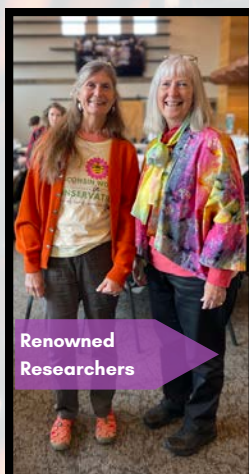
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This year's theme focuses on developing deeper connections between the diverse cultures nurturing Wisconsin's landscape. Presenters include **Ann Vang** (of Central Rivers Farmshed), **Jennifer Gauthier** and **Sara Smith** (College of Menominee Nation), **Una VanDuvall**, **Dr. Jean Eells** and **Dr. Rebecca Christoffel** (E Resources). **Dr. Annie Jones**, UW Extension professor and Tribal Liaison, will deliver the keynote: "Keep Calm and Bridge the Divide: Authentic Relationship Building."

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Una VanDuvall



Annie Jones



Jennifer Gauthier



Ann Vang



Sara Smith



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community counts

Committed to Staying Connected in these Troubled Times

Wisconsin Women in Conservation (WiWiC) has been bringing together motivated regional networks of female farmers, landowners, gardeners, dreamers, and conservation professionals for nearly 5 years. Over 4,000 women have been involved in events - online and in person - that provide much-needed space to connect, support and inspire through peer-to-peer learning. While restorative land management is the focus, WiWiC's impact has rippled far beyond conservation education. Through learning circles, field days, potlucks, bus tours, happy hours, and one-on-one relationships all across the state, a powerful movement bridging generations, cultures, boundaries, and barriers has been growing.

But the federal funding freeze and disruption to USDA programs has led to difficult and uncertain times for WiWiC and a host of other effective agricultural initiatives. The WiWiC project is led by the Michael Fields Agricultural Institute (MFAI), in partnership with Wisconsin Farmers Union, Renewing the Countryside and Marbleseed. eResources group is the research and evaluation partner. USDA NRCS is the funding agency.

Much effort and many hours have already been spent by all of these organizations to plan 2025 events, but there is no certainty at this point that previously approved funding to continue the project will be released by the federal government. **Consequently, MFAI will continue to run the program without the other partners** until funding is restored. Inquiries about the program should be directed toward MFAI Director of Advancement Kriss Marion at kmarion@michaelfields.org.

The WiWiC Educator's Conference at Sentry World on April 25 will proceed as planned, with help from generous sponsors. Conservation professionals, volunteers, mentors, and advocates who support women's land stewardship efforts are warmly invited to attend. Plan to elevate the work, celebrate each other, and envision a resilient shared future.

Nothing is more important in these troubled times than community. WiWiC partners and collaborators cherish the relationships that built the program and those that have been fostered through the program. Rest assured that MFAI and these colleagues WILL FIND A WAY to continue to do this essential, earth-healing, community-building work. Stay connected.



Gov. Tony Evers Announces Additional Funding For Farmer-led Research, Soil Conservation Practices

By Julia Keegan, WFU Communications Specialist

On a sunny but windy day in early February, Governor Tony Evers visited the Peterson Family Dairy Farm in River Falls, Wisconsin, to celebrate the announcement of \$1 million in additional funding for the Producer-Led Watershed Protection Grant (PLWPG) Program. More than 25 area farmers and landowners gathered to meet the governor, share insights about farmer-led efforts, and tour the Peterson Family Farm.

“Anytime I visit with any of these [farmer-led watershed] groups across the state, I hear the same themes and different success stories,” said Governor Evers. “It’s so important for our state to recognize these efforts, for the state to drive them, for the state to help financially keep them going and keep the conversation going—it’s a ‘win-win’ for us.”

Members of the farmer-led watershed groups shared how the program works, including research plots, educating other farmers, and more.

“We’ve learned that nobody can change a farmer’s opinion better than another farmer,” said Dan Sitz, Conservation Engineering Technician with the Pierce County Land Conservation Department.

“Conservation—it’s what needs to happen. It’s what we need to do,” said Brian Bergseng, a dairy farmer and co-leader of the South Kinni Council.

“It’s great to push innovation,” said Tara Greiman, Director of Conservation and Stewardship at the Wisconsin Farmers Union. “When we go to the farmer-led watershed councils and say, ‘Don’t limit yourself to the budget—imagine what you could do if you actually had the money to do it,’ it really opens up a new conversation. It’s been wonderful to work with.”

This additional funding will be distributed to 49 farmer-led groups across the state, supporting conservation initiatives aimed at improving soil health and water quality.

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Farmer-Led Regional Lunch Focuses on Improving Farmers' Bottom Lines While Benefitting Public Waters

By Tara Greiman, WFU Director of Conservation and Stewardship

The fourth annual Northwestern Wisconsin Regional Farmer-Led Watershed Council luncheon was held in mid-February at the Phoenix Event Center in Baldwin, Wisconsin. The focus of this event was to talk about the basics of soil health to improve farm operations without any sales pitches. This year featured three speakers who focused on strategies to reduce farmers' input costs and increase profits.

Shawn Conley, the UW small grains and soybean specialist, gave a presentation on seed coating considerations and the outcomes of his research. Conley's research is independent: "If you see my presentation, you'll learn why I don't get a lot of industry funding." He noted that neonicotinoid seed treatments can do more to increase slug pressure than benefit a crop, since they harm the natural predators of slugs. Conley encouraged farmers to know their cost of production first and foremost, stating that all his research has found "absolutely no difference in risk mitigation between a high-input and low-input system." Resources and research from Conley can be found at www.coolbean.info.

The next presenter, Martin Larsen, has worked with farmers in his area in Minnesota to create what is becoming known as an "oat mafia" — a group of farmers who co-market and independently work to improve their operations and test weights. Larsen shared a detailed spreadsheet comparing his farm's performance under a corn-and-soybean rotation versus a corn, soybean, and oats rotation. Using a conservative estimation of the rotational advantage (3%), Larsen found that his gross farm income from sales decreased annually, but with the increased production from a rotational advantage on the corn and soybeans, plus the

decreased costs of oat inputs, his total farm profit increased by over \$19,000 in one year. This management style has significant additional benefits: lower costs have a real impact on loan obligations, and diversified rotations help manage pest resistance and reduce the need for a complex herbicide program.

The day concluded with a presentation by local independent agronomist Joe Ailts. Ailts has been working with area farmers to understand how soil health impacts optimal fertilizer rates. He shared significant evidence that the Haney test can be used to fine-tune nitrogen recommendations for side dressing, potentially saving farmers a great deal of money. For example, if farmers can lower their nitrogen uptake efficiency from 1.1 to 0.9, they can save \$35 per acre. Ailts also shared his insights on the economic and fertility value of cover crops and provided considerations for adding them to rotations.

Wisconsin Farmers Union hosts this event to support Farmer-Led Watershed Councils and their efforts to improve water quality in Wisconsin. A special thank you to Compeer Financial for generously sponsoring the meal for this program.

ACTION ALERT

Wisconsin Farmers Union Advocates for Continued Support of Wisconsin Local Food Purchase Assistance Program

Wisconsin Farmers Union (WFU) is calling on local communities, farmers, and advocates across the state to rally behind the Wisconsin Local Food Purchase Assistance Program (WI LFPA) as it prepares for critical funding decisions in the coming months. With the program's significant impact on both farmers and food access partners over the past two years, WFU is urging support to ensure the program's continuation and expansion in the 2025-27 state budget.

In December 2024, WFU members passed a Special Order of Business, designating the continuation and expansion of WI LFPA as a top policy priority for 2025. Since its inception, the program has delivered remarkable results:

- 289 farmers/growers have participated.
- 72 Wisconsin counties and tribal nations have been served.
- 254 food access partners have received deliveries.
- \$4.18 million worth of local food has been distributed to communities in need.

The USDA has committed to continued funding for the program focused on procurement, yet recent executive orders and federal announcements have caused uncertainty about whether the funding will be rescinded. While WFU's direct role in the program will end in June 2025, the organization remains committed to advocating for its future by educating state legislators about the importance of LFPA and the broader farm-to-food-access efforts.

WFU is leading the charge in several ways and encourages the public to get involved:

1. WI LFPA Letter of Support WFU has launched a letter of support for WI LFPA on their action page. Members of the community are invited to sign or submit their own letters, which will be delivered directly to their legislators. This letter aims to highlight the widespread backing of the program and its importance for Wisconsin farmers and families.
2. Joint Finance Hearings – April 2025 At the upcoming Joint Finance Committee Hearings, WFU plans to present the results of their petition, showcasing the broad reach and impact of the WI LFPA program. Advocates and supporters will be encouraged to attend and testify in support of the program's continuation. Further details will be shared as hearing dates are announced.

The WI LFPA program has demonstrated its value in promoting local food systems, supporting farmers, and addressing food insecurity across Wisconsin. With continued advocacy and legislative action, WFU and its partners aim to ensure that the program remains a vital resource for years to come.

For more information on how to get involved, visit www.wisconsinfarmersunion.com/action

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- LWIPA
- Dan & Lynn Barnum Family
- Thomas Venezio & Mimi Fumo
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- Nathan & Anna Schneider Family
- Benjamin & Stephanie Niedzwiecki Family
- Gundrum Bros Farm LLC
- Alan Blonien
- David & Patricia Ortlieb
- Greg Bjork
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- Janel Hanrahan Family
- Samantha Kewin Family
- Katie Sideri Family
- Pam & Jeff Lambrecht
- High Ridge Acres LLC
- Hannah Cusick

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- Mount Horeb
- Colfax
- Fall Creek
- Beaver Dam
- Phillips
- Oneida
- Chippewa Falls
- Eau Claire
- Elkhorn
- Lena
- Shorewood
- Denmark
- Thorp
- West Bend
- Malone
- Chilton
- Hudson
- Eau Claire
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- Eau Claire
- Chippewa Falls
- Rosholt
- St. Paul

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- Stefanie Stieglbauer Family
- Megan Ziegler Family
- Marie Adams Family
- Rachael McGraw Family
- Kayla & David Proffitt Family
- Emily Walton Family
- Healing Starts Today
- Travis Mueller
- Marieke & Rolf Penterman Family
- Kathleen Tuttle
- Willow Woods Roots & Remedies
- Robert & Patricia Coogan
- Ariana Abbrescia
- Diane & Kevin Cain
- Grian Hollies-Maxwell & Don Maxwell
- Gierhart Farms
- Kristy & Jim Bielecki
- Sally McCoy
- Katie Furlano Family
- Katy Krause Family
- Amanda Christensen Family
- Kyle Zeman
- Stewart Bartz
- Crossroads Community Farm
- JTL Farm & Gardens
- Emilee Gaulke
- Ashley & Brian Law Family

Location

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- Milwaukee
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- Chippewa Falls
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- Montfort
- Thorp
- Eau Claire
- Cadott
- Mineral Point
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- Milwaukee
- Argyle
- Chippewa Falls
- Edgerton
- Eau Claire
- Altoona
- Eau Claire
- Sand Creek
- Downing
- Mt Horeb
- Oconto
- Madison
- Sheboygan



SPRINGING INTO ACTION

Connecting with Conservation Professionals

By Allison Crook, WFU Regional Membership Coordinator

The depth of winter has passed, and spring is arriving soon, full of possibilities and new beginnings. For many of us, this also includes farm planning for the coming year. Have you thought about new or different conservation practices you could implement on your land? If not, I encourage you to consider it—and to reach out to WFU staff to help get you connected with conservation resources and professionals!

For over a year now, I had the great privilege of working on the Wisconsin Women in Conservation (WiWiC) Project. The territory I supported for this project included nine counties: Sauk, Columbia, Green Lake, Marathon, Portage, Waupaca, Shawano, Brown, and Outagamie. Through this work, I closely interacted with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and County Conservation Departments. For me, the most rewarding part of the WiWiC project is helping landowners, farmers, farm workers, urban growers, and non-operating landowners get connected with conservation professionals so that they can bring their land dreams to life.

When I joined the WiWiC project, I had minimal experience working with NRCS or county conservation offices. I was intimidated

and overwhelmed by the depth and breadth of services these offices offered. As women started asking me for conservation support, I wanted to ensure I was directing them to the appropriate resources. I reached out to a number of conservation professionals in my WiWiC counties, and they generously offered me the opportunity to shadow them on the job. While I ended up shadowing several folks, one woman stands out in particular: Melissa Schlupp, Conservation Manager at the Office of Land Resources and Environment (LRE) for Sauk County.

Melissa took me to the Sauk County Farm, a roughly 566-acre property that the LRE Department has developed a master plan “to ensure the continued management of the site’s agricultural and natural resources.” Over the course of three hours, Melissa walked me around the farm, pointing out various conservation practices implemented on the land: grassed waterways, buffer strips, nest boxes, pollinator plantings, contour strip cropping, cover crop planting, stream-bank erosion control, and no-till plantings. She also discussed the farm’s forest management plan, nutrient management plan, and grazing plan. Melissa shared how the county works closely with other partners to implement these practices—providing both technical assistance

and cost-share funding.

During the tour, I furiously scribbled notes so I wouldn't forget the information and wisdom Melissa imparted to me. As we wrapped up, I felt exhausted and immensely grateful for the time and knowledge she shared. Melissa's generosity enables me to better serve the women who reach out to me through WiWiC. She is an invaluable asset to the county, and I greatly appreciate our continued partnership.

While there is only one Melissa Schlupp, there are many other conservation professionals doing great work across the state—and I highly encourage you to consider giving them a chance! Depending on where you are located in the state, and your gender identity, we have a number of different grant programs at WFU that collaborate with conservation professionals (including Wisconsin Women in Conservation, Farm Climate Smart WI, and Farmer-Led Watershed Councils). Our staff is happy to help get you connected, so that your spring farm plans can take root and thrive! If you are interested in connecting with me about the Wisconsin Women in Conservation Program, reach out at 608-851-0518 or acrook@wisconsinfarmersunion.org.

If you're not sure which conservation program is the best fit for you, you can always reach out to Tara Greiman, our Director of Conservation and Stewardship (715-492-0329), and she'll steer you in the right direction! Our members can also join WFU conversations around conservation through our climate and water committees, which assist in directing staff as we implement our conservation work. If you'd like to share a perspective or have thoughts on efficiently promoting WFU's conservation goals, feel free to reach out to Tara to get involved in a committee.



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WE'RE ABOUT TO FIND OUT



by Alan Guebert

During the final stages of building the world's first atomic bomb, scientists at the secret New Mexico research site worried that the initial test of their new weapon

might ignite the atmosphere and wipe out every living thing.

The project's anxious physicists, however, considered it "extremely unlikely and ultimately downplayed the possibility as a realistic threat" but "not an unreasonable concern."

Farmers, ranchers, and rural communities are experiencing similar anxieties as the White House and Congressional Republicans rev up their efforts to slash federal spending. Unlike the nuclear pioneers, however, neither GOP group has produced quantifiable numbers to support their views.

Moreover, any voter with an internet connection can quickly disprove key claims the budgeteers are using to underwrite their claims.

For example, in the attention-grabbing Jan. 27 White House directive labeled "Temporary Pause of Agency Grant, Loan, and other Financial Assistance Programs," the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) predicated its spending cuts on this hardworking phrase: "In the Fiscal Year 2024, of the nearly \$10 trillion that the Federal Government spent..."

There's a problem with that case-building opener; it's simply not true. Indeed, "according to the June 2024 estimate by the Congressional Budget Office.. 'In fiscal 2024, the federal government spent \$6.9 trillion..."

So 2024 spending by the federal government—as reported by the federal government—was about 30 percent smaller than what the Administration's current budget office used to justify its government-wide spending "pause."

What happens when deep spending cuts and future government budgets are based on numbers that are at least 30 percent out of line with reality? We're about to find out.

In the meantime, mandated federal spending cuts are coming to rural America with or without the

White House working with honest numbers. For example, the University of Illinois (UI) recently reported its College of Agriculture, Consumer and Environmental Sciences received "\$61 million in direct federal funding last year."

How does folding up federal programs at a Land Grant university's ag teaching and research umbrella affect that state's farmers and rural communities? We'll soon know.

Caught in the Washington, D.C. crossfire is the university's Soybean Innovation Lab that receives vital funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID. That agency was one of the first targets for deep cuts and dramatic overhaul by the Trump White House team.

After USAID's mid-February gutting, "Peter Goldsmith, the executive director" of the Illinois soybean research facility, "announced the lab will shut down in April as [USAID] terminated its funding... Thirty soybean experts working in the local lab were let go last Friday."

What happens to those experts and their work—described as "one of U.S. farmers' best tools to expand their markets... globally"—when it is dismantled without thought, understanding or appeal?

The United States' more than 500,000 soybean growers in nearly 30 states are about to find out.

And what about trade dependent American farmers; how will the recently advanced Trump trade policy of "reciprocity" —essentially a country-by-country, eye-for-an-eye mashup of arcane, trade-killing rules—reverse U.S. ag's fast growing trade deficit?

Even more worrisome, can the pared back and still-being pared USDA handle today's fast-moving avian flu outbreak before the disease discovers a pathway to a COVID-like pandemic as the White House continues to cut, freeze or eliminate funding and jobs at USDA testing facilities and National Institutes of Health research programs?

And what impact will Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., the Trump Administration's newly approved secretary of health and human services, have in upcoming food debates as the boss over the Food and Drug Administration?

No one knows but we're about to find out.



Wisconsin
Farmers
Union

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PHOTO CONTEST

The winning photo earns a Farmers Union hat! High-resolution vertical photos preferred. Send your photo entries and a brief description to Tommy at tenright@wisconsinfarmersunion.com

ON THE COVER:

Our cover photo this month was captured by Nicole Black of Superior, WI.

