



## State Senator Sheila Harsdorf

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Date: January 30, 2014

To: Senate Committee on Agriculture, Small Business, and Tourism

Fr: Senator Sheila Harsdorf

Re: Senate Bill 437 – Agricultural Enterprise Area Acreage Cap Increase

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Chairman Moulton and Committee Members:

Thank you for holding a public hearing on Senate Bill 437 (SB 437), which seeks to authorize the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) to allow up to two million acres of land to be designated as agricultural enterprise areas.

2009 Wisconsin Act 28 allowed for the establishment of agricultural enterprise areas (AEA) in an effort to preserve, expand, and develop farms and other agricultural businesses within designated agricultural areas. An AEA must consist of contiguous parcels, be located entirely in a farmland preservation area identified in a certified farmland preservation plan, and be land primarily in agricultural use.

To establish an AEA, a petition must be filed with DATCP by a unit of government and include at least five eligible farms. The petition must include a clear description of agricultural and other land uses, have a clear description of the development goals, have a plan for achieving the goals, and a description of current or proposed land use controls.

Act 28 authorized DATCP to allow up to one million total acres of designated AEA land. To date, DATCP has authorized 25 areas consisting of approximately 750,000 acres and anticipates reaching this cap by the end of this year. This bill would increase the cap to two million acres.

Agriculture plays a vital role in Wisconsin contributing \$59 billion annually to the state's economy. I urge committee members to support this legislation in order to allow for continued opportunities to preserve land for agricultural purposes. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify on this important legislation. I welcome any questions you have.



To: Wisconsin Senate Committee on Agriculture, Small Business and Tourism  
Re: Senate Bill 437 testimony, January 30, 2014  
From: Bill Berry, Wisconsin field representative, American Farmland Trust

Sen. Moulton and Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 437 on Agricultural Enterprise Areas. As you know, the bill would increase the cap on the combined area of AEAs statewide from 1,000,000 to 2,000,000 acres.

My name is Bill Berry, and I live in Stevens Point. I serve as field representative for American Farmland Trust (AFT), a national conservation organization dedicated to protecting farmland, promoting sound farming practices, and keeping farmers on the land. In Wisconsin, our work is informed by an active advisory group called the Friends of Farmland Protection, which includes representatives of local and state agricultural and conservation groups, and working farmers who are deeply interested in long-term stewardship of the land. We have worked in cooperation with a number of partners, including the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, to strengthen and update Wisconsin's farmland protection strategies. AEAs have become a key component in Wisconsin's farmland protection toolbox.

AFT continues to cooperate with the DATCP and other groups, such as the Wisconsin Towns Association, to get the word out about AEAs and farmland protection.

This bill is timely and necessary, and we're happy to see it has bipartisan support. Thank you, Senator Harsdorf, for being chief sponsor, and to all those who signed on to the bill.

AEAs are popular. In three years, local communities have developed AEAs totaling about 750,000 acres in 19 counties, 72 towns, and on one reservation. Soon we will reach the 1,000,000-acre cap.

AEAs are voluntary. They represent a commitment to farmland preservation and the agricultural economy. They provide farmers the opportunity to sign farmland

preservation agreements and receive state tax credits. In turn, farmers who sign farmland preservation agreements commit to conservation compliance.

AEAs are useful in areas that do not have zoning, since they open the door to farmer participation in the farmland preservation program. Where farmland preservation zoning is present, farmers are eligible for higher tax credits.

In addition to expanding the cap, AFT believes there are other ways to strengthen and enhance AEAs as economic development and farmland preservation tools. We encourage leaders to explore grants, low-interest loans, a state match to local conservation easement programs, protection from annexations and other enhancements.

AFT supports this bill and will be happy to work with lawmakers and the DATCP on enhancements, sharing information on how AEA programs operate in other states.

Thank you.

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