



TODD NOVAK

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 51ST ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

(608) 237-9151
Toll-Free: (888) 534-0051
Rep.Novak@legis.wi.gov

P.O. Box 8953
Madison, WI 53708-8953

DATE: November 21st, 2023
RE: Testimony on Assembly Bill 655
TO: Assembly Committee on Agriculture
FROM: State Representative Todd Novak

Thank you Chairman Tranel and members of the Assembly Committee on Agriculture for holding a public hearing on Assembly Bill 655 (AB 655) which creates a transition to grass pilot program and provides an appropriation.

I authored this bill with Senator James after initially working on this issue during the budget cycle this session. We authored this bill after being approached by stakeholders and local conservation groups that expressed the need for a grazing grant program in Wisconsin.

Two sessions ago, I chaired the Speaker's Task Force on Water Quality with Rep. Shankland. We held hearings throughout Wisconsin, and heard from dairy business leaders, conservation groups, and local family farmers. From these hearings, it was made clear that farmers want to be the leaders in clean water and conservation efforts, but they need the tools and resources to lead in this important effort.

Our task force has led on legislation that was signed into law that has helped farmers implement practices beneficial to water quality, conservation and their bottom line. The Producer-led Watershed Protection Grant Program, Nitrate Optimization Program and Cover Crop Insurance Rebate Program have become successful conservation programs.

AB 655 further expands on the progress made from our work on the Water Quality Task Force by creating a grazing pilot program. The program administered by the Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection provides farmers with grants to transition fields and pastures to grazing areas.

The Transition to Grass pilot program will provide grants to farmers for the following purposes:

1. Assist with establishing perennial forages for rotational grazing of livestock raised in a grass-based managed grazing system.



TODD NOVAK

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 51ST ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

(608) 237-9151

Toll-Free: (888) 534-0051

Rep.Novak@legis.wi.gov

P.O. Box 8953

Madison, WI 53708-8953

2. Provide assistance to establish harvestable continuous cover in marginal areas that can produce supplemental feed for livestock that is raised in a grass-based managed grazing system.
3. Provide a farmer with incentive payments during the first three years of the farmer's transition to grass-based managed grazing systems.
4. Assist a farmer with paying for grass-based managed grazing system infrastructure needs, including fencing, watering, and other livestock management infrastructure.
5. Technical assistance to develop grazing plans, including determining field and paddock layout, infrastructure setup, seed selection, and establishment of rotational grazing patterns.
6. Assistance in navigating grass-based grazing system and grass-fed livestock research and market development initiatives, and market opportunities.
7. Best practices for meeting consumer demand for grass-fed livestock products.
8. Assistance in fostering innovation in and expanding farm and agribusiness strategies in grass-based grazing system and grass-fed livestock practices.

I am proud of the broad coalition of industry stakeholders we have established to support our proposal including: Wisconsin Agri-Business Association, Clean Wisconsin, Dairy Business Association, the Nature Conservancy, Wisconsin Cattlemen's Association, Wisconsin Conservation Voters, Wisconsin Farm Bureau, Wisconsin Farmers Union and Wisconsin Land and Water Conservation Association.

Thank you for your consideration of AB 655.



Testimony in Support of Assembly Bill 655

Assembly Committee on Agriculture

November 21, 2023

Chair Tranel, Vice-Chair Oldenburg, and members of the Assembly Committee on Agriculture, I want to thank you for holding a public hearing on Assembly Bill 655, legislation to create a Transition to Grass pilot program administered by DATCP. I also want to thank my colleague and friend, Representative Novak, for his work on this important legislation that was born out of the Speaker's Task Force on Water Quality.

This legislation provides grant funding up to \$40,000 for farmers implementing new grass-based managed grazing areas on their farms. For those not familiar with managed grazing, it really is a win-win because managed grazing is often economically advantageous for our farmers while protecting water quality and promoting good soil health. In managed grazing systems, livestock are rotated through paddocks of high-quality grasses that are then allowed to rest and re-grow.

The benefits of a well-run managed grazing system include:

1. Maintaining healthy and vibrant livestock
2. Improving soil and water quality
3. Reducing the risk of flooding
4. Reducing numerous costs associated with farming

Although some producers in Wisconsin practice managed grazing on their farms, we know that many do not, and the pilot program created in this legislation provides a great incentive to encourage our producers to adopt and implement new managed grazing systems. Given the significant success of our nitrogen optimization pilot program and the cover crop insurance rebate program, it only makes sense to provide additional incentives to farmers to help them improve their bottom lines while also enhancing soil health and water quality. This bipartisan bill builds on the good work this committee and the Legislature has done over the last few sessions.

I want to thank the committee for hearing this important bill today, and we are happy to answer any questions.



November 21st, 2023

Testimony on 2023 Assembly Bill 655

Relating to: a transition to grass pilot program and making an appropriation

Dear Chairman Tranel, Vice-Chair Oldenburg, and Committee Members:

Growing up, it was evident why Wisconsin was considered “America’s Dairyland”. It was commonplace to see rolling fields of cows dotting the landscape, and even today, our state is still heavily associated with this storied past. Unfortunately, the modern economy has put Wisconsin farmers in a tough spot. To keep up with global markets, farmers needed to scale their operations. Naturally, they found it easier to consolidate their cattle into free stall barns for quicker access than continue to let them roam large sections of pasture.

However, with an increased number of animals living in a smaller, more defined area, local environments began to be impacted. Farmers face a constant balance between remaining competitive with other producers while keeping their crops, soil, and water healthy, and they have come up with some clever ways to get the best of both worlds. The state has even taken a vested interest in some of these innovative practices, funding programs like the Producer-led Watershed Protection Grants, Nitrate Optimization Program, and Cover Crop Insurance Rebate Program.

Another method that has gained a lot of traction lately is called managed grazing. Managed grazing is an organized grazing system where livestock is systematically rotated between different plots of land to keep grasslands in check. This routine has many benefits, including significantly improving soil health and water quality. It also reduces the amount of manure needed to be stored on the farm, further mitigating potential downsides related to spills and runoff.

Assembly Bill 655 would establish a Transition to Grass program that would help farmers implement a rotating grazing program. The pilot program would consist of grants that could be used to establish grazing plots, cover the costs of infrastructure needs like fencing, getting technical assistance on grazing plans, among other things. These grants would help farmers move back to the grass-based systems Wisconsin became famous for while remaining competitive in the modern world and being good stewards to the environment.

Thank you all again for hearing this important legislation.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jesse James'.

Senator Jesse James
23rd Senate District
Sen.James@legis.wisconsin.gov



Date: November 21, 2023
To: Assembly Committee on Agriculture
From: The Clean Water Initiative (Clean Wisconsin, WI Dairy Business Association, Wisconsin Land and Water Conservation Association, The Nature Conservancy)
RE: Assembly Bill 655 – Transition to Grass Program

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Assembly Bill 655 to create a transition to grass program and thank you to Representative Novak and Senator James for their leadership on this issue. We are here as the Clean Water Initiative which is our ongoing, four year-old collaboration by Clean Wisconsin, the Dairy Business Association, the Nature Conservancy and the Wisconsin Land and Water Conservation Association to find common ground on water quality and agricultural issues, striving for policies and programs that promote clean water and resilient farms.

In brief, the “Grazing Bill” creates a new program at the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection to provide grant money and technical assistance to help farmers establish managed grazing systems for livestock on their land.

Managed grazing is more than just pasturing animals. Managed grazing is a farming practice where livestock are systematically rotated through pasture units with multispecies mixes of grasses and forbs to optimize livestock nutrition and the land’s health. In addition to providing excellent feed to pastured livestock, managed grazing on perennial grasslands provides significant soil health and water quality benefits. Managed pastures act like a sponge by absorbing rainfall from even the most intense precipitation events which reduces flooding in rural areas, captures and filters fertilizer and manure nutrients and pesticides, and builds soil and organic matter through its deep-rooted plants. The program this bill creates would support both transitioning new acres into managed grazing areas as well as landowners choosing to renovate low-productivity pastures into high producing managed grazing systems.

In Wisconsin, grassland acreage has declined 39% over the past two decades and institutional support has likewise declined over a similar timeframe. Prior to 2012, Wisconsin’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) partnered with the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) to dedicate funding to support grazing planning and implementation through the federal Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative (GLCI). Before federal and state funding ended in 2013, this program provided easily accessible funding to support grazing system planning, farmer to farmer engagement on grazing strategies, and the technical support needed to implement those grazing plans.

At its peak in the early 2000’s, the program provided a combined total of just under \$1 million in federal and state funding for competitive grants for managed grazing education, technical assistance and research. However, prescribed grazing support from the federal government declined by 55.4% between 2005 and 2020.

Wisconsin's agricultural landscape poses significant potential for expanded managed grazing operations. The 2017 Census of Agriculture noted that only 6,700 of Wisconsin's nearly 31,000 livestock farms practiced rotational grazing at some level within their operations. Since actively milking dairy cows need to make their way into the milking parlor 2-3 times each day, they can be more work to pasture, however milk cows are only about one-third of the state's cattle, meaning over two-thirds of our state's dairy and beef cattle are conducive for grazing, including dry cows and heifers. A 2021 case study on Brey Cycle Farm in Door County demonstrated the environmental and economic benefits of managed grazing when they transitioned 140 acres of a corn silage-alfalfa rotation into rotational managed grazing for their heifers and beef cattle. By converting from row crops, Brey's were able to reduce P runoff by 126 lbs and reduce soil erosion by over 200 tons of soil, all while saving an estimate \$1.50/head/day of animal management costs through reduced feed, fertilizer and fuel costs on that 140 acres of land.

Additionally, there is real evidence that interest in managed grazing is growing among Wisconsin's livestock farmers. NRCS has been the main funder of grazing practices in the state since the end of the Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative, and while over \$700,000 was obligated to grazing related practices in 2022, an average of 75% of applications to NRCS conservation programs have gone unfunded, mainly due to lack of funds. The Wisconsin-born Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship (DGA) Program links current and aspiring graziers in the transfer of farms and grazer skills and knowledge through a carefully designed educational platform that integrates classroom learning with real-world grazing implementation experiences. Since its creation in 2010, the DGA has expanded to 14 additional states and has approved more than 200 mentors to assist beginning graziers in implementing this sustainable form of livestock management. Additionally, UW-Madison's Grassland 2.0 and NRCS recently launched the [Grassland Academy's "Foundations of Grazing Planning" educational program](#) which aims to train farmers and ag consultants to write managed grazing plans. Their debut class was filled in only three days and graduated over 80 agricultural operators and other professionals from the program.

Since the Speaker's Task Force on Water Quality convened in 2019, the state legislature has enacted several popular and successful programs to help agricultural producers improve water quality. Much like the Producer-led Watershed Grant Program, the Transition to Grass Program will revitalize the peer-to-peer learning environment that is fundamental to successful, sustainable agricultural conservation practice implementation. The Transition to Grass Program will create the opportunity for farmers to learn from one another at on farm field days, pasture walks and through research participation about the very real money savings and environmental improvements grazing systems can generate.

In summary, we know managed grazing provides significant economic advantages to farmers and tangible environmental benefits. We also know farmers are interested in establishing managed grazing systems on their farms. However, they need access to resources and expertise to begin transitioning acreage in those systems. Assembly Bill 655 is that need. The Clean Water Initiative is excited to support this important initiative.

FRI REPORT: Bipartisan bill aims to encourage grass-based managed grazing practices

November 17, 2023



Lawmakers and backers of a bipartisan bill to encourage grass-based managed grazing practices say the proposal would lower transition costs while providing opportunities for new farmers.

Proponents argue the bill would be a way to help reduce costs for farmers while supporting a practice that has environmental benefits, including promoting water quality.

Rep. Todd Novak, the lead author, told WisPolitics the bill builds on work by the Speaker's Task Force on Water Quality he led in 2019 with Dem Vice Chair Rep. Katrina Shankland.

Novak, R-Dodgeville, who comes from a fifth-generation dairy, hog and beef farming family, said he believes animals are happier out in the fields than in a feedlot, adding the program would be an opportunity for new farmers.

"This would be a good program for them getting their feet on the ground, helping them out," Novak said. "Some of the older farmers that are going out of dairy, and are going into raising beef or just stock animals, transitioning them out of that."

Novak said the grant amount in the bill is a starting point and could be increased later on if the legislation is signed into law. The Assembly Agriculture Committee is set to hold a [hearing](#) on the bill on Tuesday.

[AB 655](#) would create a Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection “transition to grass” pilot program to assist farmers in making the transition to managed grazing. That practice involves regularly moving livestock between separated areas of pasture.

The program would offer grants of up to \$40,000 over three years to help farmers implement managed grazing systems while offering technical and other assistance. The proposal would create one half-time position with DATCP to support the program and provide resources for farmers.

Shankland, who is a co-author of the bill, said the state already has great farmers who are practicing managed grazing. But they don’t have the full-time support, technical assistance and incentives that exist for other conservation practices.

“This is one of the best ways for livestock producers, not only to support conservation, but also they would get tremendous economic benefit from establishing managed grazing at their farms, especially because it reduces input cost,” the Stevens Point Dem said.

Shankland said managed grazing can reduce costs for farmers, such as for fuel or fertilizers. Managed grazing also has environmental benefits, including reducing soil erosion and runoff, which can impact water quality, avoiding flooding and promoting soil health.

A coalition of groups involved in a clean water initiative have pushed for the proposal, including Clean Wisconsin, the Dairy Business Association, The Nature Conservancy and Wisconsin Land and Water Conservation Association.

Clean Wisconsin Water and Agriculture Program Director Sara Walling told WisPolitics one of the main selling points of the bill is the opportunity to enter the industry with lower costs. Newer farmers wouldn’t have to deal with overhead such as buildings or manure collection systems.

She said a lot of farms are aging out and there aren’t always family members willing to take on the operation.

“And so having this opportunity to provide support for farmers that ... maybe also don’t come from an agricultural background but that want to have an entry point into the industry, this provides a really great opportunity to do that,” Walling said.

Walling noted the grant program would offer funding in the second and third years of the transition. That would help farmers make adjustments if they run into any hurdles and ensure they can be successful in the long run, she said.

Dairy Business Association CEO Tim Trotter in a statement praised the measure, noting the group believes in empowering farmers to enact change.

“This legislation exemplifies that mindset, making more tools available to Wisconsin farmers for creating solutions that work for the environment, their individual businesses and our rural communities,” Trotter said. “A healthy environment and healthy farms are not mutually exclusive; we can have both.”

Jason Mugnaini, Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation executive director of governmental relations, told WisPolitics the most beneficial aspect of the bill is the assistance and education that would be provided to farmers who want to move to managed grazing.

That includes technical assistance and support from certified grazing specialists, as well as help navigating and analyzing the economics of grass-based managed grazing.

Mugnaini noted any new farming practices, such as moving from hand milking to automatic milking with dairy cows, take a bit of education.

“You’re really making those choices with the business that you built your whole life on. And you want to be able to have the technical capabilities and knowledge to make an informed choice,” Mugnaini said.

Mugnaini said a lot of farmers are interested in managed grazing, and a pilot project would offer that opportunity. Those who are on the fence about making the change could talk to grant recipients about their experiences and decide whether they want to make the transition, he added.

Wisconsin Farmers Union President Darin Von Ruden said the proposal would also offer good opportunities for new farmers. He said he hoped the measure would also entice some farmers to partner with beginning farmers to preserve agricultural land.

“With the current economic situations and the way things are, sometimes a retiring farmer doesn’t necessarily want to give up the land because they’re not sure what’s going to happen to it and just keep renting it out to somebody else, but it might give that beginning farmer an opportunity,” he said.



Tuesday November 21st, 2023

Assembly Committee on Agriculture

Re: Assembly Bill 655; Relating to: a transition to grass pilot program and making an appropriation

Michelle Ramirez-White – Policy Coordinator, Wisconsin Farmers Union

Chair Tranel and members of the committees, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of Assembly Bill 655.

Wisconsin Farmers Union's grassroots, member-driven policy reads:

***“Sustainable land-use and farming practices (e.g., no-till or low-till planting, cover cropping, and rotational livestock-grazing) not only protect the environment, but also have the potential to improve farmer economic stability and food security, which benefits all Americans.*”**

Wisconsin Farmers Union strongly advocates that permanent groundcover and managed grazing dairy and livestock systems are the Best Management practice to control soil erosion and phosphorus pollution in our nation's freshwater resources.”

Over time, we have seen conventional agriculture focus heavily on profit margins and highest yields, pushing operations to implement chemical, and technical methods of farming intended to extract agriculture out of the environment.

Managed Grazing is a farming method that recognizes and supports the interdependence between agriculture and the environment. Wisconsin Farmers Union supports the introduction of a Transition to Grass program at DATCP, under AB 655.

This program would provide funding and technical assistance to encourage more farmers to implement livestock grass-based managed grazing systems onto their operations. Managed grazing on perennial grasslands mitigates the impacts of GHG emission, controls soil erosion and phosphorus pollution in freshwater, as well as improves economic stability to the operation. Long term benefits of grazing systems also improve a farm's overall health, and builds its productive capacity, moving operations away from short-term extractive methods of agriculture.

Managed grazing can be implemented on new operations, as well as on established operations, and can be used with any livestock species and adapted to any ecosystem that grows grass. This level of versatility makes grazing central to sustainable agriculture.



We see the unique nature of the 3-year state support structure for the grant and the multi-year funding structure being especially helpful for applicants to overcome hurdles as they implement this system to their operation.

Wisconsin Farmers Union thanks the bill authors for putting forth this legislation that strengthens Wisconsin's environment and biodiversity, animal welfare, public health and nutrition, and the viability of rural economies and communities.

Thank you for this opportunity to share Wisconsin Farmers Union's thoughts on this issue.

Sincerely,

Michelle Ramirez-White

Policy Coordinator, Wisconsin Farmers Union



Testimony of Chuck Anderas, MFAI Associate Policy Director

Public Hearing, Assembly Committee on Agriculture, November 21, 2023

The Michael Fields Agricultural Institute (MFAI) is a non-profit organization helping rural and urban farms and agricultural communities in Wisconsin and beyond be environmentally, economically, and socially healthy. Founded in 1984 in East Troy, Wisconsin, it is our mission to nurture the ecological, social and economic resilience of food and farming systems through education, research, policy, and market development. We work closely with beginning and experienced farmers across the state and nation. Our long history of working with farmers transitioning to managed grazing includes serving as Collaborator for the Uplands Farmer-Led Watershed Group in southwest Wisconsin.

MFAI supports many conservation practices as a way to achieve water quality goals and strong farm businesses, and managed grazing systems stand out as profitable, practical, and optimal for conservation outcomes. We appreciate the Legislature's leadership on grazing, and we wholeheartedly support AB655 to create the **Transition to grass pilot program** through DATCP.

Well-managed grazing represents an opportunity for healthy communities, profitable businesses, and thriving ecosystems. Grazing promotes the vitality of Wisconsin's communities, economy, and natural resources. To see more grazing on the landscape, Wisconsin's agricultural community needs grazing technical assistance, education, and research as well as investments in marketing, processing, and supply-chain development. This bill contributes to meeting all those critical aspects of

Well-managed grazing is critically important for:

- Restoring healthy rural communities and farmer livelihoods
- Improving water quality, soil, carbon, wildlife, and pollination benefits
- Reducing flood risk, soil runoff, and well contamination
- Meeting the rapidly increasing consumer demand for grass-fed products
- Providing opportunities for beginning and young farmers

MFAI is asking for your vote to pass AB655 out of committee, and we hope to see a vote on the Assembly floor soon. For more information, please contact Chuck Anderas, Associate Policy Director at Michael Fields Agricultural Institute: (612) 469-2582 or canderas@michaelfields.org.

Sincerely,

Chuck Anderas

Prof. Adena Rissman, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Legislative testimony, Assembly Agriculture Committee 11-21-23

Hello! My name is Adena Rissman and I'm a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Thank you to Representative Tranel and the members of the Committee for having this hearing. I'm here for informational purposes only.

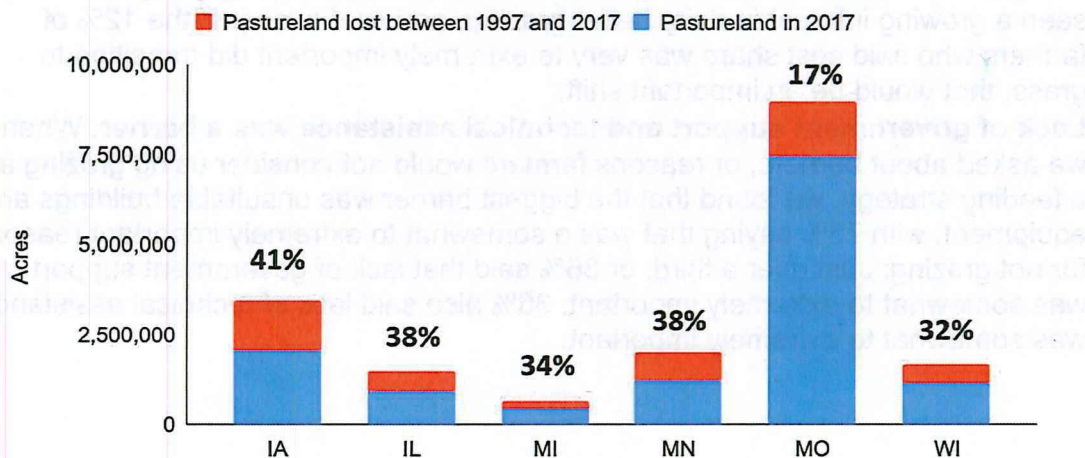
My research focuses on how policy can help private landowners in forestry and agriculture produce food and fiber in sustainable ways. I serve as the policy team lead on the Grassland 2.0 project which is a collaborative project funded by USDA for producers, researchers, and public and private sector folks to develop pathways for grassland-based agriculture. This is designed to increase profitability, production stability, and nutrient and water efficiency while improving water quality, soil health, biodiversity, and climate resiliency.

We have learned what it takes to transition to grazing through over 130 interviews, several workshops, and a survey of Wisconsin dairy farmers. Our findings show growing support for enhancing profitability, sustainability, and community well-being through increased adoption of managed grazing. However, we found significant barriers such as up-front capital requirements for cost-share, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient government support to facilitate a transition to perennial grass-based agriculture.

Thank you for the chance to share some of what we learned. I also want to give a shout out to the farmers who have fed us along the way - I'm looking forward to a delicious pasture-raised turkey thawing in my cooler at home right now.

Pasture is declining in Wisconsin

Wisconsin had 1.1 million acres of non-woodland pasture in 2017, a decline of 32% from 1.7 million acres in 1997.



Percent of non-woodland pasture lost across the Upper Midwest between 1997 and 2017. Source: Agricultural Census 1997 and 2017 (USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, 1997, 2017).

We heard from many producers in interviews that financial and technical assistance was critical for helping them get started with grazing. It can be expensive to put up fences and install pipes for water before cows or sheep are even out on the land, much less turning a profit. Technical assistance is critical and sometimes limited, as there can be long waiting periods to get a grazing management plan. We also heard concerns with federal programs like EQIP that they were oversubscribed, time consuming to get started, and had extensive paperwork. We've seen from the example of the producer-led watershed program that state efforts can serve an important role in allowing for fast, flexible, and innovative actions, even if they provide less overall funding than federal programs. We heard how those programs are crucial for farmers to learn from each other, creating a space for sharing innovations.

Dairy farmer survey results

This year, I worked with a group of economists and other social scientists at UW River Falls and UW Madison to survey dairy farmers. We heard from 660+ farmers with a 33% response rate, which is a relatively high response rate for farmer mail surveys these days. These results show the perspectives of one pathway into managed grazing, in which an existing dairy or livestock farmer transitions into rotational grazing. The other is that a new farmer starts off grazing from the get-go, and their perspectives are not included here.

We learned that 82% of survey respondents do not already practice management intensive rotational grazing, which means moving cows every 4 days or more often. From those not already rotationally grazing:

- **Cost sharing would be helpful for some dairy farmers to help support their transition to managed grazing.** 38% of dairy farmers who do not rotationally graze said that cost sharing would be somewhat to extremely important for helping support their use of managed grazing with their dairy animals. We recognize that most dairy farmers won't transition to rotational grazing, but we've seen a growing interest in dairy heifer grazing, and so if even just the 12% of farmers who said cost share was very to extremely important did transition to grass, that would be an important shift.
- **Lack of government support and technical assistance was a barrier.** When we asked about barriers, or reasons farmers would not consider using grazing as a feeding strategy, we found that the biggest barrier was unsuitable buildings and equipment, with 75% saying that was a somewhat to extremely important reason for not grazing. Just over a third, or 36% said that lack of government support was somewhat to extremely important. 36% also said lack of technical assistance was somewhat to extremely important.

More broadly, we asked existing dairy farmers their views on water quality and policy. We know that many farmers and organizations are working to improve agricultural management and sustain well-managed grazing operations to reduce runoff and leaching of phosphorus and nitrogen into the waters and wells of Wisconsin. Here's what we learned:

- **Water quality and soil health matter to farmers.** 83% of farmers emphasized the importance of enhancing soil health and 78% stressed the need to minimize nutrient runoff.
- **Protecting soil and water are more important for being a “good farmer” than having the highest milk production.** The majority said it is very-to-extremely important for a good farmer to improve soil health (83 percent) and minimize nutrient runoff (78 percent). Less than a quarter said it is very-to-extremely important to have the highest milk production (20 percent) or the latest technology (14 percent).
- **Dairy farmers support payments for water quality overall.** More than half, or 53 percent, of farmers support paying farmers for improved water quality outcomes, while 14 percent oppose this.

In conclusion, our research finds that Wisconsin is losing pasture acres and the year-round roots they keep in the soil. We saw a decline in state and federal funding for prescribed grazing at the end of the Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative around 2012. Well-managed grasslands, savannas, and other forms of perennial agriculture are presently underutilized. Farmers face significant barriers to adoption in terms of financial and technical assistance. This presents an opportunity for Wisconsin to pioneer a nimble, lower-paperwork approach that complements existing programs and aims to achieve farmer profitability, grow rural communities, keep water clean, build soil health and retain soil carbon, revitalize wildlife and pollinator habitat and biodiversity, and produce high-quality milk and meat.



State of Wisconsin
Governor Tony Evers

Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection
Secretary Randy Romanski

RE: Assembly Bill 655 Relating to: a transition to grass pilot program and making an appropriation.

November 21, 2023

Chairman Tranel and members of the Assembly Committee on Agriculture:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide information in support of Assembly Bill 655 related to a transition to grass pilot program and making an appropriation.

The bill creates a transition to grass pilot program. The program would provide grants to farmers who implement new grass-based managed grazing systems for their livestock. Grants would be capped at \$40,000. These grants would be distributed 75 percent in year one, 12.5 percent in year two, and 12.5 percent in year three. Managed grazing systems are alternatives to continuous grazing with the goal of improving conservation through controlling the density of livestock to maintain perennial grass-based vegetation, ensure regular access to fresh forage, and to reduce soil compaction and erosion.

The bill would create a 0.5 full-time equivalent (FTE) position to support the new pilot program. The pilot program would be funded with a newly created SEG annual appropriation funded at \$500,000 with revenue from the Environmental Fund.

DATCP currently administers conservation and market development grant programs. This program would appeal to the agency's customer base.

DATCP would like to thank Representative Novak for agreeing to amend the bill allowing the department flexibility to determine where the program will be placed.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide information on AB 655.

Wisconsin - America's Dairyland

2811 Agriculture Drive • PO Box 8911 • Madison, WI 53708-8911 • Wisconsin.gov

An equal opportunity employer

November 20, 2023

Representative Travis Tranel Chair
Wisconsin Assembly Committee on Agriculture
Room 302 North
State Capitol
PO Box 8953
Madison, WI 53708

Subject: Letter in support of Assembly Bill 655 (Transition to Grass Pilot Program)

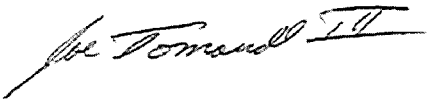
Chair Tranel and Honorable members of the Assembly Committee on Agriculture. I am submitting this letter of support for Assembly Bill 655 as a dairy farm owner and operator of three grazing based dairy farms in Marathon and Taylor Counties.

I have built, three grazing based dairy farms from the ground up with the first in 1998. These farms now have about 175 dairy cows and several hundred acres of managed pastures on each farm. It is extremely difficult to build a successful dairy farm business. I was fortunate enough to have access to quality technical assistance, state and federal grazing incentive programs, and robust local and statewide educational opportunities that existed throughout Wisconsin in the late 90's and early 2000's. Unfortunately, much of that was discontinued in 2012 on both the Federal and State levels because of budget cutbacks at the time.

The time is now ripe to begin anew with the transition to grass pilot program. This bill, if signed into law, has the potential to provide a robust transition option to managed grazing for new or transitioning farmers. Today, in Wisconsin, there is a fragile technical, financial and educational support system for farmers considering managed grazing. The transition to grass pilot program will provide a seamless transition opportunity for farmers choosing to begin managed grazing on their farms. In addition, managed grazing offers one of the few profitable entry-level options for aspiring livestock farmers. Managed grazing provides a low-cost entry model option for beginning farmers because of its lower investment costs and profit potential. I can personally attest to this through the development of my own three farms over the last 25 years. In addition, Managed grazing has numerous positive environmental and climate impacts. A robust grazing industry has the opportunity to contribute to our dairy industry's solutions for the environment.

Passage of this bill is imperative to the future of Wisconsin's grazing-based livestock industry. It will build on our proud history and success of a strong and robust livestock industry in Wisconsin built on independent farm ownership and operation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joe Tomandl III". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Joe Tomandl III
247606 Gad Rd, Medford, WI 54451