



Legislative Fiscal Bureau

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June, 2021

Joint Committee on Finance

Paper #167

Regional Farmer Support (Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection – Agricultural Assistance)

[LFB 2021-23 Budget Summary: Page 61, #4]

CURRENT LAW

The Wisconsin Farm Center, housed in DATCP's Division of Agricultural Development, offers services supporting farmers and their families, including: (a) a hotline that farmers may call for information, referrals, and crisis support; (b) mental health assistance, including a 24-hour counseling hotline, in-person and virtual counseling sessions, and workshops for farmers on mental health issues; (c) technical assistance related to production, processing, and marketing; (d) financial consultations and farm succession planning; (e) minority and veteran farmer outreach; and (f) mediation and arbitration assistance. Under the 2021-23 base budget, the Farm Center is budgeted 6.5 permanent positions, as well as several limited-term staff, for a total of approximately \$750,000 each year in salary and fringe benefit costs.

The UW-Madison Division of Extension provides educational programs related to agriculture, natural resources, geological and natural history, community and economic development, and other topics through an office located in every county in the state. The agriculture and natural resources program uses UW research and knowledge to address community agricultural and natural resources needs.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. Assembly Bill 68/Senate Bill 111 would provide \$347,400 GPR in 2021-22 and \$436,600 GPR in 2022-23 with 5.0 GPR positions to increase Farm Center staffing. While existing Farm Center staff are located at DATCP's main office in Madison, proposed staff would each be assigned to a different region in northwest, north, central, southwest, and northeast Wisconsin. DATCP intends that proposed positions would operate locally to build relationships with farmers,

and local organizations and businesses that support and provide services to farmers. Proposed staff would allocate approximately: (a) 50% of its time answering calls from the Farm Center hotline, and researching and providing information in response to caller requests; and (b) 50% of its time engaging in outreach activities such as visiting farms, attending industry events, building relationships with local leaders, farmers, and agribusiness professionals, and connecting with agriculture educational programs.

2. DATCP believes that outreach and engagement by the proposed positions would increase demand for Farm Center services. DATCP suggests that it may be more effective to conduct outreach to provide Farm Center services before farmers reach a point of crisis or dire need. In particular, DATCP suggests that proactive business consultations and succession planning may allow farms to be more resilient to economic pressures that have driven farm closures in recent years. Further, DATCP suggests that local engagement may allow the Department to more effectively design Farm Center offerings to meet farmer needs, and allow the Department to reach minority and underserved producers.

3. The UW-Madison Division of Extension provides outreach to local citizens and communities, with institutes focusing on agriculture, community development, health and well-being, human development and relationships, natural resources, and positive youth development. As part of the agriculture institute, educators work in local communities through activities such as working directly with farmers and other agricultural producers, speaking to civic groups and county boards, facilitating meetings, and providing information publicly through newspapers, radio, or television programs. Educators provide information on topics including safe and healthy agricultural practices, farm profitability, farm succession and planning, using resources in a sustainable way, and best practices for growing various crops.

4. In 2020-21, the Division of Extension budgeted \$3.5 million for agriculture agents and educators, using a combination of state and federal funding. As of April, 2021, 52.1 full-time equivalent (FTE) agricultural educators are working in 56 of Wisconsin's 72 counties. (A decline in agricultural educator positions from 57.4 FTE in May, 2019, may be partially associated with a hiring freeze during the COVID-19 pandemic.) Some educators work part-time in more than one county; in those cases, the county portion of the funding is split between counties. While positions are supported primarily by Extension, counties provide a portion of the funding for county-based educators, equal to approximately 41% of total funding for educators.

5. While the Farm Center and Extension may provide expertise and counsel in a variety of similar areas relating to farm business, the Farm Center is typically associated with providing services that may be more socially beneficial, including crisis intervention and mediation. Given the opportunity to further such outreach in regions of Wisconsin, the Committee could consider providing \$347,400 GPR in 2021-22 and \$436,600 GPR in 2022-23 with 5.0 GPR positions to provide regional Farm Center staff [Alternative 1]. The Committee could also consider providing \$139,000 GPR in 2021-22 and \$174,600 GPR in 2022-23 with 2.0 GPR positions to conduct outreach activities [Alternative 2].

6. However, considering the existing network of Extension agricultural agents located in each county that provide outreach services to farmers on agricultural practices, business management,

and succession planning, the Committee could decide not to provide additional positions to the Farm Center and take no action [Alternative 3]. It should be noted that AB 68/SB 111 includes a provision to provide \$500,000 GPR in 2021-22 and \$1,500,000 GPR in 2022-23 to increase county agriculture extension agents by 20 positions.

ALTERNATIVES

1. Provide \$347,400 GPR in 2021-22 and \$436,600 GPR in 2022-23 with 5.0 GPR positions in the Division of Agricultural Development's general program operations appropriation to create a regional network of Farm Center staff.

ALT 1	Change to Base	
	Funding	Positions
GPR	\$784,000	5.00

2. Provide \$139,000 GPR in 2021-22 and \$174,600 GPR in 2022-23 with 2.0 GPR positions in the Division of Agricultural Development's general program operations appropriation to create a regional network of Farm Center staff.

ALT 2	Change to Base	
	Funding	Positions
GPR	\$313,600	2.00

3. Take no action.

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