If I had a nickel for every time the phrase “return to normalcy” has been uttered since the first lockdowns last March, I would be a wealthy man. I am not sure we are there yet or even what would constitute normal after the last year. However, business as (sort of) usual has returned to the Legislature in Madison.

The start of the 2021-22 legislative session last month brought our elected officials back to town. In Wisconsin, even-numbered years normally mean a truncated legislative year with the summer and fall being dominated by campaigning, not lawmaking. In 2020, that traditional lull in action was extended even longer because of COVID-19.

Being back in town, lawmakers have been pumping out new bills. The very first one was meant to be a response to the impact of the same disease that had made lawmakers pack their bags early last spring.
Policy Radar
Biennial state budget
Gov. Evers unveiled his 2021-22 state budget proposal on Feb. 16. Agriculture plays a big role with a $43 million investment included in the two-year budget. Several DBA priorities carried over from last session, which was cut short due to COVID-19. Notable inclusions are: Wisconsin Initiative for Agriculture Exports ($2M), increased dairy processor grants ($1.2M), connecting food banks to producers ($20M), updates and improvements to Farmland Preservation ($5.4M), increased funding to farmer-led watershed groups ($500K) and increased funding for UW-Extension specialists and county conservation staff ($9.2M).

The budget now moves to the Republican-led Legislature where the Joint Finance Committee (JFC) gets the first crack at making changes. JFC will be scheduling state-wide public hearings in March-April. By May-June the full Assembly and Senate should be reviewing changes made by JFC and debating a final bill.

Truth-in-labeling proposals return
Senate Bill 81 (dairy products-ingredients), Senate Bill 82 (meat) and Senate Bill 83 (milk) have been introduced and have already passed in the Senate Agriculture Committee. These proposals ensure plant-based imitators cannot use terms like milk, cheese, yogurt and hamburger to confuse customers and hijack legal definitions. Sen. Howard Marklein is the lead author of all three bills in the Senate. In the Assembly, Rep. Travis Tranel will lead on milk and dairy products while newcomer Rep. Clint Moses is leading on the meat bill.

Assembly Bill 1 was a package of different COVID-related initiatives. At DBA, we were mostly interested in a provision that would have protected farms and other businesses who acted reasonably during the pandemic from predatory lawsuits.

The challenge was having people agree on what other parts of the package were essential. Disagreements over what to include were not just between our Democratic governor and the Republican-controlled Legislature. Republicans in the Assembly and Senate also went back and forth repeatedly on the bill. Ultimately, the version that passed was vetoed by the governor. The good news is that COVID liability protections were resurrected and passed as an amendment to a bill meant to address the issues with the state’s unemployment insurance system, which COVID has made glaringly obvious.

A large part of the Legislature’s focus now, as it always is during odd-numbered years, will be the state’s biennium budget. In mid-February, Gov. Evers released his vision for government spending over the next two years. (See details of his budgetary ag package in the Policy Radar on this page.)

Lawmakers are also thinking about what to spend money on. Parts of many of the bills that are being drafted and introduced now will ultimately find themselves in the final budget, although the road to that point is often a bumpy one.

Overseeing the entire budget process is the Joint Finance Committee (JFC), which this session is being led by two new lawmakers for the first time in many years. The new co-chairs are Sen. Howard Marklein and Rep. Mark Born. Both come from heavy agricultural districts, which means they are very familiar with our issues. We hope to preserve budget funding for the newly created Dairy Innovation Hub; secure new funds to help dairy processors and promote Wisconsin ag exports; and better fund rural infrastructure, from roads to broadband.

We have work ahead of us to secure these budget victories, among others, but having rural lawmakers at the helm of JFC can only help.

The state Capitol remains closed to the general public, but we are back to having some in-person meetings with lawmakers. As the JFC works on the budget, the committee will seek input from people from all over the state. Normally, this takes the form of public hearings. COVID will probably impact what this process looks like, but our best guess is there will still be regional hearings, although some virtual component might also occur.

DBA’s annual Dairy Day at the Capitol is scheduled for April 14.

This should coincide nicely with the height of budgetary horse trading. We normally have the event in the Capitol, and we were lucky that the 2020 event occurred in January before the session was disrupted. This year, the Capitol closure and gathering restrictions in Dane County have made an in-person lobby day impossible. Instead, the event will be virtual. You can register for it at dairyforward.com. Unlike the in-person event, it is free, although attendees are encouraged to donate to our Political Action Committee. Please sign up by April 2. You will not want to miss out on this virtual experience before we “return to normalcy.”

(continued from page 1)
Get to know
DBA’s new president

By Jamie Mara, director of strategic communications

Amy Penterman is not new to DBA. She’s been a member for 15 years, has been on the board for four years and has been active in our advocacy work.

But, Amy does have a new role — she was elected DBA president in January, and she’s the first woman to be leading the organization.

I asked Amy to share some personal background and her perspective on the organization.

Tell everyone a little about yourself.

My husband, Sander, and I live in Thorp in northwestern Wisconsin. We have two adult children and three young boys at home. Our farm is Dutch Dairy, where we milk 850 cows, mostly Holsteins but also a handful of Jerseys — the real rock stars of the barn. We also raise heifers. We crop 1,350 acres. I am also a crop insurance agent with a home office on the farm. I’m incredibly proud of our family and employees. I am also honored to serve as the president of DBA.

What are some of the priorities you have for your term as president?

It’s critical that Wisconsin remains a welcoming place for dairy farmers and processors. That requires things like investing in research, for example through the Dairy Innovation Hub, and in innovative approaches farmers are taking to improve water quality.

DBA’s new clean water initiative, partnering with environmental organizations, will help make sure farmers play a key role in discussions about environmental regulations. We haven’t always been on the same side as some of our new partners on every issue, but we can’t wait around for misguided rules; we need to be out front. And finding common ground where we can will get us there quicker. Tom Crave, my predecessor, deserves praise for his leadership on this initiative. It’s bold.

You have participated in DBA’s advocacy work on government policy. Can you talk about the importance of this?

The DBA team does an extraordinary job of representing all of us. They stand up for farmers every time, and that happens in town halls, county board rooms and the Capitol. But it’s also extremely important that our decision makers hear directly from farmers. More of us need to visit local and state officials, and also to invite them to visit our farms. We must remember that fewer and fewer of those leaders have direct connections to farms. They will make more informed decisions if they better understand how those decisions affect what we do day to day. The staff provides a lot of options to get involved and I strongly urge you to participate.

The same goes for connecting with our communities. Farmers are under a lot of scrutiny these days. People want to know that we are producing safe and healthy food and doing this responsibly. I am confident we can turn that challenge into an opportunity.
As you know, when a calf, cow or other bovine animal leaves your dairy, the $1 per head Beef Checkoff is deducted from your check. Half of that dollar remains in Wisconsin for local beef promotion, while the other half is forwarded to the Cattlemen’s Beef Board. All Beef Checkoff programs focus on national and international efforts to grow demand for beef. The Wisconsin Beef Council is led by beef and dairy farmers across the state.

An example of how the Council is investing dollars to grow beef demand from Wisconsin dairies are programs with the U.S. Meat Export Federation (USMEF). Currently 96 percent of the world’s population is outside the United States and the global middle class is growing exponentially. In addition to this growing purchasing power, the beef cuts demanded in the international markets are typically different than the high-demand cuts in the United States. As a result, the international markets boost demand, and prices, for a wide variety of cuts that are considered “underutilized” in the U.S., thus increasing carcass value.

For a number of years, the Wisconsin Beef Council has invested in projects in the Central American region through USMEF. Your Beef Checkoff investment has been directly introducing Central American consumers to high-quality, grain-fed U.S. beef through product sampling, retail promotions and hands-on cooking classes. We have also worked to develop relationships between importers in the region and Wisconsin farmers and in-state packers American Foods Group and JBS. In 2019, the Wisconsin Beef Council hosted a group of importers, where they visited beef and dairy farms, and both Green Bay-area packing plants.

The importers learned about the diversity of products that can come from the dairy cattle supply: from choice and prime graded beef to ungraded and utility products. The visitors expressed interest in a variety of beef products, but are looking for consistency and quality, while keeping in mind that it is a price sensitive market. There was interest in grain-fed Holstein beef as potential to meet these needs, especially to be able to compete with their domestic beef supply. There is growing consumer preference for high-quality beef in the region, as well as increasing purchasing power to make it more affordable.

Another example of efforts that add value
to Wisconsin dairies is the market for beef and beef products from cattle over 30 months of age into the Japanese market. In 2019, Japan dropped the restriction for imports of U.S. beef from cattle over 30 months of age (OTM), which was originally imposed following the BSE-related market closure in 2003. That opened up opportunities for beef products from older cattle – such as mountain chain tripe, tongues, trimmings and some middle meats – to be exported to Japan, enhancing the carcass value of cull cows.

These items became even more attractive to buyers in 2020 with tariff rates lowered under the new trade agreement. This category, which is primarily supplied by Holstein and other cow meat, represents an opportunity to increase beef exports to Japan by between 7-to-10 percent, equating to $150 million to $200 million of incremental growth.

OTM beef is well suited for the food service sector, as it offers high value with solid quality and a price point significantly less than U.S. choice grade beef. However, because it has been nearly 16 years since this market was open to U.S. suppliers, education for both U.S. suppliers as well as Japanese buyers was critical to reestablishing a reliable supply chain for this market.

Thanks to your Beef Checkoff investment, USMEF was able to develop an OTM Guidebook to educate trade and foodservice buyers about how this product can be used and prepared to bring additional value and profitability to their businesses. The guidebook also includes individual profiles of the different U.S. companies manufacturing and exporting these cuts (including AFG and JBS). This important resource will help grow long-term U.S. beef exports and will also help support OTM exports from packing plants that source cattle from Midwestern regions with a high concentration of dairy cattle.

Our board and staff welcome your input and feedback. You can find more details about Wisconsin Beef Council at beeftips.com and USMEF at usmef.org.
Member Spotlight

Breunig honored as DBA Advocate of the Year

By Mary Hookham for DBA

When Mitch Breunig received the Dairy Business Association’s Advocate of the Year award, he said he was humbled. And then he turned the attention elsewhere.

“I work with people who have received it in the past and I can’t help but to be inspired by them. They are tremendous people for the dairy industry and have given a lot back,” Breunig said.

The award came as a surprise to Breunig when it was sprung on him a few days before the Dairy Strong conference, which was held virtually in January.

“He is a man of great integrity and operates his personal and professional life in a way that makes his family and friends proud,” Matt Gabler of Vita Plus and Cornette Farm Supply, the sponsor of the award, said of Breunig.

“While he is a great dairy manager, his leadership reaches beyond the farm gates,” Gabler said. “He is willing to give his time to engage with the public, members of the media, researchers and colleagues in the dairy community. When it comes to dairy, Breunig always does the right thing.”

Breunig’s family farm, Mystic Valley Dairy, has undertaken several expansions over the years, coming up from a 50-cow herd milked in a stanchion barn beginning in 1961 to a herd of 400 cows and 1,000 acres of cropland today. Throughout these changes, Breunig successfully kept sight of his most important goals for the farm: to create a sustainable business by breeding long-lasting cows that produce large volumes of milk and have exceptional quality.

“The next generation coming in and trying to run their businesses needs us to lead the way for them so they can get where they’re going,” Breunig said.

Tim Trotter, DBA’s executive director, applauded Breunig for his willingness to share his leadership with the entire dairy community. “Mitch’s vision, passion and commitment to dairy is evident,” Trotter said.

Breunig was instrumental in developing Wisconsin’s Dairy Innovation Hub, an agricultural research engine through three of the University of Wisconsin System colleges. He said the trend of fewer dairy-focused faculty members needed to be reversed.

“It’s really important we changed the way that was going,” he said. “We might not notice the research today, but in 20 years we will see the results.”

“This is a cool collaboration between all the dairy and ag groups around the state,” he said. “We all worked together on a project that was good for everyone.”

Breunig, who regularly appears in news stories, said farmers should take this opportunity more often. “If the media has a question, be the one they call first.”

Personal connections are crucial as well, he said. “It takes more than one conversation to change an opinion about the dairy industry. And it takes that conversation with one person at a time to help them understand our industry and how it’s changed over the years.”
Podcast power: Dairy Stream turns 1

We are celebrating Dairy Stream’s first orbit around the sun. The DBA and Edge Dairy Farmer Cooperative podcast, launched in February 2020, is a resource to our members, processors, lawmakers and the greater dairy community. The response has been very positive.

Mike Austin, a master of farm broadcasting for 40 years, is our host. Measured by downloads, the top three most popular episodes have been “Impact of COVID-19 on the dairy community,” “Wisconsin dairy farm’s diverse sustainability practices include genetics” and “What are PPDs and how does they impact my milk check?”

Audience reach

Through last month, we published 31 episodes. Dairy Stream has been downloaded nearly 10,000 times. It has been listened to in 47 states and 76 countries. In the U.S., the top five states are Wisconsin, Illinois, Minnesota, California and New York. Elsewhere in the world, Dairy Stream was most listened to in Canada, United Kingdom, Germany and Sweden.

Podcast topics

We focus on providing insights on dairy policy, sustainability trends, market updates, new technology and other key aspects of the dairy community. We have covered a wide variety of topics, like the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s efforts during COVID-19, dairy customer research, cover crops as part of sustainability, subsurface manure drip irrigation and dairy leadership advice.

Featured guests

Dairy Stream listeners have heard from 45 guests, including lawmakers, farmers, dairy business experts, farm broadcast icon Orion Samuelson, recently confirmed Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, USDA Under Secretary Greg Ibach and FSA Executive Director Sandy Chalmers.

Sponsorship support

We have limited sponsorship still available for 2021 and are accepting inquiries for 2022. The sponsorship supports our policy efforts in Madison and Washington, D.C.


Feedback appreciated

If you’d like to share a topic suggestion, please email podcast@dairyforward.com. We welcome your feedback and appreciate your support.

Tune into Dairy Stream on your favorite podcast app or at dairyforward.com. Thank you for making it a great year and we look forward to bringing you more exceptional content in 2021.

Creating a safe and healthy workplace is a critical risk management strategy for agricultural operations. You can protect your workers and your product with these guidelines for your facility and your employees.

Shop structure

• Prevent trips and falls by reducing clutter and keeping walkways clear and stable.
• Safeguard mezzanines with a railing system 39 inches or higher, according to OSHA standards.
• Keep your shop lit appropriately in all areas.
• If the shop is heated, ensure that it is properly vented to remove excess heat and remove any air contaminants.
• The shop should be equipped with 20-pound ABC fire extinguishers located no more than 100 feet away from any point in the shop.

Equipment

• Prevent electrical injury by making sure that electrical equipment is properly grounded.
• Store flammable and combustible materials away from heat sources.
• Keep all guards and shields in place on power equipment.
• Use hand tools only for their intended purpose.
• Reduce back injuries by using hoists, cranes and hydraulic lifts.
• Wear protective equipment when performing repair jobs.
We encourage our members to participate in this event. This is our opportunity to share real-life experiences from the farm that will inform elected officials regarding pros and cons of legislation before them.

Cost: This event is COMPLIMENTARY to attend. In lieu of a registration fee, we recommend a VOLUNTARY PERSONAL contribution to Dairy PAC, DBA's political action committee. Suggested contribution $50.

Register at: dairyforward.com/DairyDayAtTheCapitol