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Changes needed in regulatory approach

DBA is a driving factor in building consensus to reexamine farm permitting in Wisconsin

By John Holevoet, director of government affairs

Wisconsinites are proud of our state’s dairy farming heritage. A suggestion a few years ago to remove “America’s Dairyland” from our license plates was met with strong opposition. This was good to see, but dairy farmers cannot survive off good feelings alone. We know that Wisconsin’s dairy community faces real challenges.

The number of dairy farms in the state has been steadily declining since the 1950s, but the pace at which we are losing farms has quickened. We have also seen investments in dairy farms stagnate. At the same time, dairy farms and processors have been growing elsewhere. DBA has been very vocal about the threats Wisconsin must confront to keep its most progressive farms in the state and attract new ones as well.

The regulatory burden and associated compliance costs that farms face are partially to blame for farmers choosing to invest (continued on page 2)
Political poll

A recent Marquette Law School Poll of Wisconsin registered voters found that Gov. Tony Evers’ job approval stands at 50 percent, while 43 percent disapprove. The numbers are unchanged from October 2020.

Approval of Evers’ handling of the coronavirus pandemic is 54 percent, with 39 percent disapproving. In October 2020, the numbers were 52 and 45 percent, respectively.

The poll interviewed 807 people by landline or cell phone from Aug. 3-8. The margins of error range from 3.8 to 5.4 percentage points.

Ron Kind retirement

U.S. Rep. Ron Kind, a 13-term Democrat from La Crosse, announced he will retire at the end of his term in 2022. Kind has represented the 3rd District, a dairy-rich region encompassing La Crosse, Eau Claire and rural areas along the state’s southwestern border, since 1997. Kind faced the first serious threat of his career in November 2020, when he defeated retired Navy SEAL Derrick Van Orden by just under 3 points. Van Orden has spoken about his intent to run for the seat again.

The impact of pending legislative redistricting could have portended an even more difficult reelection for Kind, who said at his retirement announcement, “I’ve run out of gas.”

Budget surplus

The nonpartisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau projects that Wisconsin will end its two-year budget cycle in 2023 with a $17 billion surplus. The budget totals $87 billion. Fiscal Bureau Director Bob Lang said the surplus will be one of the largest in recent memory. Having money left over provides lawmakers with more spending or tax-cutting opportunities in future budget cycles.

Policy & Purpose

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elsewhere. We first saw this shift as more and more farmers opted to send their youngstock out of state. Even with transportation costs, it was still much cheaper to raise them elsewhere. This results in millions of dollars in economic losses for Wisconsin. Now, we see this trend broadening as farmers choose to build satellite facilities and new farms elsewhere.

We need to improve the regulatory environment for farms in our state. This does not mean a lack of regulation. The states that are seeing significant growth in dairy farms and processing still have regulations. In fact, we are all bound by the same underlying federal rules, such as the Clean Water Act. That being the case, merely being more efficient in our administration of these shared rules would go a long way. That is why DBA has long advocated for improvements to the state’s CAFO permitting program to allow for new permits and renewals for larger farms to be issued more quickly.

A recent decision by the Wisconsin Supreme Court has added new uncertainty to what might be expected of permitted farms here. The case centered on whether the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) could impose an animal unit cap on a CAFO and require a farm to dig groundwater monitoring wells at manure application locations. Ultimately, in a 4-2 decision, the court held that the DNR did have that kind of authority.

In the wake of that decision, DBA organized a meeting between the DNR and ag stakeholders. Much is still unknown about the broad practical impact of this decision, but the uncertainty it has caused does not help those trying to encourage farmers to stay and grow in Wisconsin.

There has never been a more important time for us to reexamine how farm permitting could be changed. DBA is hopeful that consensus can be reached between the farming community, DNR, environmental groups and others about a path forward. All three groups want a better and more functional CAFO program. This may seem like a lofty goal to achieve, but we have seen that merely trying to deflect or litigate our way out of regulatory challenges has not been successful either.

There are no easy or solutions to the problems Wisconsin’s dairy community faces; however, doing more of the same is unlikely to produce different results.
Summers come and go; advocacy must be ongoing

By Amy Penterman, DBA president

As each summer draws to a close, it always seems like the most recent went by faster than the last. There are so many things we want to pack into a relatively short time.

One of those things is advocacy. Finding time to do this, of course, is difficult. There’s plenty to do on the farm. But it’s important that we make it happen, consistently.

Our non-farming friends and neighbors see us, but do they understand why we do what we do? We need to connect with them.

That holds true for our lawmakers, too. They need to see and understand the work we do and the reasons why. Inviting local, state or federal representatives to your farm is an effective way. Show them the latest technology you’re using, even a homemade invention that is a game changer on your dairy. Farmers are often too humble; it’s OK to showcase what you are doing. I often say that farmers can do the same thing 100 different ways, but each of those 100 different ways can be successful.

Words like conservation, water and climate have been heard a lot in 2021. We in the dairy community live those words daily. As we plan for next year’s crops, nutrient application, crop rotation, cover crops and other aspects, we keep our neighbors and our families top of mind. DBA provides a voice in Madison to tell the story of how our farmers diligently care for the land and water, and continuously look for ways to improve.

Don’t be afraid to speak out and showcase what you are doing to improve soil health, prevent runoff and protect water quality. Farmers across the state are doing amazing things in conservation. Let’s show our neighbors, friends and lawmakers.

A great example is the growing number of farmer-led watershed conservation groups across the state. DBA has helped develop and closely supports several of them.

Farmers for Sustainable Food, a collaborative group of conservation-minded industry partners, including DBA, is driving a lot of the momentum. I encourage you to get involved. Email Lauren Brey at lbrey@farmersforsustainablefood.com.

I hope you had a chance to attend one of our Policy Picnics, which we presented in July along with our sister organization, Edge Dairy Farmer Cooperative. We have the best advocates not only in Wisconsin but also in Washington, D.C., through Edge.

Lastly, I want to wish you a successful harvest. Once the last of the corn is chopped and safely covered in the bunker, I always get a feeling of satisfaction and am content knowing there is feed for another year. Stay safe!
There is a collective theory that the more cows you have, the more milk you will make. Unfortunately, this isn’t necessarily the case when you look at efficiency. Overcrowding is a common problem on most dairy facilities, whether they are large or small.

Overcrowding is just what it sounds like: too many cows in a pen. Overcrowding puts cows in a constant state of stress, and it’s important to understand how it affects a cow’s response to the diet and her ability to convert feed into milk efficiently.

In an overcrowded situation, a cow is less likely to reach her full potential for milk production and respond to a diet in an efficient manner. She’ll consume more feed to produce the same or produce less on the same intake.

For example, a 2008 study found that over half of the variation in milk production on 47 herds was caused by nondietary factors like stocking density.

Stocking density, for four-row barns, can be calculated by taking the number of stalls divided by the number of cows. Herds usually have at least 100 percent stocking density, meaning at least one cow per stall, but others have stocking densities as high as 150 percent. Stocking to this rate can induce a constant state of stress for the cow, which will cause key changes in behavior. Not only will the cow increase the amount of time she is standing and decrease her resting time, but she will also alter her feeding behavior and rumination.

In this situation, a cow must compete for her daily needs. She must compete for a stall to lie in, at the feed bunk to eat and at the water trough to drink. Imagine yourself in a similar situation: a busy buffet. All the tables are taken, there is a line at the drink dispenser, and there is a line at the buffet. You will have to compete for these amenities, and it’s uncomfortable, irritating and changes your dining experience. This is comparable to an overcrowded cow’s life. She must choose which behavior she will put effort into competing for.

Research has shown that management which impairs lying time also decreases rumination and feeding time because these behaviors are biologically linked. A cow will prioritize lying time and will compensate for decreased lying time by eating less. She will

**By Katie Smith, Dairy specialist associate, Northside Elevator**
Overcrowding can lead to negative effects from chronic stress. It also decreases the amount of time she spends ruminating because more than 90 percent of rumination is generally done while lying down. These changes go against the cow’s natural behaviors, and this creates a stressful environment where she is constantly competing for her basic needs.

Beyond behavior, to deal with chronic stress a cow will compensate for lower caloric intake by using her body reserves. Stress can also show itself via losses in performance in reproduction, milk yield, fat production and immunity. This means that combining overcrowding with a disease like metritis, heat stress, or even poor feeding management like infrequent feed pushup will cause the cow to put more of her resources toward handling those stressors instead of making milk and getting pregnant.

Research has shown that with every 10 percent increase in stocking density over 100 percent, cows will produce 1-2 pounds less milk per day. There are also adverse effects on conception rate and percentage of cows pregnant by 150 days in milk. These responses can also be linked to lower rumen pH, greater somatic cell count, more health disorders and greater lameness within the herd.

The take home here is that overcrowding your facility and pushing your cows to compete will not maximize your operational efficiency. It is important for cows to rest comfortably, ruminating lying down in a stall and not have to compete for feed at the bunk.

Unfortunately, overstocking is not always avoidable. If this is the case, it is important to remember that overstocking is a subclinical stressor. If a high-quality feed is being pushed up consistently, heat stress is mitigated, and cows are healthy, then negative consequences may not show themselves. Responses in milk yield, reproduction and immune responses tend to appear when secondary stressors are not being managed effectively.

Keep overstocking in mind. Efficient, healthy cows are cows that do not live under chronic stress.
Data demonstrates success in sustainability pilot project

By Jamie Mara, director of strategic communications

Results from the first year of a nationally recognized farm-level sustainability project in southwestern Wisconsin have been released, and the partners in the initiative are encouraged by what they see.

The dozen participating farms, including members of DBA, demonstrated that their conservation practices contribute to significant reductions in environmental pollutants reaching streams and rivers.

The analysis is part of a pilot project aligned with a first-of-its-kind framework for sustainability projects that helps farmers determine what conservation practices are most effective for their individual farms and document the environmental and financial effects. The goals: protect the environment, remain profitable and demonstrate to communities, customers and regulators that farmers are taking action on sustainability.

“These positive outcomes reflect a commitment among farmers to push ourselves each day to discover what works best on individual farms and fields, for both the environment and our businesses,” said dairy farmer Jim Winn, a participant in the project who is a DBA member and the president of a farmer-led watershed conservation group called Lafayette Ag Stewardship Alliance (LASA) in Lafayette County.

“It’s rewarding to see, in concrete terms, that we are making a positive difference,” Winn said.

The assessment uses nationally accepted metrics from Field to Market: The Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture to address on-farm sustainability indicators, such as greenhouse gas emissions and energy use. A tool called Prioritize, Target and Measure Application (PTMAp) is being used for measuring impact on waterways.

The first-year findings in 2020, based on 2019 data, are detailed in a 141-page report. Among them:

• On average, farms participating in the pilot project have adopted five conservation practices per field that Field to Market’s Fieldprint Platform recognizes as having a positive impact on sustainability scores.

• Farms with livestock and those that use manure for most crop nutrient needs scored, on average, better than the project benchmark for greenhouse gas emissions and energy use. Manure replaces the use of inorganic forms of nitrogen, which have a higher energy (fossil fuel) cost to produce and ship.

• Existing conservation on the farms is reducing the amount of sediment reaching local streams and rivers by 28 percent.

• Estimates suggest that by adding cover crops to 50 percent of all fields in the project area, additional pollution reductions of 40 percent (sediment), 28 percent (nitrogen) and 23 percent (phosphorus) can be achieved.

“Farmers have long been stewards of the environment, and the increasing adoption of conservation practices is a testament to this,” said Lauren Brey, managing director of Farmers for Results from the first year of a nationally recognized farm-level sustainability project in southwestern Wisconsin have been released, and the partners in the initiative are encouraged by what they see.

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Hay fires usually occur within six weeks of baling. Moisture content is the main factor that causes spontaneous combustion in hay, so wet hay is more dangerous than dry hay. A hay fire can also damage or even destroy buildings or equipment. The best way to reduce the risk of a hay fire is to bale hay with a moisture content of 20 percent or less. Keep baled hay dry by covering it or storing it indoors. Monitor internal bale temperatures regularly. If you’re unable to cover up the hay, arrange bales so air can circulate between them to help in drying. Bales should also be protected from moisture on the ground. Inform fire service personnel of any treatments that have been applied to bales, since smoke from hay treated with an acid preservative may contain toxic fumes.

Sustainable Food, a nonprofit organization of food system partners. “With this project, we now have data to quantify the impact of conservation on farms and to local water resources. These assessments will also guide farmers in management decisions.”

The farmers in the project teamed up with partners in the dairy food supply chain for the initiative. Farmers for Sustainable Food and Grande Cheese Company worked with LASA to develop the project with the Midwest environmental consulting firm Houston Engineering Inc. A host of other stakeholders are contributing to the initiative as well, from environmental groups and foundations to colleges and food retailers. The Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy recognized the framework and pilot project in June with a national sustainability award for collaboration.

Given the results achieved in year one, the Innovation Center is supporting the extension of the project for another two years as part of the U.S. Dairy Net Zero Initiative (NZI). By 2050, the dairy community has committed to being carbon neutral or better, optimizing water usage while maximizing recycling, and improving water quality by optimizing the use of manure and nutrients. NZI will play a key role in helping to achieve those goals while helping farmers identify economically viable solutions.

“The Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy applauds the work of this pilot sustainability project. As the dairy industry makes progress toward the collective 2050 Environmental Stewardship Goals, on-farm tools and resources are helping farmers understand their environmental footprint and the best, economically viable options for ongoing progress,” said Karen Scanlon, executive vice president of environmental stewardship for the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy and Dairy Management Inc.

“This farmer-led project demonstrates that whole-farm tools and resources are key to documenting and communicating success. The Innovation Center is excited to join this effort as a partner, and we look forward to its next phase and bringing more learnings to more farmers across the country,” Scanlon said.

In addition to the environmental analysis, the project is assessing return on investment for conservation practices for three of the farms. During the first year of the project, farm business management experts at Southwest Wisconsin Technical College established a baseline of data for each farm.

Brey said more farmers are joining the project and interest is growing for similar initiatives elsewhere: one with an individual farm and on-site cheese plant in Wisconsin, one with another farmer-led watershed conservation group in the state and one with a dairy processor in South Dakota. The project framework is flexible in its design so it can be replicated, and the partners are encouraging others to use it, at no cost.

Winn said he is inspired by the progress and realizes this is a long-term commitment. “We can be proud of what we have accomplished, but it doesn’t stop here,” he said. “This is about continuous improvement — more innovation, more collaboration, more data — to make sure we are protecting our natural resources and remaining productive.”

To see the full report online, go to FarmersForSustainableFood.com and click on “Projects & Resources.”
Upcoming events:

World Dairy Expo Sept. 28-Oct. 2

The Dairy Business Association along with Edge Dairy Farmer Cooperative will once again participate in World Dairy Expo.

Opportunities provided to members:

See us at our tradeshow booth
- Exhibition Hall 6211
- Members are encouraged to stop by for a complimentary grilled cheese or ice cream sundae coupon

DBA and Edge Lunch and Learn with Marin Bozic
- Where: Clarion Hotel in Michigan A (connected to the Expo Hall)
- When: 12:30-2 p.m. on Sept. 30

Learn about the latest in milk pricing from nationally recognized dairy economist Marin Bozic. Dr. Bozic will discuss recent trends as well as ideas about potential reforms to the Federal Milk Marketing Orders. He will also discuss the Class III Plus proposal (developed in part by DBA and Edge) and broader reform ideas as well as how those proposals might best be put forward.

DBA Member Reception
- Where: Clarion Hotel in Michigan A (connected to conference venue)
- When: 5-7 p.m. on Sept. 30

Edge Federal Policy Luncheon
- Where: Waubesa Room at World Dairy Expo
- When: 11 a.m.-1 p.m. on Oct. 1

Hear the latest news out of Washington, D.C., from the Edge policy team as well as Cassandra Kuball from our D.C. partner, Michael Torrey Associates. The group will discuss accomplishments in farm policy from 2021 and what to expect going into the coming year as well as the 2023 Farm Bill.

We always look forward to connecting with our members at World Dairy Expo. If you have any topic requests or specific questions, please contact Bekah Morrow at rmorrow@dairyforward.com or 920-883-0020 x100.