

WORKING LANDS CONNECTION

Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection
Ben Brancel, Secretary

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In This Issue

- ◆ **AEA Designations**
- ◆ **FPP in the State Budget**
- ◆ **Recent Certifications**
- ◆ **ATCP 49**
- ◆ **PACE Update**
- ◆ **ATCP 50**
- ◆ **Grazing Broker Pilot Project**
- ◆ **Staff Announcements**



Four AEAs Recommended for Designation in 2013

Designation of three new agricultural enterprise areas (AEAs) and the expansion of one existing AEA were recommended for designation by the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection in 2013. The recommendations were made by the AEA Evaluation Team after review of the petitions submitted in March 2013.

Following the new designations, there will be 25 AEAs across the state totaling nearly 750,000 acres. These 25 AEAs are located in portions of 19 counties, 72 towns and the Bad River Reservation. Nearly 1,000 landowners have signed the petitions requesting designation as an AEA. Letters of support from hundreds of other landowners, neighboring cities and villages, business owners and other interested parties have also been received.

The four areas to be designated in 2013 represent distinct areas of the state and are located in portions of seven counties, twenty-four towns, and the Bad River Reservation.

Fields, Waters and Wood AEA, Bayfield and Ashland Counties and the Bad River Reservation. This new AEA covers 41,000 acres in the towns of Marengo, Ashland, White River and Kelly. In this dairy and livestock area, petitioners aim to maintain the agricultural land base necessary to support existing production, while encouraging the continued growth and diversification of the agricultural economy.

Heart of America's Dairyland AEA, Clark and Marathon Counties. The designation will expand the existing AEA by 66,000 acres, bringing the covered area to nearly 165,000 acres in the towns of Mayville, Colby, Unity, Beaver, Loyal, Brighton, Hull, Johnson, Holton and Frankfort. The AEA petitioners want to preserve the region's agricultural heritage, assure production capacity, and provide tools to minimize the conversion of farmland to non-farm uses. They also aim to develop markets for local products.

For more information on Wisconsin's Working Lands Initiative:

Website: <http://workinglands.wi.gov>

E-mail: DATCPWorkingLands@Wisconsin.gov

Continued from page 1...

Southwest Lead Mine Region AEA, Lafayette County. The new AEA covers 102,000 acres in the towns of Gratiot, Monticello, Shullsburg and Wiota. Lafayette County is a strong agricultural county and over 80% of total sales are related to agriculture. Petitioners in the AEA want to ensure continuation of a strong agricultural economy through participation in larger regional initiatives, development of new products and markets, and support of multi-generational farming operations.

Town of Grant AEA. Dunn and Chippewa Counties. A strong legacy of farming in this new 26,000 acre AEA is evident by the presence of many multi-generational farms. The AEA is located in the towns of Grant, Colfax, Sand Creek, Otter Creek, Auburn, and Cooks Valley. Petitioners want to ensure that farming remains a viable option for future generations through the use of strong land use protections to protect existing agricultural land, and through strong business and transition planning.

AEA designations support local efforts to protect agricultural land use and promote the agricultural economy. An incentive available to landowners is the opportunity to voluntarily enter into a farmland preservation agreement with the state. This enables the landowner to claim tax credits in exchange for keeping their land in agricultural use for at least 15 years.

The Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection anticipates releasing another request for AEA petitions in early fall of 2013. For more information about the program and to talk about whether designation as an AEA may be right for your community, contact Coreen Fallat at

Farmland Preservation Program in the 2013-2015 State Budget

The recent state budget signed by Governor Walker includes the following changes to the farmland preservation program:

- Changes the FPP program funding to a sum sufficient appropriation. This removes the \$27 million cap and ensures the state will pay tax credits in full to all eligible landowners who apply for the credit.
- Includes funding for farmland preservation program planning grants to counties.
- Removes the requirement to have mortgage holders sign the farmland preservation agreement subordinating their mortgage to the agreement.

The Governor also vetoed a proposal that would have changed the farmland preservation tax credit to a farmland preservation grant. This veto ensures that the process for landowners to claim the farmland preservation tax credit remains the same.

Questions on the impact of the new budget to the farmland preservation program can be directed to Keith.Foye@wi.gov or 608-224-4603.



Recent Certifications

Local governments continue to revise farmland preservation plans and zoning ordinances. The following local governments completed the department's certification review since our last newsletter:

Farmland Preservation Planning: Columbia County, Juneau County

Farmland Preservation Zoning: Town of Nepeuskun (Winnebago County), Town of Carlton (Kewaunee County), Town of Fox Lake (Dodge County)

For more information about certifications, contact Alison Volk at: Alison.Volk@Wisconsin.gov.

ATCP 49 Update

In February 2013, the department held four public hearings for ATCP 49. A total of 49 people attended and registered at the hearings. Many of the comments received were in support of the rule and the goals of the farmland preservation program. Some of the comments requested that the department make certain specific changes to the rule language. For the most part, the department adjusted the language accordingly. These changes included allowing the department to consider certifying a farmland preservation zoning ordinance that is less than 80% but more than 70% consistent with the farmland preservation plan if the local government can demonstrate to the Secretary's satisfaction that there is a reasonable, objective justification for the lower level of consistency.

The final draft of ATCP 49 was approved by the DATCP Board on May 14, 2013, and approved by Governor Walker on June 19, 2013. The final draft rule was submitted to the Legislature at the end of June. The rule will be referred to one standing committee for each house and then to the Joint Committee for Review of Administrative Rules (JCRAR). If there is no objection to the rule, the Secretary may sign a final rulemaking order. The rule then goes into effect the first day of the month after publication of the rulemaking order. Depending on the Legislature's response, it is possible that ATCP 49 will go into effect before the end of 2013.

PACE Update

The department completed purchase of the remaining agricultural conservation easements on fourteen farms in Wisconsin selected by the department and the PACE Advisory Council in 2010.

In total, fourteen farms were permanently protected, covering approximately 5,120 acres of farmland via eighteen agricultural conservation easements. Approximately \$4,824,000 of the \$5,200,000 initially transferred to the PACE program from the Wisconsin DNR Stewardship fund was spent on easement purchases and related transaction costs. The remaining funds were returned to DNR. DATCP's PACE program will remain in effect but will not accept any new applications until additional funding is allocated to the program.

ATCP 50 Update

In March and April of 2013, the department held five public hearings for ATCP 50, the rule for the Soil and Water Resource Management program. A total of 56 people registered at and attended the public hearings, and 49 people submitted written comments during the comment period. The department received both general comments related to the rule and specific comments related to certain rule provisions. The general comments were largely supportive of the rule revision. DATCP staff are in the process of reviewing comments and making adjustments to the draft rule to address the concerns voiced in writing and through testimony at the public hearings. A final draft of the rule will be presented to the ATCP Board for approval at their meeting on September 10th, 2013.

Grazing Broker Pilot Project

What lies ahead for grassland in Wisconsin established under the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)? The future for many depends upon a partnership of agricultural and conservation groups working to make options available for sustainable and profitable use of these grasslands through the Grazing Broker Pilot Project.

The Southwest Wisconsin Grassland and Stream Conservation Area partnership (SWGSCA) is a coalition of county, state, federal, and non-governmental agencies that works to promote practices that perpetuate existing grasslands to hold the soil, improve water quality, and provide wildlife habitat in Southwest Wisconsin. The coalition is accomplishing this by strengthening relationships between agriculture and conservation. As CRP contracts for tens of thousands of acres in the area expire over the next several years, concerns have been raised that many of these acres will be returned to annual crop production. Land expiring from CRP originally had a history of cropping or grazing and is primarily composed of sensitive land with steep slopes and high erosion potential. While reenrollment in CRP is an option, many landowners may consider returning the land to agricultural production. High commodity prices for row crops make renting for cash grain production an easy option which could reverse gains made in erosion control and water quality during the years the land was in the program. The SWGSCA partners view this situation as a unique opportunity for agriculture and the conservation community to work together to utilize the grassland resources and transition from publically subsidized grasslands to market driven sustainable grass management.



“Establishing managed grazing on lands coming out of CRP, as well as other grassland areas, would build on the initial public investment in grassland, provide a sustainable agricultural alternative that would keep the land in grass, and continue the land under agricultural use value to provide significant tax incentives for the landowner,” comments Brian Loeffelholz, Conservation Land Use Specialist at the WI Dept. of Agriculture Trade and Consumer Protection. “Grassland owners are offered few true options other than to continue with idle grassland cover or rent for

row cropping, with the latter option commonly chosen” says Loeffelholz. The grazing broker works to connect these landowners with livestock producers to create a mutually beneficial partnership to manage grassland for its conservation value as well as to produce an income for both parties.

Investing in pasture based agriculture in Southwest Wisconsin makes sense due to the abundant grass resources, sensitivity of the landscape, availability of markets, and demand for the products. Southwestern Wisconsin holds the greatest percentage of grassland of any region of the state today and historically. It also has a high population of dairy and livestock producers. The abundance of this grass resource makes the brokering effort a win-win opportunity. According to Maureen Rowe – SWGSCA Coordinator for the WI Dept. of Natural Resources the project focus area is a “unique 500,000 acre island of grassland in Wisconsin with cold water trout streams and relatively high populations of grassland birds.” Much of the land is highly erodible with steep slopes, making it less than prime farmland. Through CRP and other programs, perennial grasslands have been established to protect fertile soil and fresh water.

Continued from page 4..

The Grazing Broker project transitions grassland acres to grass-based agriculture while sustaining conservation benefits and grassland health. Implementation of Management Intensive Grazing (MIG) improves the productivity and nutritional value of the grassland as pasture. Similar to silvicultural principles used by foresters, the grazing broker works with producers to develop grazing management plans that apply best management practices. These plans prescribe a rest-rotation cycle that maintains the vigor of the perennial grasses while also meeting the forage quality and production needs of the livestock producer. The management plan analyzes soils with existing grass type to calculate sustainable stocking rates and rotations. Within the MiG system, grazing management techniques are recommended to ensure health of the grassland, provide wildlife habitat, and return a profit to the landowner and renter.

Availability of markets and increasing demand for grass-fed products makes growing and investing in pasture based agriculture a good opportunity. This growing market for pasture raised products creates local incentives for increased use of managed grazing by livestock producers. Laura Paine, Grazing and Organic Agricultural Specialist with DATCP, notes that "Proximity to urban centers (including Madison, Milwaukee, and Chicago) creates opportunities for farmers to realize high returns via direct marketing of grass-based products. Producers who do not wish to direct market their products have opportunities to reach expanding markets via successful regional businesses such as Organic Valley, Thousand Hills Cattle Company, and the Wisconsin Grass-fed Beef Co-op."

SWGSCA partners are working to develop tools, identify audiences, find resources, and form partnerships with local agricultural and conservation groups. "The positive response to Grazing Broker pilot workshops and requests from producers demonstrates that the broker fills a gap in connecting non-farming landowners with the resources they need to manage land for agricultural production" states Cara Carper, Executive Director of Southwest Badger RC&D. Carper suggests, "Funding a full-time Grazing Broker would meet a critical need for conserving grasslands while helping farmers and landowners create profitable partnerships." The SWGSCA partners are actively working to find resources to support a full time position with the goal to establish the position by late 2013.



Landowners and agricultural producers attend a Grazing Broker Pilot workshop

Staff Announcements

Lisa Schultz started work as the Agency Liaison for the Bureau of Land and Water Resources in May 2013. Lisa started at DATCP in January of 2007 as a Planning and Information Specialist to assist counties with Land and Water Resource Management plans and manure storage ordinances. In 2010, she became the Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement (PACE) program manager. Prior to DATCP, Lisa worked at the Wisconsin DNR as a Water Resources Management Specialist. Lisa holds a B.S. in Zoology and a Graduate Certificate in Geographic Information Systems from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Lisa will coordinate staff resources to support local conservation efforts and ensure quality program delivery for training, outreach and education, rule coordination, federal grant management, and bureau reporting and evaluation.