

FULL NELSON AGENDA

Growing It In Wisconsin - Demanding Food Sovereignty and a New Dairy Revitalization Plan

OVERVIEW

Our food system is in crisis thanks to corporate consolidation from farm inputs to processors to retailers, leaving us with a fragile supply chain. The Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have shown the dangers of having our food supply controlled by a handful of corporations. Food security needs to be thought of as national security. We've lost 85% of our Wisconsin dairy farmers since 1980. Our rural way of life and heritage as America's Dairyland threatens to become obsolete. Less than 16 cents of every dollar spent on food goes back to the farmer, down from 50% in 1952.

While this is all happening behind the scenes, consumers face rising costs at the grocery store due to corporate gouging. I am proud to be the first U.S. Senate candidate to ever introduce a plan to establish food sovereignty that says family farmers and consumers should decide our food policy, not corporations or institutions like the World Trade Organization that work only for corporate profits.

Like my previous Full Nelson Agenda that emphasized bringing back manufacturing so we can make essential goods again in Wisconsin, we need to be growing our food here in Wisconsin. We need a resilient, diversified local food economy that is able to deal with climate change and allow access for higher quality and healthier food for all. Our current broken system is benefitting neither farmers, consumers, nor our planet and is a national security risk.

I grew up in Little Chute where my father founded a Lutheran church. My dad's



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parents ran a small dairy farm in the rich soil of Polk County in Northwestern Wisconsin, where, as a kid, I cut, baled, and stacked hay. Back then, a 50-cow dairy farm could support a family of five. Nowadays, that sadly is not the case, to the detriment of our communities. I understand intimately the joys and struggles of rural Wisconsin and how they are being left behind as a result of corporate globalization and Wall Street greed. I'm the only candidate to have launched a 72-County Full Nelson tour where I listened to the struggles of our rural towns and the threat of factory farms to our water supply.

It is tragic to lose so many family farms to bankruptcies because they are the heartbeat of so many of our small towns. Meanwhile, the decline in manufacturing, including our paper industry, has also contributed to our struggle to retain population and vitality in our small towns. We need to invest in food sovereignty that prioritizes our local food economies, not out-of-state hog and dairy factories that threaten our rural way of life.



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PROBLEM: The dairy crisis has caused 85% of our dairy farmers to go out of business. Our Wisconsin dairyland heritage is threatened by corrupt cooperatives and too much consolidation.

SOLUTION: A new dairy revitalization plan that is based on growth management and helps stabilize fair prices for farmers.

In 1980, Wisconsin had over 46,500 dairy farmers. Ronald Reagan decided to end New Deal parity pricing for milk, subjecting farmers to extreme volatility and whatever the price of cheese was first at the National Cheese Exchange and now on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. Farmers have long charged that corporate monopolies like Kraft Foods manipulate markets to fatten corporate profits at the expense of farmers. As a result, the number of dairy farms in Wisconsin has catastrophically dwindled to around 6,500 as our state suffered more farm bankruptcies than any other state. Every dairy farm lost means more Main Street businesses shutter and schools consolidate as communities are hollowed out.

We desperately need a new approach to food sovereignty and milk prices that balance supply and demand while ensuring consumers have access to local dairy products. Currently, Wisconsin lacks any representation on the Agriculture Committee and I intend to serve on it if elected and fight for a system that can end this disastrous “boom and bust” cycle of volatile milk prices. I support the farmer-led Dairy Revitalization Plan and will make it my priority in the next Farm Bill so we can stop the rural exodus of the countryside.

The growth management plan from [Wisconsin Farmers Union and local chapters of the Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation](#) gives every dairy farm a base level of milk production depending on past production. Farmers who want to expand beyond that base would pay a market-access fee for additional milk. I consider it a luxury tax for those farmers who want to expand. It's important for farmers to do so in a responsible way that doesn't lead to overproduction that collapses milk prices.

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Dividends would be given to those farmers who stayed within their allowable growth and serve as an incentive to match supply with demand.

Think of growth management as a fishing bobber in a lake. Regardless of the weather or size of the waves, the bobber always floats. Whether the market is volatile or stable (waves), farmers (bobber) can count on a fair price.

In addition to a new dairy revitalization plan, we need to do the following:

- **Enforce antitrust laws.** Why has the largest dairy co-op, Dairy Farmers of America (DFA), been allowed to control one-third of the U.S. milk supply? Dairy processing has become too consolidated and in some markets, DFA is the sole provider of school milk. In 2020, DFA purchased the largest dairy processor in the U.S.: Dean Foods, a clear conflict of interest between the co-op and its farmer members. For decades, Washington has allowed merger after merger to happen giving no thought to farmers or consumers, so that three to four corporations now control the markets for seed, fertilizer, buying, and processing. Over a century ago, we passed the Packers and Stockyards Act, only to see it not enforced and now the corporate packers are even more powerful.
- **Checkoff reform and ending bloc voting.** Even worse than undemocratic gerrymandered districts, the system that allows dairy cooperatives to bloc vote on behalf of farmer members on important federal policy has been abused and needs reform, as does the [checkoff system that takes 15 cents per hundredweight](#) from dairy farmers, all to fund corporate executives' exorbitant salaries while doing nothing to help farmers.

PROBLEM: Food inflation is eating into every family's budget. Many rural and urban communities suffer from food deserts.

SOLUTION: Invest in Strategic Grain Reserves and break up agricultural monopolies. Reinvest in local and regional food economies.

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The United States used to have grain reserves to make sure we had enough food in times of disaster. We foolishly eliminated most of them in 1996. We have a Strategic Petroleum Reserve to help with oil supplies, and it is baffling that we do not have Strategic Grain Reserves. We have also seen prices for meat and other food skyrocket. This should not be surprising when four companies control our meat industry and all our other basic commodities. To make things worse, Washington has allowed China and Brazil to buy Smithfield and JBS, so the United States is no longer in control of our own food industries. Agribusiness corporations have been making record profits while our cattle ranchers and farmers struggle to survive.

- **Revive Strategic Grain Reserves and Farmer-owned Reserves.** Not only do grain reserves help stabilize consumer prices, they can also help farmers from receiving below-cost of production prices. In recent years, commodity prices have fallen to 1970s levels (not adjusted for inflation!). We should not be dependent on Cargill and Wall Street grain traders for our food security.
- **Place a moratorium on agricultural mergers and subject them to national security review.** The United States allowed China to take over Smithfield and a corrupt Brazilian company to take over JBS. China also bought Syngenta, a critical provider of farm inputs. The top four meatpackers control 85% of the market. In recent years, the number of major seed companies has gone from six to three. I support legislation to halt agricultural mergers, review previous ones that endanger food security, and make sure foreign acquisition of critical agriculture supply chains is considered by the Committee on Foreign Investment in the U.S. (CFIUS). Currently, food security is not seen as a national security risk.
- **Reform farm subsidies and reinvest in local and regional food economies.** Currently, crop subsidies benefit the largest and wealthiest landowners. We can redirect funding to invest in rebuilding our local food system including: more processing, storage, local food hubs, distribution to farmers markets, and farm-to-school programs. Subsidies should also not just go to commodity crops, but incentivize regenerative practices and good conservation practices.

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Wisconsin's tribal communities have been at the forefront of implementing food sovereignty practices to help address hunger and poverty and reclaim their ancestral knowledge. The Menominee Tribe has looked at growing indigenous food such as wild rice and hunting wild game. The Oneida Nation has invested in a local cannery and producing white corn. These are model efforts that should be expanded to all communities.

- **Allow for mandatory Country-Of-Origin Labeling (mCOOL).** Corporate trade agreements prioritize the interests of corporate agriculture over family farmers. While the packers keep importing meat from abroad, they oppose allowing our meat products to be labeled "Made in the USA," citing trade issues. This is ridiculous and outright wrong.

PROBLEM: As family farms wither away, factory farms have increased, threatening our water supply and rural way of life.

SOLUTION: Regulate factory farms and reorient our policies towards sustainable family farming.

During my 72-County Full Nelson tour, I heard from many Wisconsinites about the threats out-of-state factory farms pose to local communities. In Burnett County, a 26,000 hog factory has been proposed which will help Smithfield ship pork to China. Wisconsin is being used as a sacrifice zone for the needs of foreign consumers. Kewaunee County has also suffered greatly from the proliferation of factory farms, with residents confronting contaminated groundwater.

We need to oppose out-of-state industrial livestock farms. Stricter environmental regulations are needed for certain confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs). We must stop the destructive trend of vertical integration in agriculture. Meatpackers should be banned from owning livestock and foreign countries like China should not be allowed to own U.S. farmland. We do not need Wisconsin to become another Iowa, with all of its problems of unregulated factory farms.

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Farmworkers rights should also be respected while ensuring that industrial livestock farms are not exploiting immigrant labor.

Other policies I believe are necessary to preserve and revitalize the countryside:

Expanding Renewable Energy: Farmers have invested in ethanol and this homegrown fuel is helping to lower gas prices while making us less reliant on Russia and Venezuela for our fuel needs. We need to ensure oil refineries are not skirting the Renewable Fuel Standard. Furthermore, distributed energy that helps promote wind, solar, and other energy efficiency technology would be a boom for many rural towns.

Investing in Hemp: I proudly helped save a paper mill in my home county and I believe hemp could be a vital crop to help reinvent our paper industry (the U.S. Constitution was written on hemp after all!) and meet the demand for CBD products. To ensure the industry does not end up in the hands of a few corporations, we should look at modeling a hemp program after the highly successful tobacco quota program that sustained many farm families in Wisconsin.

Universal Broadband: We need to expand broadband to all communities and challenge Big Tech companies that refuse to invest in rural towns. The FDR New Deal Rural Electrification program transformed rural America. Broadband is every bit the economic necessity now that electricity was then, especially as the Covid-19 pandemic forced students to rely on remote learning. Broadband should also be made a public utility and regulated accordingly to ensure complete geographic coverage and affordability.

Medicare for All: Suicides among farmers have tragically increased due to the stress of chronically low farm prices. The weight of having to sell a multi-generational family farm is heavy. Lack of affordable health care is another critical issue, with many farm families needing off-farm jobs to secure health insurance. Medicare for All would help expand mental health coverage and make it easier for farmers to get the healthcare they need. 7

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CONCLUSION

With the coming global food crisis and the continued struggles of rural Wisconsin, it's time to have a food sovereignty policy that puts the needs of people first, over the profits of a few seed, agrichemical and food processing corporations.