

Wisconsin Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement (PACE) Program

Reinvesting in Wisconsin's Agricultural Heritage (WI State Statute 93.73)

THE CHALLENGE

- **FARMLAND LOSS:** Wisconsin has nearly 14 million acres of farmland, of which, over 60% is considered the most productive, versatile, and resilient agricultural land in the country. But that land is at risk: Wisconsin lost 250,000 acres of farmland between 2001-2016 and could lose as much as 688,000 acres of farmland to development by 2040. This potential loss is equivalent to an area eleven times the size of the City of Milwaukee and would spell the end of 2,402 farms and 6,383 farm jobs. As a top producer in the nation of cheese, cranberries, and potatoes, this loss in WI would be detrimental.
- **FEWER FARMERS:** Loss of farmland to development also compounds **the biggest challenge facing next-generation farmers – access to farmland.**¹ With greater development pressure on our agricultural land resulting in higher land prices and less agricultural land available, it is increasingly difficult for new and beginning farmers to enter the industry and acquire land.
- **LOST OPPORTUNITY TO ACCESS FEDERAL DOLLARS:** There is **historic federal funding available** for agricultural conservation easements - \$2.25 BILLION in the current Farm Bill and \$1.4 BILLION from the Inflation Reduction Act over 5 years – but only if Wisconsin has available matching funds. **Currently, 27 states with active PACE programs** provide matching funds to invest more dollars in their agricultural communities. With an unfunded PACE program, Wisconsin is currently not equipped to take advantage of the available Federal dollars and will lose an unprecedented funding opportunity.
- **OPEN SPACE LOSS:** Undeveloped open space, including agriculture, provides vital resources such as habitat, recreation, flood control, water quality, food production, health, and climate resilience benefits. The permanent conversion of farmland to development affects both agriculture and natural habitat, creating landscape fragmentation, contributing to degraded water quality, and the permanent loss of habitat and agricultural productivity.

THE OPPORTUNITY

In 2009, Wisconsin legislature created the state's Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement (PACE) program under [s. 93.73, Stats](#). This program, administered by the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP), enabled landowners to voluntarily protect their farmland through permanent farmland conservation easements. This program created a match program to leverage both federal and local dollars, helping to prevent non-agricultural development on Wisconsin's high-quality farmland. However, in 2011 with passage of the 2011 WI Act 32 (2011 – 2013 State Budget), the initial \$12 MILLION in funding for the PACE program was rescinded and the program has not received funding since.

Stakeholders across Wisconsin are asking the State Legislature to refund the PACE program to support the future of Wisconsin's agricultural sector and the rural economy. Through a \$15 MILLION reinvestment in the PACE program in the 2025 – 2027 State budget, we can:

- Enable DATCP to solicit applications and award grants towards the purchase of agricultural conservation easements on working lands.
- Position Wisconsin among 27 other states as ready to capture and provide required match unprecedented federal farmland protection dollars.

1. Figueroa, M. and L. Penniman. 2020. Land access for beginning and disadvantaged farmers. Data for Progress. Green New Deal Policy Series: Food & Agriculture. March 2020. 11 pp.

WHY PACE

- **Legacy and Farmer Choice:** Many farmers would like to see their land stay in farming as part of their legacy. Easements allow farmers to ensure the land stewarded by past generations will stay in farming long after they are gone. Participation in the WI PACE program is entirely voluntary, and every landowner can choose whether or not to participate in the program.
- **Farm Viability:** The sale of an agricultural conservation easement provides a farm family a way to realize liquidity from their land without having to sell all or a portion of it for development. Proceeds from easement sales enable farmers to expand or diversify their farms, implement resiliency-building conservation practices, finance retirement, pay down debt, repair or upgrade farm equipment, or facilitate the transfer of the farm or ranch to a family member.
- **Land Access:** Escalating land values and competition for land from developers and non-farming investors puts land ownership out of reach for many producers. This includes both those with established operations seeking to expand and, even more so, undercapitalized farmers and those just getting underway. Conservation easements can assist with farmland transfer and create affordability for new by allowing the transfer of farmland at its agricultural value, instead of development value.
- **Rural Communities:** Agricultural conservation easement investments create jobs in rural communities and grow local economies. A 2022 study showed that every federal dollar of easement investment yielded \$1.89 of economic activity. Securing Wisconsin's agricultural land base is vital to the future of both Wisconsin agriculture and our rural communities.
- **Local Food:** Nearly 60% of U.S. farm market value is produced near cities. That includes 90% of fruits, nuts, and berries, 81% of vegetables, 66% of dairy, and 55% of eggs and poultry.² These farms in metro-influenced areas are the farms that are most threatened with conversion to development. Agricultural conservation easements protect the land base producing food for Wisconsin residents and is foundational to U.S. food security.
- **Efficient use of funds:** Agricultural conservation easements are efficient with taxpayer dollars – the land stays in private ownership and on the tax rolls, providing economic use, while the public benefits from the permanent protection of the natural resources and resulting land and water health.



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