

SENATE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING

June 21, 2007 Hearing

Thursday, June 21, 11:00 a.m.

Russell Senate Office Building, Room 328

Future of Farming and Rural Life in Wisconsin: John Rosenow

Introduction

I am John Rosenow, dairy farmer from Cochrane, WI and I appreciate this opportunity to speak to the Committee today in my role as a leader in the Future of Farming and Rural Life in Wisconsin's 2-year study. The Future of Farming (FOF) project is the current public policy initiative of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters. I have co-chaired the Production Agriculture segment of the study and provided special expertise in addressing farm labor needs with immigrant workers.

I have chosen to be involved in this project because I am one of those rural folks. My entire life has been devoted to agriculture and it has been very good to me as a business and as a way of life. I am now 57 years old and over the years have gained some insights that may be of value. Agriculture is dynamic. Our farm has changed from 50 cows to 500, from one employee to 19, from all English speaking to only half native speakers—and there are fewer and fewer of us. I could just ride it out, retire, and move south, but I think things can be done to revitalize rural America. I am here today to explain how we have approached this in Wisconsin.

The Future of Farming and Rural Life initiative began in 2005 with the mission to present stakeholder groups with a fact-based process that would stimulate thought, conversation, and action on the important issues in farming and rural life in Wisconsin. The Wisconsin Academy is uniquely able to guide this effort because of its independent and nonpartisan status.

FOF Study Process

In an attempt to develop a new vision for agriculture in Wisconsin, the project's ambitious goals were to:

- Examine status, trends, constraints, and opportunities for Wisconsin's ag sector
- Include diverse stakeholders from all regions, disciplines, perspectives, and interests
- Develop policy recommendations and action steps
- Energize implementation strategies and action networks toward a more sustainable future

The vast content possibilities were organized into the broad categories of: **Production Agriculture, Food Systems, Natural Resources/Conservation, and Community Life** (social, economic and cultural factors).

To gather maximum expert and grassroots input, we held six regional **forums** around the state in 2006. Last month, we held a 2-day **statewide conference** in Madison to learn from each other, build networks and stimulate engagement.

October 7 we intend to present to Governor Doyle and to heads of state agencies the **FOF final report**. The backbone of this report is a series of 83 recommendations.

The **recommendations** were arrived at through a multi-tiered vetting process that started with collecting input at each of our regional forums and via our website, and soliciting advice from content specialists and stakeholder groups. Known experts in various fields served on committees that reviewed input by content categories and suggested recommendations. This was an iterative process that required several rounds of culling, combining and working toward mutually acceptable statements and calls to action. The project's executive committee signed off on the draft you are receiving today. A final version is subject to one more review after incorporating final public input.

The pending final report is important not only as the culmination of the FOF initiative, but also as a **commencement to a rural renaissance** in Wisconsin. Organizations committed to rural development are currently seeking funding from foundations and government agencies to implement specific project recommendations and to capitalize on networks built during the project. These individual and collaborative efforts will create what we hope will become a **model rural development program**.

Included in the **materials** I have submitted for the Committee's review is video of a presentation colleagues and I made that illuminates the role of migrants in farm labor today. There is considerable background information on the project website (www.wisconsinacademy.org/idea) and in the submitted materials, including the draft recommendations.

Future of Farming Findings Highlights

In our limited time today, I would like to touch on just a few of the things we learned throughout our study:

- There is considerable poverty in rural Wisconsin—and that affects rural communities in many ways. Conversely, there are farmers who have accumulated some wealth as well, usually tied up in land.
- Health care is a major—perhaps the greatest—concern among rural residents.
 - Almost one-third of Wisconsin farmers have no insurance or only catastrophic insurance. Of those who do have insurance, 64% privately purchase it and 36% secure coverage through off-farm employment. In many cases, the off-farm insurance does not cover farm related injuries. As a group, rural citizens are less healthy as they delay or avoid professional care.
 - The FOF study concludes that ALL citizens are entitled to access to high-quality affordable health care and enhanced delivery of preventive care.

We should start by determining a basic level of care to which all citizens are entitled.

- Wisconsin education needs to re-think the basic structures and develop alternate funding strategies.
 - K-12 enrollment declines in rural areas trigger reduced state aids, as transportation, energy, and other fixed costs escalate.
 - Rural schools are the center of community life; losing the school is a drastic blow to community viability.
 - Too few rural students graduate from college.
 - With decreasing school enrollments and resources, fewer rural students may be able to compete for higher education or desirable employment, thus threatening the mandate for equitable educational opportunities for all. Some school districts with large immigrant populations are experiencing rapid growth which aids their funding resources. For example, since the first of the year, Arcadia has seen a growth of 159 students in a district with 986 students in all grades.
 - Support for training in agricultural careers at all levels (K-16) is lacking. New skill sets for managers and owners of agricultural enterprises are required (especially in human resources management and business and financial planning).
 - The nature of agricultural businesses and the workforce needed for them is changing, requiring different preparation, skill sets, and identification and training of non-traditional sources of agricultural owners, managers and workers. Ongoing professional development across the career span and affordable access to it is needed.
 - Cooperative approaches, facilitating credit transfer, and sharing of services and technology among all levels of the state educational system (K-12, technical colleges, university system) are much needed to improve efficiencies and service delivery throughout the state.
 - Education delivered by distance learning to more and different kinds of populations is desirable.
- Rural communities are hampered by inadequate access to 21st century jobs and leadership for economic development strategies. More regional cooperation and strategies are necessary.
- Rural communities, especially schools, need more technology access. Inadequate access to high-speed internet and telecommunication services causes impediments to economic development, innovation, entrepreneurial behavior, and educational services. In contrast to this, there are 11 telephone co-ops that serve a portion of rural Wisconsin. These co-ops provide all their subscribers with the latest in internet services.
- The cost of fuel affects many organizations in rural communities, particularly schools.

- Production Ag.
- Wisconsin's biggest agricultural asset is its diversity. Thirty million acres of agricultural and forest lands have an enormous impact on the state economy.
- Keeping these lands productive and thoughtfully preserving working lands is critical to our viability as a state.
 - Vulnerable mid-sized farms urgently need public policy attention to encourage success or enable transition to other operation types for this group, e.g., business planning grants, investment tax credits, favorable tax treatment for farmland inheritance, etc.
 - Wisconsin farms are now truly dependent upon immigrant labor. An effective documented worker program and sensible immigration laws are crucially important to the dairy and food processing industries.

My own example is instructive. In 1998, I hired my first immigrant from Mexico. This was a difficult decision. I did not want to do this. I wanted to hire locally. I did not want to hire Spanish speaking people I knew nothing about. I had no choice as the labor situation became very tight. My experience with reliable, hard-working Latinos has been very positive. Today, most dairy farms in Wisconsin with employees have Mexican help.

Along with many others, I have founded an organization called Puentes that provides language and cross-cultural training and links us employers with the families of our Mexican employees. This unique approach has been very successful in making employers caring and benevolent rather than the established exploitive stereotype.

- This new labor force requires basic training for farm workers and managers—and other citizens of rural communities— in language, literacy and cross-cultural appreciation. A favorable environment for non-traditional labor sources to move from labor to management to ownership is also needed.
 - Wisconsin's \$50+ billion agriculture economy can remain strong only with encouragement of new farmers and entrepreneurs, requiring access to both education and capital. The development of new cooperative strategies is a part of investing in the future.
 - Citizens are concerned about food quality issues and the ability to trace the food supply.
 - Wisconsinites express a strong desire for regional and local foods.
 - Energy sources for the future are a major interest and major concern. Production ag is hugely affected—biofuels represent both a constraint and an opportunity.
- Federal programs and farm policy have major impacts on agriculture nationwide.
 - Farm policy should encourage market-driven production systems supported by safety nets.

- The rural development title of the federal Farm Bill should focus on strategies that broaden and enhance diversity in rural economies.

What I Hope You Take Away from this Conversation...

- The people living in rural Wisconsin and America are no longer all Northern European, white, 3rd and 4th generation Americans. There is a new diversity to rural America which creates both opportunities and challenges.
- Conditions are ripe for a “**rural renaissance**,” which is in the interest of all citizens, regardless of where they live. Results of the FOF study are applicable elsewhere.
- Throughout the FOF project, we heard from citizens that they need **the tools** for rural development. Congress can support those efforts with policy and funding.