

Farmland Preservation Focus Group Findings

~ WASHINGTON COUNTY, WI ~

Submitted by

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Purpose Statement

The primary purpose of the focus groups was two-fold:

- 1) Provide a means to foster public participation in Washington County's farmland preservation planning process, specifically to gather the opinions of key stakeholders, in this case, agricultural producers and/or business representatives actively involved in livestock operations, dairy farming, grain production, or niche farming (e.g., organics, truck farming, orchards, etc.)
- 2) Help planners and local officials gain a more in-depth understanding of the issues, needs, and wishes of agricultural producers and/or business representatives, especially in regard to agricultural infrastructure.

Methodology

The methodology used for the Washington County Farmland Preservation Focus Group Study was based on a workshop presented in 2005 by Mohammed Douglah, UW-Extension, Dept. of Life Sciences Communication.

A focus group is a carefully planned discussion in a non-threatening environment designed to obtain perceptions of a defined area of interest. Approximately seven to ten people who have some common characteristics that relate to the topic being discussed are invited to participate in a group. The discussion is conducted by a trained facilitator. Typically, a focus group study consists of a minimum of three focus groups.

The County's Farmland Preservation Focus Group Study consisted of three focus groups held consecutively on January 25, 2011 at the Public Agency Center in West Bend. The general topic was "How do we make agriculture more sustainable in Washington County?" and the groups consisted of 1) livestock and dairy producers, 2) grain farmers, and 3) niche farmers. UW-Extension and Land & Water Conservation worked together to assemble lists of potential participants for each group. Everyone on the lists was then sent an invitation and all of those who responded with a desire to participate were allowed to do so. There were seven participants in the livestock/dairy group, five in the grain group, and seven in the niche group.

All three groups received the same questions over a period of 90 minutes. Each session was recorded with an audio cassette recorder and a note taker was also present to capture key points during the discussion. Participants were assured their names would not be linked with their comments. Both the recordings and the notes were then used to identify the themes, key points, and representative or insightful quotations that are contained in this report.

The questions asked were as follows:

- 1) Tell us your name, where you live, and a little about your farm or business.
- 2) When it comes to agriculture in Washington Co., what are our assets?
- 3) What is lacking in the County that would make agriculture stronger?
- 4) How adequate is key ag infrastructure such as transportation, supply facilities, facilities for processing, and storage facilities?
- 5) What do you anticipate will change in production, processing, supply, and/or distribution in the next 10 years? (nature, scope, location, and focus)
- 6) What future development related to agriculture might be needed?
- 7) Is there anything else you'd like to add to this discussion before we end?

Participant Characteristics

What town are they from?

Addison (3)
Barton (2)
Farmington (2)
Hartford (2)
Jackson (4)
Kewaskum (2)
Polk (3)
Wayne (1)

How many come from the more rural northern half of the county vs. the more developed southern half?

- ◆ 10 participants from north
- ◆ 9 participants from south

What was the ratio of male to female?

- ◆ 18 male
- ◆ 1 female

Approximately how many were over age 45 vs. under age 45?

- ◆ 12 over 45
- ◆ 7 under 45

Did everyone verbally take part in their group's discussion?

Yes

Livestock / Dairy Focus Group Results

Seven individuals took part in the discussion. Six of the seven have active dairy farms, and several of these operations also include some cash crops and/or beef production. The other individual recently sold his dairy operation and now sells seed. Their responses to Questions 2-7 are summarized below. Responses/themes that were repeated more than once during the discussion are bolded for emphasis.

2) When it comes to agriculture in Washington Co., what are our assets?

- ◆ **Plenty of outlets to sell and deliver farm products.**
 - Ethanol plants.
 - Milwaukee.
- ◆ Infrastructure is very good.
 - Highway, rail freight, etc.
- ◆ Non-farm neighbors are still reasonably understanding of agricultural activity.
 - While this may still be true, it's not as positive as it used to be.
- ◆ Several high schools and the Extension support agricultural education.
- ◆ At least some kids are still interested in getting into farming.
- ◆ There is still a substantial amount of farmland left in the County.
- ◆ General public wants to keep open space.

KEY QUOTES

“We have a tremendous infrastructure here, with all the highways . . . rail . . .”

“People seem more respectful of agriculture when I cross over into Dodge County. Here we’re finding some with an attitude that we’re in their way.”

“Where I’m located, south of Slinger, there’s been pretty strong development pressure for a number of years, but I still come across a lot of people out there that respect us and what we do, and want to know what we’re doing—and aren’t negative at all about what we’re doing.”

“All of the farmland we have left—that’s one big reason we’re all here today. That’s probably the biggest asset, because if we lose that . . .”



Dairy

3) *What is lacking in the County that would make agriculture stronger?*

- ◆ **Farmer representation on the County Board has decreased and farmer interests on local town boards are not as important as in the past.**
- ◆ Farmers are more and more outnumbered by the large number of people who have moved in from urban areas.
- ◆ General public's knowledge about agriculture.
 - There's a need for education.
- ◆ **Intergovernmental cooperation between cities/villages and towns.**
- ◆ Funding at the town level to keep roads properly maintained.
- ◆ Sound decision-making about how roads are constructed.
- ◆ Traveling to the Milwaukee markets can be inconvenient; would be nice to have it closer.
- ◆ Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) can be harmful when it takes needed farmland out of production unnecessarily.
- ◆ WDNR too often buys farmland and takes it out of production.

KEY QUOTES

"We've lost a lot of farmers on the County Board in recent years. Locally, my town board in the last 7-8 years has turned against agriculture. It's hard for me as a farmer attending the meetings."

"There are so many people moving out from the city with no farm background and they don't understand . . . they see a tractor and they don't comprehend . . . I think if there was a way to educate some of these people and make them more aware of what's actually going on it would probably help."

"They [city, village, and town] haven't sat down and hashed things out, because nobody gets along."

"It comes down to local control. I personally own land in five townships and some are far worse than others at working to preserve agriculture."

"It's absolutely terrible the way that program [CRP] was designed compared to what it has become. To see some of the good tillable land that gets enrolled and planted over with trees is hard to see."

"The DNR has bought up and taken a lot of farmland out of production around the Jackson Marsh, for example. Why wouldn't they at least rent it out?"

Dairy

4) How adequate is key ag infrastructure such as transportation, supply facilities, facilities for processing, and storage facilities?

- ◆ Primary highways are good; secondary roads sometimes in disrepair.
- ◆ **The local co-ops are convenient, but they pay substantially less than those outside the area.**
- ◆ High-speed Internet is adequate for the most part.

KEY QUOTES

“The major infrastructure is there.”

“It’s beneficial every time you can take your product to the end user and avoid any middlemen.”

“More high-speed Internet options might be nice, depending on where you live.”

5) What do you anticipate will change in production, processing, supply, and/or distribution in the next 10 years? (nature, scope, location, focus)

- ◆ Economy will eventually improve and lead to more competition for farmland.
- ◆ Production and yields will continue to increase.
- ◆ Fewer dairy farms and more grain farms.
- ◆ More cattle and milk production in Wisconsin, but less in Washington County.
- ◆ **General public will continue to become more concerned with how and where their food is grown.**
 - **More locally grown food and direct marketing like farmer’s markets.**
- ◆ Farmland preservation strategies will focus on keeping the very best land rather than just any farmland.
- ◆ More farmland fragmentation is likely.
- ◆ Bio-energy opportunities might possibly increase but only if costs for infrastructure (e.g., manure digesters) declines, technology improves, and economies of scale become a compelling factor.

KEY QUOTES

“If the economy stays slow, things might kind of stay the way they are.”

“As far as processing—we’re going to have to have better options, because a lot of these local places that are doing some of the slaughtering are falling further and further behind. We’re going to need to get some small slaughtering plants, and processing, including poultry and beef—because people are going to be looking for that. They like going to not only the farmer’s markets but also the meat markets.”

“It’s all the initial costs. I think digesters are a good idea , but it’s a big risk if it doesn’t pan out the way it’s supposed to.”

Dairy

6) *What future development related to agriculture might be needed?*

- ◆ Smaller operators in particular would like to at least keep the local feed mills in the area.
- ◆ Maintain a solid infrastructure for both small and large farms.
- ◆ Wait times are often quite long at local meat processing facilities.
- ◆ Dairy plants and small-scale cheese plants might be a good addition.

KEY QUOTES

“I don’t think it’s a problem yet, but I’m saying it would be if we were to lose much more [of the things that support agriculture]. We need to maintain what we have.”

“On the plus side, if something breaks on the combine at 7:00 at night, you can go in the house and order the part on the Internet and it’ll be at the dealership the next morning.”

“We used to have a lot of little cheese factories all over the place. If we could get something like that stimulated again in this County I think it would be a hell of an asset, because there’s demand for the product.”

7) *Is there anything else you’d like to add to this discussion before we end?*

- ◆ Where will the money come from to pay for the WLI?
- ◆ The \$10 per acre tax credit will not keep land from being developed.
- ◆ Concerns about just how effective WLI will be in protecting farmland and for how long.
- ◆ Larger residential lots cause more fragmentation.
- ◆ Is all this planning (e.g., comprehensive, farmland) worthwhile?
 - Job security for planners.
 - Tired of all the meetings.
 - What’s the point? Has anything improved? Look at all the farmland that’s been lost.

KEY QUOTES

“How can people afford more taxes [to pay for WLI]? How can we as farmers put more of a burden on them?”

“Use-value assessment is enough of an incentive already. My taxes are \$4 an acre. Why do I need a \$10 per acre credit when other people are struggling?”

“One way for the retiring farmer to bring money into the farm to ensure his children can take over is to sell some lots for development—so we don’t want to totally stop rural development, but at the same time we need to control it in order to preserve enough farmland for the future.”

Grain Focus Group Results

Five individuals participated in the discussion. While they were primarily grain farmers, additional, lesser parts of their operations may have also included some livestock. Their responses to Questions 2-7 are summarized below. Responses/themes that were repeated more than once during the discussion are bolded for emphasis.

2) *When it comes to agriculture in Washington Co., what are our assets?*

- ◆ **Infrastructure is good.**
- ◆ Good number and quality of equipment dealers.
- ◆ Able to find and order parts online and have them delivered to local dealer.
- ◆ Good – fair quality land.
- ◆ Proximity to Milwaukee cultural activities.
- ◆ Convenient Milwaukee grain markets and parts.
- ◆ Good established customer base (farmers) for farm suppliers.

KEY QUOTES

“I think we’ve got a good amount of infrastructure, equipment dealers . . . Relatively productive land.”

“I look at the proximity to Milwaukee in several ways. Markets are very close to home—like commodities. I can get parts down in Milwaukee; I can get truck parts real quick. Also, on the other side of the coin, you can go see a concert or something.”



Grain

3) *What is lacking in the County that would make agriculture stronger?*

- ◆ **Public understanding of what farmers do.**
 - Traffic dangers and moving equipment.
- ◆ **Qualified labor force:**
 - Lots of alternative jobs and choices here compared to more rural and remote places, which draws them away from farm work.
 - Farm work is dirty work and people don't want to get dirty.
 - Lack of farm experience and exposure.
 - Higher wages elsewhere draw people away from farming; but even when we try to pay more it doesn't seem to matter much.
 - Attitude and expectations about farm labor is different.
 - People today typically have less mechanical and problem solving ability.
- ◆ Realtors who provide accurate information to potential buyers about the realities of country life (e.g., odors, noises).
- ◆ Roadways/road shoulder quality.
- ◆ Kids and people with strong connections to their agricultural roots.
- ◆ As the land base diminishes you lose the volume you need to make a living.
- ◆ Support by general public and local officials to maintain and develop the ag industry.

KEY QUOTES

“When we encounter the general public on the roadways, we are in their way. They aren't real forgiving. I'm taking my life in my hands a lot of times when I'm out on the road with this big equipment.”

“A lot of young people are drawn away from the farm by the opportunities of the bigger cities. They want to work on computers—clean work—and a lot of what we do gets your hands dirty.”

“We had 283 school kids come out to the farm last year for a tour—only 2 kids out of those 283 came from a farm. We're losing that connection.”

Grain

4) How adequate is key ag infrastructure such as transportation, supply facilities, facilities for processing, and storage facilities?

- ◆ Local grain markets are limited and not competitive.
 - Need to go to Milwaukee or Randolph for the best prices.
- ◆ Vegetable processing is gone.
- ◆ High-speed Internet is adequate for the most part.

KEY QUOTES

“In the County there are a few places that purchase our commodities, but they’re kind of limited markets. If we want to be able to sell larger quantities and get a higher price we have to go outside the community to places like Milwaukee and Randolph; but there’s really no getting around that. We’re never going to have an export harbor here.”

“There used to be vegetable processing facilities in Hartford and Jackson, but that’s all gone. But thanks to the availability of trucking transport it’s not really that much of an issue.”

5) What do you anticipate will change in production, processing, supply, and/or distribution in the next 10 years? (nature, scope, location, focus)

- ◆ **More cash crops.**
- ◆ As the population increases, there will be fewer farm animals.
- ◆ Grain farms generate less conflict than dairy, which might make them more likely to survive in more populated areas like Washington County.
- ◆ Smaller dairies will likely not be able to compete or last.
- ◆ Getting ever more efficient.
- ◆ More competition for fewer acres will lead to higher land rents.
- ◆ Big farms will keep getting bigger.
- ◆ More land lost to development eventually especially if economy improves.

KEY QUOTES

“As has happened in Waukesha County, our dairy is going to continue to dwindle. As the population closes in it gets harder all the time to, and as others have mentioned, the smell of manure, and concerns about water quality. There’s less concerns with grain than dairy.”

“As farmers get into their 70s and 80s they’re not looking at locking up their land for another 15 years of preservation; they’re looking at selling.”

“The banks are much more likely to finance an expansion than a new operation.”

Grain

6) *What future development related to agriculture might be needed?*

- ◆ **Agricultural education programs for the general public.**
- ◆ Need to maintain the processing capacity that is here.
- ◆ Not enough local meat processing options.
- ◆ We need a stronger work ethic.
- ◆ Don't see any ethanol or large processing plants coming here—they will go to the more rural places.

KEY QUOTES

"If we want to continue to save agriculture, a future emphasis needs to be education on the importance of having the farm not only for our food but to replenish our groundwater and all of the things that ag land gives us. I think that if anything needs to happen as far as help from the state, it's education."

"We've got to keep the two elevators that are there. They may not pay the top prices, but they are an option, and in a pinch you may go there."

"Meat processing locally is a need; there are only two places and the waiting list can be 2-3 months in the fall."

"I wouldn't mind seeing an ethanol plant here, but that'll never happen. Right now I have to go 58 miles to Jefferson."

7) *Is there anything else you'd like to add to this discussion before we end?*

- ◆ Should towns even go through the trouble of WLI? Too complicated.
- ◆ Concerns about just how effective WLI will be in protecting farmland and for how long.
- ◆ Don't want to have the value of the land reduced.
- ◆ Government is spending what we do not have.

KEY QUOTES

"We're still unsure what we should be doing [in regard to the WLI]."

"We don't want to lose use-value assessment. That is a big reason to keep it in farmland."

"All of this planning is being done to keep planners in business."

Niche / Organic Focus Group Results

Seven individuals participated in the discussion. They represented a broad spectrum of operations that included vegetables, poultry, pigs, cattle, ewes, and more. For some in the group, organics and community supported agriculture (CSA) were part of their operation. Their responses to Questions 2-7 are summarized below. Responses/themes that were repeated more than once during the discussion are bolded for emphasis.

2) When it comes to agriculture in Washington Co., what are our assets?

- ◆ **Our location relative to the Milwaukee metro area market, and even Chicago.**
- ◆ West Bend Farmer's Market.
- ◆ Road infrastructure.
- ◆ There are at least 4 equipment dealers within a short drive.
- ◆ Soil quality.
- ◆ Climate is more moderate than western part of state.
- ◆ Availability of rental land with varying topography and soils.
- ◆ Good county services (e.g., roads are plowed quickly).
- ◆ Rural, farming culture still exists here to some degree.

KEY QUOTES

"As a small producer, the way a lot of us sell, it's our location in relationship to Milwaukee and West Bend."

"The road infrastructure is excellent. I'm 8 minutes from a four-lane highway, two hours from the ultimate market for me, which is Chicago. I do sell in Chicago."

"Washington County has the right level of commercialization versus the right level of agriculture right now—I'd like to see that continue."



Niche

3) *What is lacking in the County that would make agriculture stronger?*

- ◆ **Reasonable regulations and permit requirements from all levels of government. Current requirements can be unfair, a hassle, and extreme.**
- ◆ **Local educational resources for “our” type of agriculture.**
- ◆ State certified commercial kitchen.
- ◆ Local network of operators sharing information.

KEY QUOTES

“When a little 4-acre farm gets bothered by two EPA inspectors making unsubstantiated claims, how much of that do you want to put up with?”

“I don’t want to sound insensitive to food safety, but if regulations go too far it’s just going to destroy some of the young farmers, young entrepreneurs because of the extra costs, the concerns, the anxieties they put into you.”

“You preserve farmland by preserving the farmer. How are you helping farmers by charging for every little thing we need to do?”

“Most of the informational sessions for organic, value-added producers are either in Madison or on the western side of the state. It was great to see one in Elkhart Lake recently, but we need a lot more of that.”

4) *How adequate is key ag infrastructure such as transportation, supply facilities, facilities for processing, and storage facilities?*

- ◆ Lacking a vegetable processing facility.
- ◆ Roads are very good.
- ◆ Fleet Farm, Menards, and True Value provide most of the needed maintenance supplies.
- ◆ High-speed Internet is adequate for the most part.

KEY QUOTES

“The only thing I don’t have relative to what I grow is the primary vegetable production infrastructure of the Central Sands area of the state. There’s plenty of that infrastructure up there, but it’s not down here.”

“You’re always looking to have your own facilities, because then you can have 100 percent control over it.”

Niche

5) *What do you anticipate will change in production, processing, supply, and/or distribution in the next 10 years? (nature, scope, location, focus)*

- ◆ **Concerns about food borne illnesses due to poor practices by a few may cause additional burdensome regulations on everyone.**
- ◆ **Organics and CSAs might become more popular as people have a greater desire to know where their food is coming from and how it's produced.**

KEY QUOTES

"Pickle Bill might impact small regulated producers like us negatively if consumers lump us in with someone who is unregulated and sells one bad batch of something."

"How can I compete against the really small operations that are exempt from the regulation costs that I have, even though I'm also relatively small?"

"People come out and they seek my product because they know me and my farm—they can see how I do things, and that's what sells my product. And they can walk through my farm and look at anything."

6) *What future development related to agriculture might be needed?*

- ◆ Commercial kitchen.
- ◆ Business incubator focused on niche farming products.

KEY QUOTES

"I really like the concept of a commercial kitchen when you start to think of the County as a whole and the ability to process some of the products we all have."

"Computer marketing—a large percentage of what I sell is driven by people finding my product online."

"The way it is right now, in terms of the infrastructure here, is really good."

7) *Is there anything else you'd like to add to this discussion before we end?*

- ◆ West Bend Farmer's Market is a premiere one, but they need to be sensitive to exhibitors' needs. Don't switch stand locations, if possible, and allow reasonably close unloading of vehicle.
- ◆ A more "permanent" Farmer's Market would probably not fare too well.

KEY QUOTES

"You lose the *experience* of the traditional Saturday morning market."

"I've got a 7-day a week roadside stand if people need to reach me."

"We need to spend most of our time at home harvesting and making the product."