***Editor’s note:****This column is provided to Wisconsin Newspaper Association members by WisPolitics.com. Proper attribution in your newspapers is appreciated, including the byline “WisPolitics.com” and the tagline that is included at the end of the column.*

**Gov. Evers’ call for farm aid getting traction at Capitol**

*By WisPolitics.com*

The pattern has usually been if Gov. Tony Evers liked it, majority Republicans in the Legislature rejected it.

But the first-term Democratic governor is getting some traction on his call for aid to farmers and rural Wisconsin. Evers made the call for a special session during his State of the State address in January.

Both houses of the Legislature have begun the special session and introduced the governor’s bills. And now Republicans are looking to tweak Evers’ proposals and push some of their own new and existing legislation. This comes as the Capitol looks at how to use a surplus of some $450 million this election year.

On Feb. 4, Speaker Robin Vos said Assembly Republicans are considering two tax breaks for farmers as they look for a more “robust” boost for the ag industry than what Evers has proposed.

Vos, R-Rochester, said Assembly Republicans were looking at a combination of bills they’ve already introduced, new proposals and some of what Evers proposed last month in his State of the State address. Vos initially reacted negatively toward the Evers proposals.

Still, he said the $8.5 million price tag for Evers’ package was probably “too small of an effort” to make a significant difference for struggling farmers.

“We would prefer to be a little bolder in our actions,” Vos said.

The new ideas from the Assembly include a variation of Vos’ previous call to allow farmers to deduct health insurance costs from their taxes. Vos said the idea would apply to all sole proprietorships, not just farmers, with a price tag of about $9 million.

Assembly Republicans are also looking at a property tax cut that would benefit just farmers.

Vos said his caucus was still putting the final touches on both ideas. One potential hurdle: the uniformity clause in the Wisconsin Constitution generally prevents the Legislature and local officials from granting preferential treatment to certain property owners. But Vos said he believes the final proposal will meet those standards.

He didn’t have a cost for the proposed property tax break or the overall package. Vos said it will be significantly bigger than what Evers proposed.

Assembly Republicans have passed a series of proposals this session on topics such as homelessness only to see them run into resistance in the Senate GOP caucus over the price tag.

Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald, R-Juneau, said his caucus is “all ears” when it comes to plans to help farmers. The Senate Organization Committee unanimously approved introducing the special session legislation that Evers requested.

“We’re taking an all-the-above approach as a caucus and are continuing to review all the bills in front of us as we look to address the special session call,” he said.

Evers said Feb. 4 he’s open to “all sorts of ideas” but would prefer more immediate help for farmers than tax credits that may take a while to collect.

Speaking after a Wisconsin Counties Association event in Madison, Evers said he was glad to see “all sides now have decided to get going on this particular issue.”

“It seems to me that we’ve always worried about whether we propose something that they’re going to complain about how much money we’re spending,” Evers said. “So, if they want to put more money into mental health issues or if they want to put more money into some other programs, have at it. I’m with them.”

Evers’ initiatives include:

* Creating the Wisconsin Initiative for Dairy Exports to promote the state’s dairy brand and help increase exports.
* Expanding the Farm Center, which is housed at DATCP and provides information and support to farmers and their families to grow the ag economy.
* Increasing staffing at UW Extension to support farmers and agricultural industries.
* Bolstering the Farm-to-School program, which brings local or regionally produced foods into school cafeterias and classrooms, and creating the Farm-to-Fork program. The latter would help connect farmers with universities, technical colleges, hospitals and local businesses to market their products.
* Creating a new program to improve farmers’ access to mental health services. That includes coordinating local and regional peer support programming and providing one-on-one counseling.

*The Capitol Report is written by editorial staff at WisPolitics.com, a nonpartisan, Madison-based news service that specializes in coverage of government and politics, and is distributed for publication by members of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association.*

*Copyright © WisPolitics.com*