Trump cut to local food program affecting farmers, food banks, schools and childcare centers  
  
By WisPolitics

Wisconsin ag groups say they’re looking for alternative funding options after the Trump administration cut more than $1 billion for federal programs providing local products to food banks, schools and childcare centers.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture announced this month it was eliminating the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative, which facilitates partnerships with farmers to provide healthy, local food for underserved communities to food banks. Also cut was the Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program, a similar program aimed at schools and child care centers.

The cuts include nearly $6 million for Wisconsin. Nearly 300 Wisconsin farmers had participated in the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative program at the end of last year, and more than $4 million was distributed to counties across the state, according to Gov. Tony Evers’ office.

Tyler Wenzlaff, director of government relations at the Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation, said the group was “disappointed” to see the programs eliminated. He said WFBF was told the programs were canceled because they were COVID-19-related and had run their course.

“The programs provided access for not only schoolchildren, but, locally, local participants that may have not had access or opportunity to these foods that they could try during everyday life,” Wenzlaff said. “So this program provided an opportunity for a lot of farmers that may have not had access to those kind of markets.”

He said while there are some existing programs that dairy farmers still can use to get their products to school districts, other farmers may be more affected.

Wenzlaff said WFBF has reached out to U.S. Reps. Derrick Van Orden, R-Prairie du Chien, and Tony Wied, R-De Pere, who both serve on the House Agriculture Committee, about ways to either reimagine the programs or redirect funding into existing farm-to-school programs in the farm bill.

He said the response from Van Orden and Wied has been “positive.”

Wied in a statement to WisPolitics referred to the programs as “Biden-era COVID spending” that “was established without congressional approval and was never intended to be permanent.”

“This program has significant funding still available and longstanding farm bill programs already provide assistance to America’s farmers and rural communities,” Wied added. “I will continue to work with my colleagues on the House Agriculture Committee to ensure our Wisconsin farmers have the necessary resources and funding they need to succeed.”

Van Orden said the programs “were done ad-hoc by the Biden administration.”

“These programs instead need to be formalized. I understand the positive impacts that they had on our local communities, and it is important that we continue to support our local farmers and buy domestically,” Van Orden said.

Wisconsin Farmers Union President Darin Von Ruden told WisPolitics the elimination of the programs will hurt farmers as well as local communities.

“You look at rural Wisconsin too, the number of farm families that actually qualify for SNAP benefits and also reduced school lunchbenefits, it’s probably just about every farmer has that situation,” Von Ruden said. “So to cut those costs, it’s not just affecting the average citizen in town, it affects the farmers that feed the world, too.”

He said there’s “lots of worry and concern among farmers” about the cuts, particularly with the elimination of the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative farmers have benefited from over the last two years. He said they will have to look to new markets.

Von Ruden noted Evers included money for the program in the state budget, which WFU advocated for amid a federal funding freeze. Evers has proposed nearly $770,000 and one full-time position to support the program. Von Ruden said he’s spoken with state legislators who are also “very supportive” of keeping the program alive with state funding.

Evers has criticized the funding cuts, vowing “to fight to make damn sure our farmers have the resources and support Wisconsin was promised.”

State schools Superintendent Jill Underly told WisPolitics the elimination of the Local Food for Schools Cooperative Program “not only disrupts the lives of students, small farmers, and local producers, but it undermines years of effort to strengthen Wisconsin’s critical local food supply chains.”

“Small farmers, producers and schools across Wisconsin relied on this program to provide fresh, local foods to students,” Underly said in a statement. “We cannot afford to make cuts that will undermine the very students and families who rely on these federal programs to thrive.”

About $3.5 million was spent under the program to distribute food to schools and child care centers in the 2023-24 and 2024-25 school years, according to the Department of Public Instruction. More than 230 schools and districts and 11 non-school entities benefited from the program. DPI estimated the broader impact of the initiative at between $3.8 and $6.8 million.

Hunger Task Force, a Milwaukee-based food bank and anti-hunger advocacy group, received a $250,000 grant for the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative program last year, which was used to provide meat, fish and produce to 114 hunger relief organizations in Wisconsin across 29 counties. The group currently serves over 50,000 people per month in the Milwaukee area.

CEO Matt King said the group has seen a 30% increase in visits to its network of food pantries, which he attributed to an increase in the cost of living, particularly housing. He said he wants the decision to eliminate the program reversed.

“This program not only benefited people in need in an environment where the need for emergency food has dramatically increased, but also was a reliable opportunity for small-scale producers to be able to leverage USDA support and develop some security in their portfolio,”  
King said. “And so the program was a win-win for both hunger relief organizations, people in need and local farmers.”

He said the group is turning to private donors to fill the funding gap and will continue to purchase food from local farmers whenever possible, including continuing to work with farmers who benefited from the program.

“For many of them, they were already operating as small businesses under the premise that this was a secure part of their business plan for the upcoming growing season, and so the timing of this announcement really was inconsiderate of the impact that this would have on the security of these small businesses,” he added.

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