

Assembly Committee on Agriculture

2021 Assembly Bill 77

Funding for certain extension services at UW System

April 7, 2021

Good morning Chairman Tauchen and members of the Assembly Committee on Agriculture. The University of Wisconsin-Madison thanks the committee for the opportunity to be able to provide written testimony in support of Assembly Bill 77 (AB 77), which provides additional funding for the crucial work being done in the field of applied agriculture by CALS and Extension faculty.

UW-Madison appreciates the intent of the authors to support state Extension specialists in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences (CALS) who focus on applied agriculture and their impact on the future of agriculture in Wisconsin. We also appreciate the introduced amendment which adds the flexibility to fund Extension outreach specialist positions.

Researchers within CALS develop world-class research, working closely with Extension outreach positions and with input from farm owners, practitioners, and trade groups. This research forms the basis for guidance and solutions. The Extension faculty specialists integrated into CALS conduct basic and applied research that is extramurally funded, reviewed by peer scientists from around the world and informs Extension programming. They may deliver their findings directly to user groups or partner with Division of Extension programs on dissemination. They also train graduate and undergraduate students. In 2019-20, USDA funded \$30.1 million of research conducted by faculty in CALS.

An important role of Extension faculty in CALS is to stay apprised of the latest technology advancements and, in many cases, create new technologies for agriculture in collaboration with the graduate students they train. More often than not, the process of developing new technology is a result of the unique partnership between faculty and agricultural producers in Wisconsin who are looking for innovative ways to farm.

This work manifests in many ways across the state. For instance, faculty from our Department of Horticulture have worked to coordinate the Network for Environment and Weather Applications in the state. This is a network of weather stations across Wisconsin that help cranberry growers adjust production practices based on their local weather conditions.

Similarly, faculty and staff have also developed new tools and technologies in these roles. A faculty member from our Department of Plant Pathology helped create and release the

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“Sporecaster” application, which assists farmers in making management decisions for white mold in soybean crops. This mobile app combines site-specific data with research-based models to predict the best timing for white mold treatment in that specific field. It has been downloaded more than 1,600 times and averages more than 250 users a day during “white mold season,” which is July and August.

There are many other examples of this work across the state of Wisconsin such as dairy pricing and marketability, nitrogen management, and developing different produce varieties. This Extension work done by faculty at UW-Madison is wide in its breadth and vital for many across the state. It is also worth noting that this work is not exclusive to the field of agriculture.

Extension outreach specialists in the Division of Extension provide outreach programming in a specialized topic across several counties or the entire state. These specialists also collaborate with faculty in academic departments on field-based research and disseminate research findings and other relevant information. The positions leverage the latest university research to create regional solutions coordinated with local agencies and trade groups to move industry and rural prosperity issues forward. This model builds off successful private-public partnerships to connect and apply university research with those who can benefit from it the most.

Just this past year Extension has supported 250 cranberry growers across the state in this manner. Cranberries are Wisconsin’s largest fruit industry, valued at \$1 billion and employing nearly 4,000 people. In fact, Wisconsin produces more cranberries than any other state, making up more than 60 percent of the country’s production. Extension worked with the Wisconsin State Cranberry Growers Association and others to create a cranberry outreach specialist position working with growers in 20 central and northern counties. The specialist takes the latest research from Extension and CALS and provides growers with a resource for timely cranberry production questions and information to optimize Wisconsin cranberry yield and quality – and, therefore, cranberry farm profitability.

In 1990 there were about 70 Extension-funded faculty in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences. This has been reduced to approximately 40 today, or a reduction of about 30 Extension faculty over the past 3 decades. This is the result of steady reductions in Extension funding in the UW System budget. Similar position reductions have been experienced within the Division of Extension. SB 80 would allow CALS and Extension to reverse this trend and invest in this important work.

As was referenced before, AB 77 was recently amended to ensure funding could be directed both at CALS and the Division of Extension. With this additional flexibility we can fund these complimentary roles that are important to the agricultural industry. We also support the addition in the Governor’s Executive budget proposal that includes a much-needed investment for both Extension educators and CALS research positions.

UW-Madison appreciates the bill authors recognizing this important work and the additional, much-needed funding this proposal provides. On behalf of the UW-Madison, CALS, and the Division of Extension we would like to thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony and describe the type of impact that could be realized through additional funding. If you have any questions, please reach out to UW-Madison Director of State Relations Crystal Potts at crystal.potts@wisc.edu or (608) 658-6761.