

WCMA Releases 2023 Wisconsin Advocacy Priorities

Dairy processors' agenda includes grant and export funding, dairy labeling, expanded workforce tools

MADISON, WI – The Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association (WCMA) today unveiled a robust legislative platform for 2023. In visits with elected and appointed leaders, WCMA members called for increased investment in state programs to boost dairy exports and spur dairy business development, action to ensure food labeling accuracy, updated transportation regulations, continued expansion of high-speed broadband internet access and other key workforce supports, among other items.

“WCMA is proud to serve as a strong voice for the dairy processing community in the nation’s leading cheese state. As the Wisconsin Legislature enters a new session, now is the time for policymakers to champion investments and policies that sustain and grow the state’s signature industry,” said WCMA Executive Director John Umhoefer. “We’re grateful for the widespread bipartisan support legislators have expressed for the issues that matter most to dairy manufacturers, and we look forward to seeing swift action in the coming biennium.”

Following a keynote address from Governor Tony Evers, WCMA members received federal and state updates from Advisor to U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin Sydney Scott, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Deputy Secretary Sarah Barry, and Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (WDATCP) Secretary Randy Romanski. A legislative panel comprised of Senator Joan Ballweg (R-Markesan), Senator Howard Marklein (R-Spring Green), Representative Tony Kurtz (R-Wonewoc), and Representative Travis Tranel (R-Cuba City) shared insights with attendees on their plans to champion dairy priorities in the upcoming legislative session.

Finally, members moved to the State Capitol, meeting with lawmakers on both sides of the aisle and in both houses to urge support for 10 key state budget provisions and policy items:

- **DAIRY PROCESSOR GRANTS:** In the previous budget cycle, legislators allocated \$400,000 for WDATCP grants to dairy processors to support innovation and development. This funding is consistently in high demand: in 2022, 43 businesses applied for a total of \$1.7 million. WCMA supports an **expansion of the Dairy Processor Grant program at WDATCP to a total annual allocation of up to \$1 million per year**. Funding will alleviate labor shortfalls by supporting increased automation – which also means higher wages and better conditions for dairy processing workers – and generate growth for artisan cheesemakers, maintaining Wisconsin’s dominance in the specialty cheese arena.
- **WISCONSIN INITIATIVE FOR AGRICULTURAL EXPORTS:** WCMA members support increased investment in the state’s export endeavors via the Wisconsin Initiative for Agricultural Exports (WIAE). This five-year, \$5 million effort launched in 2021, but funding must be affirmed on an annual basis. The consultative, technical, and marketing support the WIAE has provided are already moving the needle on Wisconsin dairy exports, with sales up a whopping 37.7 percent so far in 2022. WCMA proposes an **investment of \$2 million per fiscal year to boost this impactful program, or \$4 million over the 2023-2025 biennium**. Every dollar allocated to the dairy part of this program will mean revenue growth for the State of Wisconsin and WCMA encourages continued investments.

- **DAIRY INNOVATION HUB:** WCMA members urge elected leaders to **maintain the state’s \$7.8 million per year investment in the Dairy Innovation Hub**, harnessing research and development at the UW–Madison, UW–Platteville and UW–River Falls campuses to support Wisconsin’s dairy farmers and processors in their mission to produce nutritious dairy foods in an economically, environmentally and socially sustainable manner. Since its launch in 2019, the Hub has funded more than 130 impactful projects and 15 critical faculty positions across the three campuses.
- **WDATCP FUNDING & KEY POSITIONS:** WDATCP’s dairy specialists and sanitarians perform critical inspections and reports that help dairy processors maintain high safety standards. However, turnover in these roles is high as staff are offered more lucrative employment. WCMA members ask the Evers Administration and state lawmakers to again **support the reclassification of these critical positions, and increased funding for the agency overall.**
- **FOOD SECURITY INITIATIVE:** While some pandemic impacts have subsided, hunger remains a critical concern. Regional food banks and pantries are experiencing a 30-45 percent increase in demand, and a surge in need is expected as FoodShare emergency allotments funded by federal COVID aid will end in early 2023. WCMA members support **continued investment in the Food Security Initiative**, which has successfully met needs of food-insecure Wisconsin households and boosted Wisconsin food processors during periods of continued marketplace volatility.
- **WORKFORCE SUPPORT:** WCMA members champion programs supported by state dollars to **provide affordable housing, childcare and eldercare, and workforce training**, particularly in rural communities.
- **BROADBAND EXPANSION:** WCMA members support investments to **expand high-speed internet access to all Wisconsinites**, enhancing quality of life and economic competitiveness, particularly in the rural communities in which many dairy processors operate.
- **OVERWEIGHT PERMITS:** Each day, over 88 million pounds of raw milk moves from Wisconsin’s 6,500 dairy farms to its processing plants, with more than 200 plants operating statewide. Approximately 90 percent of Wisconsin milk is processed into cheese, leaving behind an abundance of whey. Whey is further processed, often in separate facilities, to create additional products for market.

The State of Wisconsin allows haulers a maximum gross vehicle weight of 98,000 pounds when transporting fluid milk products, including milk, milk drinks, eggnog, and buttermilk, but not liquid whey. This means that, when whey is transported, larger tanker trucks are currently moving at reduced capacity.

WCMA members seek the ability to **apply the same conditions governing the transportation of fluid milk products in Wisconsin to the transportation of other liquid milk byproducts**, including whole whey, reverse osmosis whey, liquid whey protein, and liquid whey permeate. This change would alleviate challenges related to the current truck driver shortage and would help to support greater energy efficiency through reduced demand for diesel fuel.

- **ACCURATE DAIRY LABELING:** WCMA members continue to urge state action to **ban the labeling of foods as dairy products or dairy ingredients if the food is not made from the milk of a cow, sheep, goat, or camelid mammal.** The same guidelines should also apply to products labeled as milk. This legislation will ensure consumers are afforded clarity in the marketplace and will also serve to send a message from Wisconsin to Washington, D.C. that existing U.S. Food & Drug Administration regulations regarding product labeling should be enforced.
- **RAW MILK SALES:** WCMA members **strongly oppose any effort to change the state's current prohibition on regular sales of raw milk,** which can contain disease-causing bacteria that the pasteurization process is designed to kill. Public safety is of utmost importance to dairy processors.

For more than 130 years, WCMA has served the dairy processing industry as a strong policy advocate, networking hub, and trusted source of education and information. WCMA proudly hosts the renowned U.S. and World Championship Cheese Contests, as well as CheeseExpo and CheeseCon. Today, the organization represents over 110 dairy processing companies and cooperatives operating across the United States and around the world, backed by more than 530 companies supplying equipment and services to the industry.