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AFT Salutes Bold Step to Protect Working Lands

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American Farmland Trust and its partners in the Campaign for Wisconsin's Farm and Forest Lands are hailing action by Gov. Jim Doyle and the Wisconsin Legislature to protect Wisconsin working lands.

The biennial budget signed by Gov. Doyle June 29 contains a new and comprehensive set of tools to achieve working lands protection. Doyle introduced the Working Lands Initiative as part of the budget he provided to the Legislature earlier this year, and lawmakers adopted virtually all key pieces of the package.

"The governor and lawmakers who supported the Working Lands Initiative deserve credit for giving Wisconsin these new tools," said Vicki Elkin, coordinator of AFT's efforts in Wisconsin. "Their action will boost rural economic development and protect the state's precious working lands."

Wisconsin now has statutes in place that update the 30-year-old Farmland Preservation Program and provide new opportunities for Agricultural Enterprise Areas and Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easements (PACE), Elkin said. With the exception of updating the Farmland Protection Program, the new tools are voluntary. They are designed to empower local governments and their partners in efforts to identify and protect working lands. The package is also budget-neutral, although it provides up to \$12 million to fund state PACE grants by shifting bonding authority. PACE will help fund the purchase of development rights on strategically identified working lands. These funds will also help the state take full advantage of the federal Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program, which also provides funds to strategically protect working lands.

Upon signing the budget, Governor Doyle stated that the Working Lands Initiative "encourages the long-term preservation of Wisconsin's fertile farmlands and supports commitments by farmers to manage their land in an environmentally friendly manner."

Bob Wagner, AFT's senior director of Farmland Protection Programs, noted that other states have successfully protected prime working lands with tools similar to those adopted in Wisconsin. "This is legacy legislation for Wisconsin, and it will have positive impacts for decades to come," he said.

Elkin noted that Rod Nilsestuen, Wisconsin secretary of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, and numerous other individuals and groups deserve credit for shaping the Working Lands Initiative. "Secretary Nilsestuen has been tireless in his efforts to stem the loss of working lands," she said, adding: "Literally thousands of state residents participated in workshops, listening sessions, forums and other activities focused on developing new working lands tools over the past several years. It's truly an example of grassroots citizen involvement helping to shape good public policy."

American Farmland Trust will cooperate with other groups in assisting local communities and their partners in efforts to apply the new tools, Elkin said.

The loss of Wisconsin farmland has ranged as high as 30,000 acres in some years. Agriculture is estimated to have a \$51 billion annual impact on the state's economy.