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# JOEL KITCHENS

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 1<sup>ST</sup> ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

## **Testimony for the Assembly Committee on Environment and Forestry**

### **Assembly Bill 946**

**Monday, February 19, 2018**

Thank you Chairman Mursau and fellow committee members for holding a public hearing on Assembly Bill 946. I deeply regret I am unable to be with you today to speak on the merits of this great bill. This bill increases the amount available for Producer-Led Watershed Protection Grants given out by DATCP by \$500,000 each year in the 17-18 and 18-19 fiscal years.

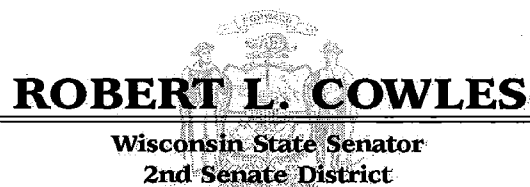
The amount currently appropriated for Producer-Led Watershed Grants is \$250,000 each fiscal year. The grants are handed out through an RFP process to producer-led watershed groups who apply and meet the criteria, with individual grants to a group capped at \$40,000. Groups must be made up of a minimum of five farmers in the same watershed and match the grant 50-50. The producer groups work with educational institutions, non-profits and conservation agencies to examine and explore soil and water conservation practices appropriate for their farms and their land.

The farmers are the ideal group to take the lead on this issue. Their success is tied to the quality of their soil and water. Grants such as these allow them to innovatively collaborate and explore new technologies and tools available for land and water conservation that they otherwise would not be able to access. I can say with certainty that there are farmers in the 1<sup>st</sup> Assembly District who are excited at the prospect of more funding being driven in this direction. For many, delving into the field of potentially costly conservation practices is not a viable option without a program such as this one. This additional funding will encourage the creation of more partnerships, more cooperation and provide more resources for farmers in each of our districts across the state.

Thank you for taking the time to read my testimony and I hope you support this bill. I also want to thank my second author, Representative Krug, for his testimony, as well as Senator Cowles and his staff for all their work on this issue.

STANDING COMMITTEES:

Natural Resources & Energy, Chair  
Transportation & Veterans Affairs



JOINT COMMITTEES

Audit Committee, Co-Chair  
Information Policy and Technology

## Testimony on 2017 Assembly Bill 946

Senator Robert Cowles

Assembly Committee on Environment and Forestry - February 19, 2018

Thank you Chairman Mursau and committee members for allowing me to testify on 2017 Assembly Bill 946. This bill increases the funding to the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection's (DATCP) Producer-Led Watershed Protection Grant Program by \$500,000 for each fiscal year in the current biennium.

Understanding that no one knows the land better than the farmers who cultivate it, the Producer-Led Watershed Protection Grant Program encourages a coalition of five or more farmers within a watershed to organize with conservation agencies, educational institutions, or nonprofit organizations to improve Wisconsin's soil and water quality by encouraging farmer-led conservation decision making and solutions. In 2016, fourteen producer-led groups received a total of \$242,550 in funding, and in 2017, eleven producer-led groups received a total of \$197,065 in funding. Currently, the program is funded at \$250,000 from General Purpose Revenue, and after a change in the last budget, an individual grant recipient's cap was doubled to no more than \$40,000 per fiscal year, with each grant matched 50/50 by the recipient.

When 2018 grant awards were announced in January, DATCP found that for the first time they had more proposals than available funding. Seventeen producer-led groups, including eight first-time recipients, received awards ranging from \$8,220 to \$27,500. These grants will fund land and water conservation projects including group start-up costs such as goal setting, implementation and outreach efforts such as field days or water quality monitoring, and incentive payments to producers for cover crops, nutrient management plan development, no-till farming, or buffer strips.

Assembly Bill 946 would add \$500,000 per fiscal year in the current biennium from funds in the Environmental Fund to ensure that more producer-led groups are formed and more projects to limit nonpoint source phosphorus runoff are completed. This increase in funds would raise the total amount available in each fiscal year of this biennium to \$750,000, and this bill has been drafted to ensure that this increase will not impact the base funding. Additionally, this transfer in funds is well within the intended parameters of the Environmental Fund, as one of the chief purposes of this fund is nonpoint source pollutant management.

Farmers typically have the best intentions to protect the watershed, but with knowledge on land and water conservation strategies constantly being updated and new economical or technological advances, many farmers don't have enough time in their day or flexibility in their finances to keep up with these land and water conservation measures. By organizing farmers together with industry experts and helping to share the cost of implementing land and water conservation strategies, more phosphorus will be contained in the soil instead of running-off, which will strengthen water quality and help the farmer's bottom-line.

I am pleased to be working with Representative Kitchens on this proposal and am thankful that Governor Walker has come to us to help push this imperative portion of his rural and agricultural agenda.



State of Wisconsin  
Governor Scott Walker

**Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection**  
Sheila E. Harsdorf, Secretary

February 19th, 2018

To: The Honorable Jeffrey Mursau, Chair  
Members of the Committee on Environment and Forestry

From: Sara Walling, Section Chief  
Nutrient Management and Water Quality Section

Re: Assembly Bill 946 - Producer led watershed protection grants and transferring moneys within the environmental fund.

## **WISCONSIN'S PRODUCER-LED WATERSHED PROTECTION GRANT PROGRAM**

Thank you for allowing the Department of Agriculture, Trade & Consumer Protection the opportunity to testify in support of Assembly Bill 946.

### **Background and Purpose**

The Producer-Led Watershed Protection Grant program (PLWPG), administered by DATCP under ATCP 52, was developed to support the establishment of producer-led projects throughout the state of Wisconsin to address the unique soil and water quality challenges of their local landscapes and communities using innovative and collaborative approaches. Under s.93.59, DATCP was appropriated \$250,000 per fiscal year to award grants up to \$20,000 per group; this maximum grant level was increased to \$40,000 per group in the FY17-19 budget. Since the program was created in 2016, it has grown from 14 groups to 23 groups (FY 2018) that have been funded by the program to date (not all groups reapplied for funding each FY). The Producer-Led Watershed Protection Grant program has been touted as an effective tool to increase farmer participation in nonpoint source pollution abatement efforts to improve water quality and soil health. Each group is different, but most focus on conservation practice implementation, increasing outreach and communication opportunities, and some research and water quality monitoring activities.

The goal of the program is to improve water quality and soil health by encouraging innovative ideas for conservation and fostering locally-led decision making by producers.

### **NEED**

There is a clear demand for additional funding. FY 2018 requests totaled \$619,721 from 21 applicants – over twice the amount of funding available. Some groups were not funded at all while 17 groups were given reduced awards ranging from \$8,200 to \$27,500, allocating the total \$250,000. Reduced awards results in a reduction in the number or extent of activities the groups can pursue.



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### **PROGRAM TO DATE**

- **FY 2016 Funds: Grants awarded in April 2016**
  - Awarded \$242,550 to 14 producer groups
  - In this round of grant funding, 9 new groups and 5 existing groups were awarded grants.
  - Over 75 attended the Producer-Led Annual Workshop held on December 14, 2016
- **FY 2017 Funds: Grants awarded late Sept. 2016**
  - Awarded \$197,065 to 11 producer groups
  - In this round of grant funding, 1 new group and 10 existing groups were awarded grants.
  - Over 60 attended the Producer-Led Annual Workshop held on December 13, 2017
- **FY 2018 Funds:**
  - Awarded \$250,000 to 17 groups
  - In this round of grants, 8 new groups and 9 existing groups were awarded grants.

The grant requests to date have been as follows:

<b>FY</b>	<b>Total Requests</b>	<b>Total Awards</b>	<b># of groups requesting funding</b>	<b># of groups awarded</b>
<b>2016</b>	\$242,550	\$242,550	14	14
<b>2017</b>	\$197,065	\$197,065	11	11
<b>2018</b>	\$619,721	\$250,000	21	17

### **ADVANTAGES**

- Innovation in the farmer-to-farmer approach includes conservation AND farm economics
- Huge increase in interest in the program over the last few years and great opportunity for conservation-minded farmers to collaborate on soil and water quality issues happening throughout the state
- Producer-led groups have a proven track record in engaging producers to try new conservation practices in their respective watersheds
- The participation and leadership by the farmers is crucial
- Successful groups have a strong tie to a collaborator that can assist them with the day-to-day administrative and outreach aspects of the projects



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## **GROUP HIGHLIGHTS**

### **Milwaukee River Watershed Clean Farm Families**

***Funded \$20,000 in 2016; \$20,000 in 2017; \$13,000 in 2018***

With the goal to promote and showcase best soil and water conservation practices in the watershed, the Clean Farm Families producer-led group:

- Established a cover crop demonstration test plot
- Held a fall cover crop/tillage demonstration field day
- Held a soil health workshop featuring Ray Archuleta with 175 people in attendance
- Provided conservation incentive payments for 524 acres of cover crop, 185 acres low disturbance manure application, 906 acres of conservation tillage and 112 acres of nutrient management plans.

### **Buffalo-Trempealeau Farmer Network: Elk Creek Watershed**

***Funded \$17,700 in 2016; \$13,440 in 2017; \$12,000 in 2018***

With the mission to evaluate their farming systems, explore current nutrient application methods, and develop and demonstrate locally-effective alternative practices that reduce the potential for nutrient loss and increase long term sustainability, the Elk Creek group:

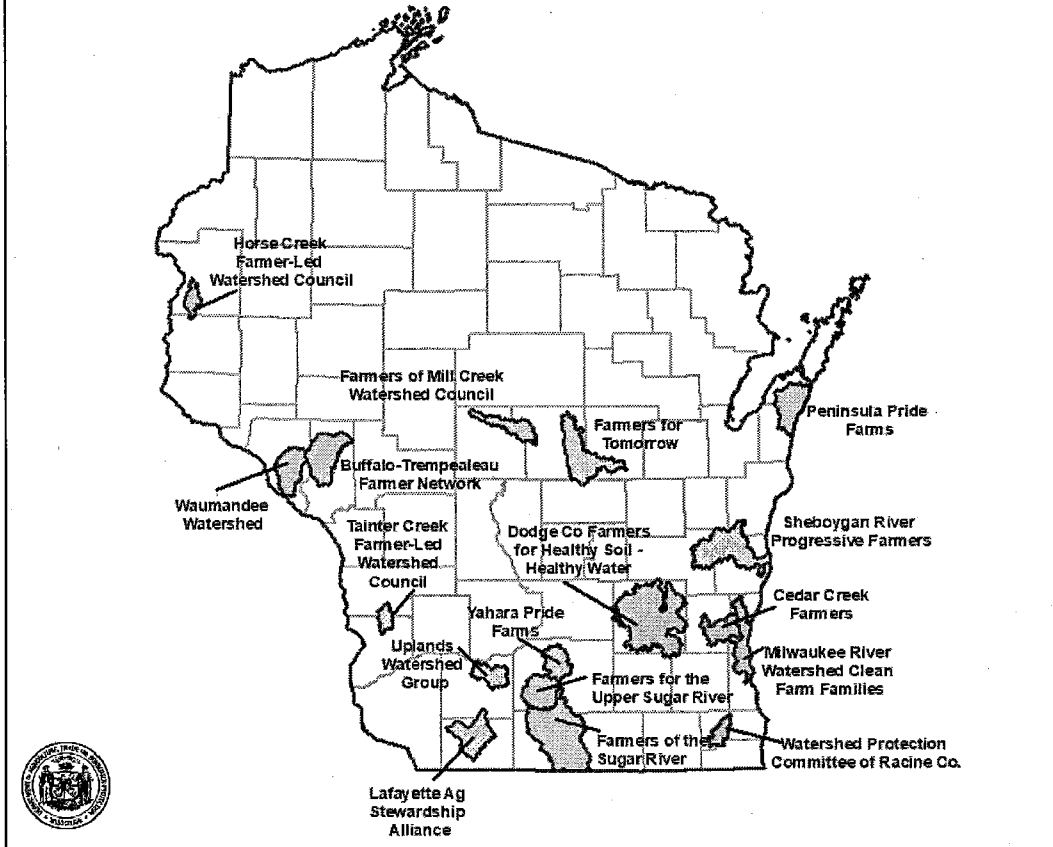
- Doubled cover crop usage in the watershed: 925 acres to 1920 acres
- All farmers in the group have a 590-based nutrient management plan: total of 6,700 acres
- Have 7 Farmers, 21 fields participate in nitrogen use efficiency research
- Split application of nitrogen increased by 600 acres
- Hosted January meeting with 105 people and April meeting with 75 people
- Published article in Farm Bureau newsletter which is received by 477 people.
- Completed 10 stream rip rap projects in watershed through Land Conservation Department funding



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## 2018 DATCP Producer-Led Grant Watersheds





River Alliance of Wisconsin comments on AB 946

February 19, 2018

Good afternoon Chair Mursau and members of the Committee,

My name is Raj Shukla, Executive Director of River Alliance of Wisconsin. On behalf of our 2,200 statewide supporters, I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to provide input on AB 946.

The River Alliance is supportive of AB 946. Producer-led councils are a venue for producers to learn from each other and try out practices that benefit their farms, advance conservation, and benefit our waters. They also serve as a social connection to surrounding communities; providing a place for constructive dialogue among neighbors.

Our organization has seen leaders develop within some of the producer-led councils we've worked. The Farmers of the Mill Creek Watershed is one of them, which has found common ground with a citizen water advocacy group that we support, the Petenwell and Castle Rock Stewards. Partnerships like this, based on shared goals and honest communication, are very encouraging and worthy of the full support of the state.

There are two components we think can improve this legislation. The first is an assessment of the requirement in State Statute 93.59 (3), which calls for the filing of annual reports from producer-led councils that describe the "activities conducted with the grant and the impact of those activities on water quality in the watershed." While the growth of such councils are undoubtedly an asset to the state, there should be transparent analysis of how well such efforts are meeting water quality objectives. If such an assessment exists we have not yet seen it.

Secondly, as AB 946 proposes a threefold increase in funding to this program, we are supportive of the concept of allocating unused funds, if they exist, toward a study of groundwater quality in fractured bedrock regions of southwestern Wisconsin. Having participated on the Advisory Committee for the recently-revised NR 151 rule, we heard time and again about the susceptibility of the southwestern part of the state to drinking water contamination, similar to the area surrounding Kewaunee County. However, we lack complete data describing the extent of the problem. Such a study would be consistent with the goals of the nonpoint source pollution abatement program that this producer-led grant program falls under.

Thank you for the consideration of our testimony today, and for opportunity to provide it.

Sincerely,

Raj Shukla  
Executive Director