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Livestock Groups Prepare Legislators for Animal Welfare Discussion

By Jordan Lamb

In anticipation of the scheduled Humane Society of the United State (HSUS) “Lobby Day” that took place March 31st at the State Capitol in Madison, fifteen livestock groups, including the PDPW, sent a joint letter to all 132 members of the State Legislature to educate them about animal welfare initiatives already at work in Wisconsin.

The letter reiterated Wisconsin agriculture’s vital importance to the State’s economy and stressed the excellent work that Wisconsin farmers do with regard to the standard of care afforded to their animals. To review a copy of the letter visit:

<http://www.wfbf.com/archivej/htmArchive/showPage.aspx?page=15595.htm&id=15595>.

Finance Committee is Briefed by DATCP and DOT on Budget Provisions

By Jordan Lamb

On March 19, **Secretary Nilsestuen** briefed the Joint Finance Committee (“JFC”) on the **DATCP** budget. He fielded questions from JFC members on issues ranging from consumer protection to the “Buy Local Buy Wisconsin” program. He also briefly described the newly proposed **animal slaughter fees** contained in the budget bill.

In his 2009-2011 biennial budget bill, Governor Doyle has proposed that an assessment be paid to the DATCP by businesses that slaughter certain kinds of animals. The assessment per animal is proposed to be one cent for poultry, ten cents for calves and 14 cents for older cattle and for swine. The bill appropriates the revenue generated from this assessment for state meat safety inspections and animal health programs.

Secretary Nilsestuen gave an overview of these proposed fees to the Committee and then Co-chair of the JFC, Senator Mark Miller, asked Secretary Nilsestuen what the consequence of the new meat inspector positions would be for organic meat farming.

The Secretary responded that the increase in state-inspections does have the potential to stimulate the whole livestock sector – including organic and grass-fed operations – as well as those 300 “main street” slaughter houses. The Secretary explained that the federal government had previously prohibited state inspected meat plants from shipping meat interstate, but that the DATCP worked with local processors and the Wisconsin Congressional delegation to get that provision changed in the 2008 Farm Bill. He stated that it was his understanding that “70% of those small meat plants have said in repeat surveys that they will expand if this goes through.”

No other members of the JFC questioned the Secretary on the slaughter fee provision.

Later in the day, **Secretary Frank Busalacchi** and his team from the **Department of Transportation** (DOT) briefed the members of the JFC on the transportation issues contained in the budget bill. Although most of the Committee members' questions focused on the state stimulus funding for transportation projects, Representative Gary Sherman (D-Port Wing) asked a question regarding the proposed changes to the DOT's **eminent domain** authority that are contained in the budget bill.

Rep. Sherman opened his question by stating that it has been his experience, as both an attorney and as a legislator, that the condemnation process is already heavily weighted toward condemnor and that this proposed change in the budget bill appears to unbalance it even more. He further stated that due process in condemnation actions is one of the most basic rights in our society. He then asked Secretary Busalacchi to explain the proposal.

The Secretary referred his question to his Executive Assistant, Chris Klein, who explained that the goal of these changes is to cap the attorney fees that the state is required to pay a property owner as a result of a condemnation action and appeal. "The goal is to save the state money," he said.

At the conclusion of the discussion, Representative Sherman stated his believe that the State needs to have eminent domain authority, but that it is also important to allow the landowner some opportunity to complain about what happens to him. "The power to limit attorneys' fees is the power to limit representation," he stated. He concluded by saying that if the landowner can find a way to balance things a bit, then he doesn't think that is "such a bad thing."

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