WISCONSIN

FUTURES

A Wisconsin Farmers Union Foundation Initiative

FACT SHEET

In partnership with Wisconsin Farmers Union Foundation

FARM BAILOUTS & WISCONSIN'S INDEPENDENT FARMERS

The Bailout Myth: How Washington's Farm Payments Miss the Farmers Who Need Them Most

> Every few years, Washington announces another round of farm relief. The headlines are big. The checks mostly go to the biggest corporate operations. And the real problem — an agricultural system rigged against independent farmers — goes untouched.

80%	Top 1%	1.1%	700%
of WI farms receive just 23% of bailout payments — averaging $8,700 each	of WI farms averaged $521,000 each in bailout payments (CFAP)	MFP payment rate for dairy vs. 40% for cotton — Wisconsin systematically shortchanged	Increase in Wisconsin farm bankruptcies in 2025. Most were small farms. Source: American Farm Bureau Foundation, 2025

Source: EWG Farm Subsidy database

> "Farmers in our state don't want to rely on emergency payments year after year — **we want a fair shot at making a living from the work we do.**" — WFU President Darin Von Ruden

1 The stats Washington doesn't put in the press release

Nationally

- Nearly **40% of the $11B 2025 Farmer Bridge program** will flow to the largest farms — the same pattern as every prior bailout. In 2025, 15,000 farms nationally went out of business. Most were small. (Source: EWG, Trump Tariff Bailout Sends Billions to Mega Farms, Feb. 2026)
- Under the Market Facilitation Program (MFP): **the bottom 80% of farms got just 23% of payments**, averaging $9,111 each. The top 1% averaged over $300,000. (Source: EWG, New USDA Records Show Trade Bailout and Coronavirus Payments Went to the Largest Farms)
- Under CFAP: **the top 1% averaged $352,432.** The bottom 80% averaged $4,677. Kansas State researchers found cotton farmers received 33 times their actual losses. The money wasn't targeted to need — it was targeted to size, which is why the biggest farms won every time. (Source: Kansas State / EWG, Trade Bailout Overpaid Farmers)
- Payments were **concentrated in Southern states** despite soybeans — a Midwest crop — being the original dispute. Senate Democrats concluded: "The Administration's trade assistance continues to pick winners and losers." (Source: EWG Farm Subsidy Database; Senate Agriculture Committee Democrats, 2019)

Wisconsin specifically — faring worse than almost any other state

WI MFP AVG. PER FARM

$16,000

vs. $48,000+ in Georgia & Mississippi.

Wisconsin got $40/acre vs. $100+ in some other states.

WI TOP 1% VS. BOTTOM 80% (CFAP)

$521K vs. $8,700

In Wisconsin, a single operation received more than $1M in MFP payments. Under CFAP, more than 20 Wisconsin operations each received over $600,000 — while the typical Wisconsin farm received $8,700.

Source: EWG Farm Subsidy database

DAIRY PAYMENT RATE (MFP)

1.1% of projected loss

vs. 40% for cotton farmers in the South. Wisconsin's signature industry systematically shortchanged every single round.

SPECIALTY CROPS NATIONALLY

$1B of $12B set aside

Wisconsin potato growers alone face $789M in losses over 3 years. Payment rates for specialty crops weren't announced for months after the bailout was announced.

Source: EWG Farm Subsidy database

2 How the system works — and who it works for

The payments aren't random. They're designed in ways that predictably deliver the most money to the largest corporate operations — and there are structural reasons why independent farmers keep losing out.

Payments tied to acres, not need

The more land you farm, the more you receive. A 10,000-acre corporate operation collects proportionally more than a 300-acre family farm — regardless of which one is in genuine financial distress. Size wins every time.

No meaningful payment caps

Ad hoc programs are authorized outside the farm bill — no requirement to follow the limits that govern regular programs. The 2025 bridge program caps at $155,000 per legal entity, but corporations with multiple entities can collect far more.

Source: USDA Farmer Bridge Assistance Program

Dairy, specialty & diversified farms are excluded

Every round of bailouts concentrates benefits on large row crop operations. Dairy farmers — the backbone of Wisconsin — get 1.1 cents on the dollar. Specialty crop growers, organic producers, and diversified operations are afterthoughts.

Bailouts accelerate consolidation

When a mega-farm collects hundreds of thousands in taxpayer subsidies, it buys more land, acquires more equipment, and drives down prices for everyone else. The bailout system doesn't help small farms compete — it subsidizes the operations displacing them.

Source: EWG, New USDA Records Show Trade Bailout and Coronavirus Payments Went to the Largest Farms

CORPORATE MIDDLEMEN COLLECT THE MONEY

Multiple bailout recipients in USDA records are banks and financial institutions, not farmers. Some "farmers" who received millions qualified only through "active personal management" — defined in federal regulations as dialing into a shareholder conference a few times a year. **They never set foot in a field.**

3 What Wisconsin farmers actually want

The narrative from Washington is that bailouts are what farmers want. The farmers themselves say something very different. Independent farmers — the kind that make up most of Wisconsin's 64,000 farms — aren't asking for a bigger check. They're asking for a fair system.

Fair prices, not government dependence

WFU President Von Ruden: "We want a fair shot at making a living from the work we do." That means farm programs that support fair commodity prices — not payments that reward the biggest operators for producing the most.

Break up corporate concentration

Four companies control the majority of U.S. fertilizer. A handful of meatpackers set beef prices. A few seed companies control what gets planted. No bailout check fixes a monopoly. WFU called for "fair and competitive markets" and "policies that address consolidation" as core 2026 priorities.

Payments that go to family farms, not factory farms

"We need a farm bill that works for family-scale farms, not one that continues to tilt the playing field toward the largest operations." — WFU President Von Ruden, May 2026. Family-sized payment limits and antitrust enforcement, not uncapped subsidies for corporate operations.

Mandatory country-of-origin labeling (COOL)

When imported beef isn't labeled, Wisconsin cattle producers compete on an unlevel playing field. WFU: without COOL, "producers are left competing without a level playing field while consumers are left guessing."

Local markets and local processing

When there's only one large processor and it sets the price, farmers have no leverage. WFU supports expanding local food procurement for schools, hospitals, and institutions, and streamlining regulations for small-scale meat processing so independent farmers can get fair prices close to home.

Support for the next generation

The average Wisconsin farmer is in their late 50s. Land is increasingly bought by investors, not young farmers. WFU supports tax policies that favor operator ownership and programs that help farmland transfer to beginning farmers — not absentee investors or data center developers.

4 The broken coalition — why SNAP and the farm bill need each other

HOW THE FARM BILL COALITION WORKED FOR 50 YEARS

Rural Congress members needed votes for commodity support programs. **Urban Congress members** needed votes for food assistance (SNAP). **The deal:** put both in one bill. Rural votes for SNAP. Urban votes for farms. Bill passes.

This deal worked for 50 years. SNAP wasn't a welfare program attached to agriculture — it was central to the farm economy itself. Every SNAP dollar generates $1.50 in local economic activity, including for Wisconsin farmers, grocers, and food manufacturers. When families can afford food, farmers have stable markets. That compact is now under strain.

⚠ In July 2025, the 2025 federal budget cuts were signed into law — slashing **$187 billion from SNAP** outside the farm bill process. The largest single cut to food assistance in American history. Done as a standalone bill. The deal was broken. Urban Democrats who had traded their votes for farm programs no longer had a reason to do so. **The political coalition that passed every farm bill for 50 years collapsed overnight.**

WFU / NFU RESPONSE

WFU and NFU President Larew named it directly: "Last summer's reconciliation package separated key farm safety net improvements and made deep cuts to nutrition programs — two pillars that have traditionally been central to the farm bill coalition. Splitting these from the rest of the farm bill **weakened the bipartisan coalition.** This markup is the first farm bill after that split, and it shows. This isn't the farm bill we want, and it's not the farm bill we need."

THE ECONOMIC CONNECTION

Cutting SNAP doesn't save farmers money — it **cuts demand for the food they grow.** Every $1 of FoodShare benefits generates $1.50 in Wisconsin economic activity, including $120 million spent at Wisconsin farmers markets annually. SNAP was never a side program — it was central to the agricultural economy itself.

Source: Wisconsin DHS Foodshare Data

WHERE IT STANDS NOW

The farm bill needs 60 Senate votes — requiring bipartisan support that doesn't currently exist. Senate Democrats are firm on SNAP. Republicans are refusing. **Independent farmers are stuck waiting.**

5 What's wrong with the proposed farm bill — where it falls short for Wisconsin

The House passed the Farm, Food, and National Security Act of 2026 on April 30. The Senate released its draft in June. Here is where both fall short — and what WFU is asking the Senate to fix.

Locks in the SNAP cuts instead of fixing them

Neither the House nor Senate bill reverses the $187B SNAP reduction from the 2025 federal budget cuts. Cutting SNAP cuts demand for Wisconsin farm products, destroys rural economic activity, and shatters the coalition that passed farm bills for 50 years. WFU: "Families feel it right away when SNAP benefits are cut."

More money through a broken system

The House bill increased mandatory commodity support by ~$60B — but without payment limits or antitrust reforms, that money flows through the same formula that produced the 1%/80% split. More money through a broken system produces more of the same result: corporate farms win, independent farms lose.

No mandatory country-of-origin labeling

The House bill failed to reinstate COOL for beef at a time when imports are rising. Wisconsin cattle and dairy producers compete directly with imports. Without labeling, they have no market advantage for being Wisconsin-grown.

Authorizes programs without funding them

New authorizations for local food procurement and meat processing are in the bill — but not funded. WFU noted that "new authorizations for local food procurement, meat processing, and others that NFU supports are not funded." Authorization without money is a press release, not a policy.

Continues to rely on ad hoc payments

WFU/NFU explicitly criticized the bill for continuing "to rely on ad hoc disaster assistance rather than establishing stronger farm policy tools." Emergency checks every two years — with the same skewed distribution every time — are not a farm policy. They are a substitute for one.

Does nothing about corporate concentration

No meaningful antitrust enforcement. No competition reforms. No structural changes to the concentrated fertilizer, seed, and meatpacking markets that squeeze independent farmers from every direction. The corporations extracting value from Wisconsin farms walk away untouched.

> "We need a farm bill that works for family-scale farms, not one that continues to tilt the playing field toward the largest operations. That means a stronger safety net, meaningful support for conservation, and policies that address consolidation."
>
> **— Darin Von Ruden, President, Wisconsin Farmers Union, May 2026**

THE BOTTOM LINE

Every time Washington announces a farm bailout, it is making a choice about who agriculture policy is for. The data — consistently, across multiple administrations and programs — shows that choice tilts toward **the largest corporate operations and away from the independent family farms** that make up the vast majority of Wisconsin's agricultural landscape. The bottom 80% of Wisconsin farms receive a fraction of what the top 1% collects. Dairy farmers get pennies. Specialty crop growers wait months for payments that don't cover their losses. Wisconsin Farmers Union isn't asking for a bigger bailout. **They're asking for a farm bill that breaks up the corporate concentration driving small farms out of business, restores the SNAP partnership, and pays family-sized farms fairly for the food they grow.** That is the populist position. And it is the one the current farm bill fails to deliver.

Tell Your Story. Protect Wisconsin's Future.

Wisconsin Futures is a network of neighbors, farmers, and local organizations documenting how these policy decisions affect real people. Add your voice: **wisconsinfutures.com/tell-your-story**

Sources

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