



**Wisconsin Agricultural Education and Workforce Development Council
Full Council Meeting
Virtual Meeting (Microsoft Teams Meeting)
Dec. 9, 2024
1 – 4 p.m.**

MEETING MINUTES – APPROVED

Members Present: Shelly Mayer; Andy Benseid; Gary Besaw; Gwen Boettcher; Brad Brusveen; Dr. Greg Cisewski; Jeff Edgar; Monica Gahan; Bob Hagenow; Ben Huber; Erik Huschitt; Larry Lee; Betsy Leonard; Scott Loomans; Karl Martin; Dr. Michael Orth; Alica Pavelski; Sec. Amy Pechacek; Jen Pino-Gallagher; Sec. Randy Romanski; Nick Stadnyk; Dr. Jill Underly; Jason Wood; Jeffrey Wright.

Others Present: Ashley Andre; Dr. Steven Deller; Julia Halopka; Dr. Ellie Hartman; Rachel Harvey; Michael Hostad; Patrick Lonergan; Kietra Olson (on behalf of Sam Rikkers); Alex Verink; Danielle Williams.

I. Call to Order and Opening Remarks

Chair Shelly Mayer called the meeting to order and welcomed those in attendance. She recognized the new members attending their first council meeting including Andy Benseid, Brad Brusveen, Glenda Gillaspay; Alicia Pavelski, and Jen Pino-Gallagher. The new members introduced themselves and were welcomed by the council.

II. Introduction and Roll Call

The roll was called, and the individuals present were recorded in the meeting minutes.

III. Approval of the Sept. 16, 2024, WAEWDC Meeting Minutes

A motion was made by Glenda Gillaspay to approve the Sept. 16, 2024, WAEWDC meeting minutes. Jeffrey Wright seconded the motion, and the meeting minutes were approved unanimously and without correction.

IV. Agency Updates

Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection (DATCP) Secretary Randy Romanski reported on the activities of the DATCP board meeting on Sept. 19, including presentations from Department of Workforce Development (DWD) Secretary Amy



Pechacek on Governor Tony Evers' "Year of the Worker" and its connection to the state's agricultural industry. Sec. Romanski also noted a report from WAEWDC Chair, Shelly Mayer to familiarize the DATCP board members of the WAEWDC and the recent developments of the council. Sec. Romanski also reported on activities from the Wisconsin Agriculture Youth Council and the fifth annual Dairy Innovation Hub Summit.

Sec. Pechacek provided a brief overview of the accomplishments and milestones achieved in 2024. She noted Wisconsin's labor market saw record-breaking success, with six consecutive months of employment growth and historically low unemployment rates, well below the national average. She also shared a few highlights from the 2024 DWD annual report published in December, including that Wisconsin attracted a record 12,089 Registered Apprentices and a record 3,020 employers. Wisconsin launched new career opportunities with pilot programs for teachers and respiratory therapists. Additionally, a record 9,932 high school students and 6,727 employer sponsors participated in Youth Apprenticeship this school year, helping develop Wisconsin's workforce of the future through 83 career exploration pathways. She added that a major milestone was reached in disability employment, with over 189,000 working-age individuals with disabilities now employed in the state.

State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly gave a report on the "Classroom to Career" Summit she attended at the White House on Nov. 13. During the event, she had the opportunity to speak with stakeholders about the career and technical education work being done in Wisconsin and engaged in conversations regarding the educational components connected to the CHIPS and Science Act. Dr. Underly concluded by mentioning the relevant initiatives included in the recent budget proposals that support career and technical organizations, including resources for schools without agricultural programs, and assisting districts with dual credit costs.

V. The Contribution of Agriculture to the Wisconsin Economy: An Update for 2022

Dr. Steven Deller presented the findings from his recent study *The Contribution of Agriculture to the Wisconsin Economy: An Update for 2022*. This study, completed by the UW-Madison Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics at the College of Agricultural & Life Sciences in collaboration with UW-Extension, provides an economic accounting of Wisconsin's agricultural industry. According to the study, the Wisconsin agricultural production and food processing sectors have increased 10.9 percent between 2017 and 2022 and contributed to a combined \$116.3 billion in economic impact in 2022, 14.3 percent of the state's total economic output. Wisconsin's dairy farms and processors continue to be an industry leader, contributing \$52.8 billion annually to the state's economy. Dairy processing is a significant contributor to this economic impact. The study further states that Wisconsin agriculture also remains a major employer and is responsible for 353,900 jobs across the state, or 9.5 percent of the state's workforce. The full report is available at: <https://aae.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/The-Contribution-of-Agriculture-to-the-Wisconsin-Economy.pdf>

VI. Fork Farms and Agricultural Education



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Michael Hostad, Chief Revenue Officer at Fork Farms, presented an overview of the organization's innovative work in vertical farming and agricultural education. Fork Farms aims to revolutionize food production to address challenges related to nutrition insecurity, climate change, and sustainable agriculture. Mr. Hostad explained how Fork Farms has developed the Flex Farm, a scalable, plug-and-play commercial vertical farm that uses 98% less water and land than traditional agriculture. Each Flex Farm can produce over 25 pounds of food in just 28 days with a wide variety of crops and is being integrated into educational environments through a comprehensive K–12 curriculum aligned with Next Generation Science Standards. The curriculum includes instructor guides, student workbooks, and additional activities, all provided with the Flex Farm units.

Mr. Hostad added that a Flex Farm Automation Package is being launched for Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs in Fall 2025. This package includes curriculum and training in partnership with institutions like Cleveland State and Ohio State Universities. Fork Farms is also approved to offer the only hydroponics credential in Ohio: "Foundations of Hydroponics," which contributes to graduation requirements under alternative pathways. This credential is gaining traction among ag educators and special education programs.

The program has been successfully adopted by special education and career transition programs in public school districts. Fork Farms has received national recognition as one of the fastest-growing private companies in the U.S. and a global leader in agri-food technology, highlighting its growing impact on school nutrition, workforce development, and sustainable food systems. Mr. Hostad concluded the presentation by emphasizing Fork Farms' potential to impact school nutrition, community sustainability, and workforce readiness in the agricultural sector.

VII. Subcommittee Breakout Session

The WAEWDC subcommittees each convened to their respective breakout sessions.

VIII. Subcommittee Report Outs

The WAEWDC reconvened from the breakout sessions and each of the subcommittee chairs reported a summary of the discussions that took place during the breakout sessions and the progress that had been made in their respective areas.

IX. Other Business

a. Public Comment

No Public comments were offered.

X. Adjournment

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A motion was made by Larry Lee to adjourn, and Micheal Orth seconded the motion.
There were no objections, and the meeting adjourned.