

**WISCONSIN FARM CENTER ANNOUNCES
FUTURE FIELDS PROGRAM**

Helps Farmers Stay in Farming by Finding Off-Farm Supplemental Income

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MADISON -- Future Fields, a program to help farmers find off-farm employment to replace or supplement farm income, is open for enrollment in southwestern Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Farm Center has announced.

The program brings employment related services to farmers, meeting them one-on-one in their homes to determine their needs. Schools, libraries, colleges and job centers collaborate to offer training and computers for use in the job search. Participants will get help with job seeking skills, resume writing, additional work skills and career exploration.

The program is set to go statewide by this summer, and is initially available in the following counties: Columbia, Dane, Dodge, Grant, Green, Iowa, Jefferson Lafayette, Marquette, Richland, Rock, and Sauk.

“Farmers are in a unique situation,” said Mike Exum, who is coordinating the program for the Farm Center. “Farmers don’t have unemployment insurance income when they lose farm income, nor do they have access to the other resources that come with unemployment compensation. Future Fields is our effort to fill this gap and help farmers through these difficult economic times.

“They also have barriers that other job seekers don’t have. Dairy farmers have to be home to milk two or three times a day, so taking time to travel to a job center or technical college is difficult for them. Farmers have to work in their fields when the weather cooperates, and be on call for all sorts of on-farm demands. That makes it hard to schedule training or attend off-farm job seeking programs. Many farmers also lack access to high speed internet services and that puts them at a disadvantage, because in the 21st century, so much of the job search and career development resources are on-line.”

“What makes Future Fields unique is that we bring the services to the farmers, rather than sit in our offices, asking them to come to us. All our staff are current or former farmers. We understand the challenges farmers face,” Rod Nilsestuen, the Secretary of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, said.

When a farmer calls Future Fields, a staff member (Jennifer Hasburgh, Chris Eickhoff, Tom Sawyer or Mike Exum) will arrange a time to visit at the farmer’s home to discuss their off-farm employment needs, set goals and develop an action plan. Future Fields staff will continue working with the farmer, helping them connect with available resources as they implement their off-farm employment plan.

Farmers interested in the Future Fields Program should contact Program Coordinator Mike Exum at 800-942-2474.

Future Fields is funded through a Workforce Innovation in Regional Economic Development (WIRED) grant. It is a collaborative effort of the Southwest Wisconsin Workforce Development Board, Workforce Development Board of South Central Wisconsin, The WIRED Initiative and the Wisconsin Farm Center of the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection.

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