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WFU names Friends of the Family Farmer

WISCONSIN DELLS – Wisconsin Farmers Union recognized four deserving recipients with the Friend of the Family Farmer award Jan. 28 at the 86th annual WFU State Convention in Appleton. First given in 2013, the Friend of the Family Farmer award is meant to honor individuals for their actions on issues that impact farmers and rural residents throughout the state.

"Wisconsin Farmers Union instituted the Friend of the Family Farmer award in order to recognize the exceptional contributions of individuals who go above and beyond in tackling the tough topics facing rural Wisconsinites," said WFU President Darin Von Ruden. "We would like to thank each of these Friends of the Family Farmer for making sure the voices of Wisconsin's family farmers and rural residents are heard."

This year's recipients included Senator Robert Cowles, Representative Mark Spreitzer, outgoing USDA Rural Development State Director Stan Gruszynski and Jim Vandenbrook, executive director of the Wisconsin Land and Water Conservation Association.

About the awardees:

Senator Robert Cowles (R- Allouez), who represents Wisconsin's 2nd Senate District. Sen. Cowles was first elected to the Assembly in 1982 and has served in the Senate since 1987. He is currently the Chair of the Committee on Natural Resources and Energy.

"Last session Senator Cowles took on the challenge of authoring comprehensive groundwater legislation, seeking to establish a thoughtful framework for managing high-capacity well permitting in the areas of the state with the greatest water quantity challenges," Government Relations Director Kara O'Connor said as she presented the award. "Even though the bill didn't pass last session, the bill was a recognition that ignoring the problem is no longer an option, and it got the conversation rolling among all of the major stakeholders."

O'Connor noted that another feather in Senator Cowles' cap was his principled stand in favor of good government during the budget process two years ago, when he voted against the budget, citing more than 100 non-fiscal policy items tacked on to the budget bill.

"Today we honor Senator Cowles for standing up for this very important principle of good government – that policy changes that affect Wisconsin citizens should have the benefit of full consideration and public hearing, rather than hitching a ride on the state budget," O'Connor said.

Rep. Mark Spreitzer, who represents the eastern portion of Green County and the western portion of Rock County in the Wisconsin State Assembly, was also honored as a Friend of the Family Farmer. Rep. Spreitzer was elected to the Assembly in 2014 and as a freshman legislator distinguished himself by authoring a pair of bills that resonate thoroughly with Farmers Union values.

O'Connor noted that a large reason behind why Rep. Spreitzer was chosen as an awardee was because he listened. "Rep. Spreitzer showed



up – at field days, at dairy breakfasts, at Farmers Union meetings, and he listened to what farmers and rural residents had to say,” she said. “One of the fruits of all of that listening was Rep. Spreitzer’s bill to create a New Farmer Student Loan Assistance Fund to help relieve student loan debt for beginning farmers. We look forward to continuing to work with Representative Spreitzer to hopefully make that program a reality.”

The second of Representative Spreitzer’s notable bills sought to create a non-partisan body to draw Wisconsin’s legislative districts. Rep. Spreitzer stood out for his stances that “Gerrymandered districts divide communities” and that “Drawing lines for political purposes divides and dilutes the voice of communities across Wisconsin.”

On Jan. 27, a federal court ordered the Wisconsin state legislature to re-draw Wisconsin’s legislative districts in time for the 2018 elections, after finding that they were unconstitutionally gerrymandered.

“That is a huge step forward for electoral fairness in Wisconsin, thanks in no small part to Rep. Spreitzer, a true Friend of the Family Farmer,” O’Connor said.

Also named a Friend of the Family Farmer was **Jim Vandebrook**, executive director of the Wisconsin Land and Water Conservation Association, a statewide organization that represents Wisconsin’s County Conservationists and County Conservation staff.



“Under Jim’s leadership at WLWCA, the organization has grown in prominence in its legislative efforts, and in its education and outreach to farmers and other partner organizations such as Wisconsin Farmers Union,” O’Connor said. “Most recently, through its Food, Land, and Water Project, WLWCA has managed to do something that few others in recent memory have accomplished – bringing diverse and often divergent organizations to the same table to have a civil, thoughtful discussion about how we move forward to protect Wisconsin’s soil and water resources. WFU has very much appreciated being a part of those conversations.”

Vandebrook’s current work at Wisconsin Land and Water is the culmination of an entire career devoted to soil and water conservation. After receiving a degree in Soil Science from UW-Madison, he worked as Vernon County Conservationist and a soil and water conservationist in Trempealeau County.

The final Friend of the Family Farmer awardee was **Stan Gruszynski**, outgoing Wisconsin State Director for USDA Rural Development. Since 2009, Gruszynski has overseen rural development projects in Wisconsin, from rural housing, high-speed internet, rural water and wastewater treatment, to rural electric coops. When the Wisconsin Food Hub Cooperative, a project of Wisconsin Farmers Union, was awarded a USDA grant to connect vegetable growers to new wholesale markets, Gruszynski was there to present the check.



Stan served in the Wisconsin state legislature from 1984 to 1994, and subsequently directed the Global Environmental Management Rural Leadership and Community Development Program at UW–Stevens Point.

“Stan’s advocacy for rural communities has been a consistent thread in all of these efforts, and we are excited to see where his career will take him next,” O’Connor said.

Wisconsin Farmers Union, a member-driven organization, is committed to enhancing the quality of life for family farmers, rural communities, and all people through educational opportunities, cooperative endeavors, and civic engagement. For more information visit www.wisconsinfarmersunion.com.

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