



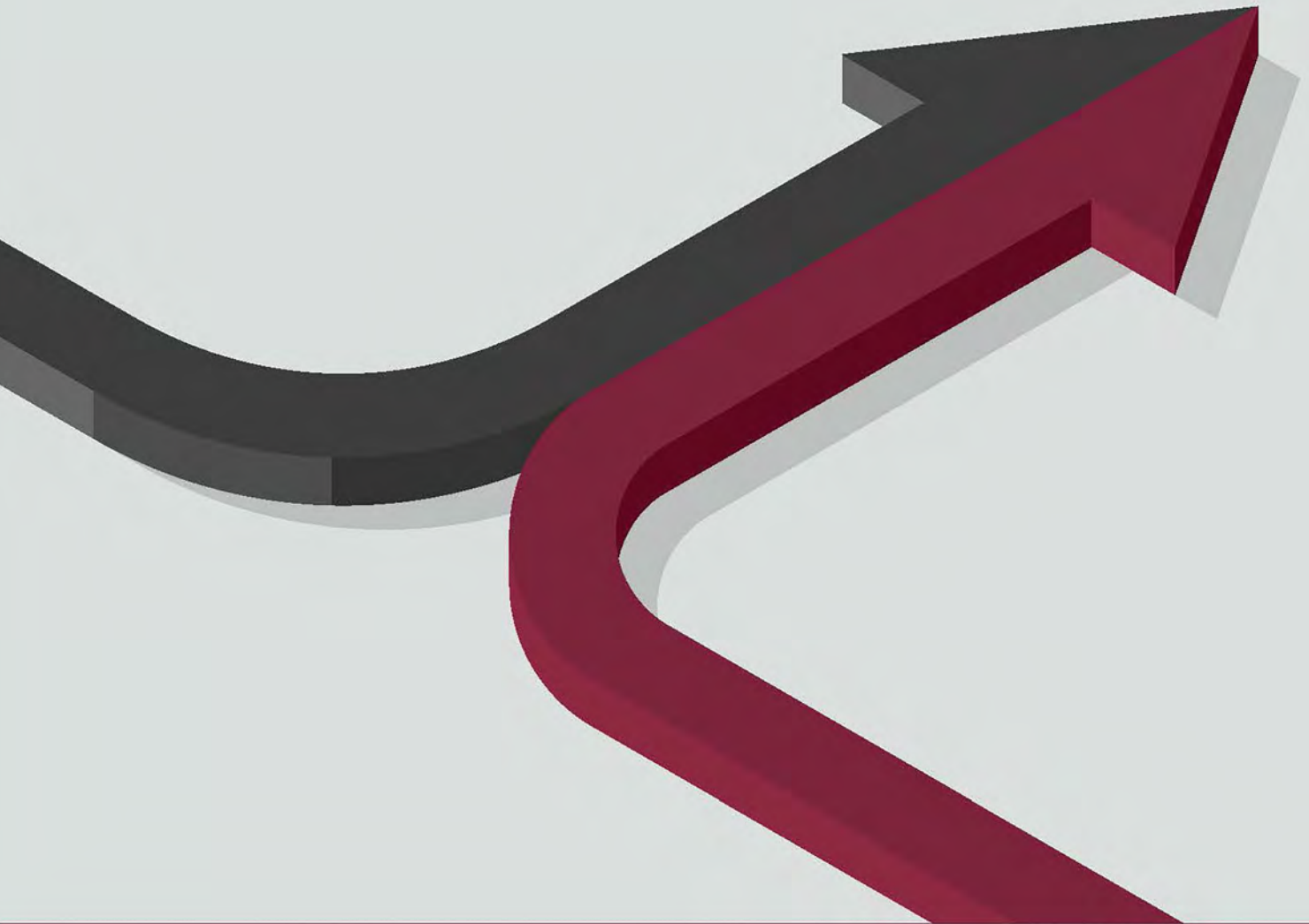
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WISCONSIN Counties

MAY 2026 | Volume 90, Number 5



Cover photo: Oneida County Land and Water Department intern, Aubrey Boisvert, removes purple loosestrife from a northern Wisconsin shoreline.

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From the President

Mark D. O'Connell

President & CEO

Stay Curious, Stay Connected

As county officials, you've got a hand in shaping your communities every day. That's no small responsibility. And doing it well takes more than just good intentions. It takes staying curious, staying connected, and keeping up with what's going on around you.

This month, there's a great opportunity to do just that. The County Officials Workshops will be held across the state, with an online option in June. These sessions, led by local governance experts from the UW-Madison Extension and the WCA, cover the nuts and bolts of being a county board supervisor — everything from county board roles and running a good meeting to open meetings law, budgeting, ethics, and more. It's practical, useful material for new and experienced county board supervisors.

Then, in June, the WCA District Meetings will bring members together in seven locations. With a new format this year, these gatherings will be a chance to get a refresher on roles and responsibilities from Attolles Law, hear what's happening from the WCA Government Affairs team and Forward Analytics, and swap ideas with colleagues doing the same work you are. Everyone is welcome, and it's certain to be a good use of your time.

Come September, the annual conference offers even more opportunities to learn, catch up with friends, and pick up some new ideas you hadn't thought of before. This year, we'll be meeting in Sauk County on Sept. 20-22 at the Kalahari in Wisconsin Dells, so save the dates and plan to join us.

But staying informed isn't just about showing up to the big events. It's something you build into your routine. You're reading the Wisconsin Counties magazine, so you're already doing part of that. Another easy way is to join the WCA County Leadership Meetings on Monday mornings (11 a.m. sharp). The weekly virtual calls are a simple way to hear what's new — from legal and legislative updates to insights from state agencies and partner organizations — and to stay in the loop without leaving your desk or home.

There are also a few trusted news sources available that keep a close eye on what's happening at the Capitol and across the state. As WCA members, you have access to WisPolitics/State Affairs and The Wheeler Report news services. Take advantage of them to stay one step ahead on issues that affect your county's work, budget and services.

Of course, knowing what's going on is only half the job. The other half is sharing it with others. Your constituents are counting on you not just to make decisions, but to explain them. When you pass along what you've learned, whether it's from a meeting, a workshop, or a quick update, it helps build trust and keeps people connected to their local government.

At the end of the day, strong communities come from leaders who stay engaged, keep learning, and aren't afraid to have a conversation. And when you do that, you're helping make sure your county, and the state as a whole, keep moving in the right direction. ■

Stay connected.

Visit wicounties.org to access resources and learn about events.

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MAGAZINE STAFF

Mark D. O'Connell
WCA President & CEO

Sheri Krause
WCA Managing Editor

POSTMASTER

Send address corrections to:
Wisconsin Counties Association
22 E. Mifflin St., Ste. 900
Madison, WI 53703
866-404-2700

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*Oneida County staff and volunteers bring in purple loosestrife covered in *Galerucella* leaf beetles as a biocontrol measure. See page 18 for more information.*



The Impact of Invasive Species

By Karen Hyun, Secretary, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

By disrupting ecosystems, degrading water quality, impairing recreation, damaging infrastructure, and impacting human and animal health, the effects of invasive species can be felt across Wisconsin.

► Ecological impacts of invasive species

Over the years, humans have introduced non-native species and disrupted balanced ecosystems by altering streams, building roads, fragmenting forests, and eliminating natural fires. We have driven watercraft from lake to lake without removing invasive plants and animals, mowed roadsides at the wrong times, transported infected firewood, and brought home invasive species in the mud on our equipment and our shoes.

The effects are widespread.

In our waterways, zebra mussels reproduce rapidly, severely reducing the food supply for native organisms and enhancing the growth of blue-green algae. Eurasian watermilfoil clog boat motors and rusty crayfish gobble up aquatic plants like underwater lawnmowers.

In our woodlands, garlic mustard can completely cover the ground within a year or two, reducing light and nutrient

resources needed by native wildflowers and tree seedlings and secreting a chemical that inhibits tree growth.

Invasive plants, like thorny multiflora rose and buckthorn, fill the understory of once-open forests and grasslands, hindering hunters, hikers and birdwatchers. Invasive animals, like the mute swan, chase away native waterfowl.

Asian jumping worms alter soil chemistry and structure, decreasing native plant species and increasing weedy non-natives.

The net effect is a loss of native plant and animal diversity as invasive species quickly multiply and take over forests, grasslands, farm fields, wetlands, and water bodies. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, about 42% of federally endangered or threatened species are significantly affected by invasive species.



Karen Hyun

Continued on page 8

AVAILABLE RESOURCES

- Wisc. Admin. Code NR 40 lists the many plants and animals identified as invasive in Wisconsin.
- The DNR provides extensive information on invasive species at dnr.wi.gov/topic/invasives.
- Check out the DNR's website to learn about additional volunteer opportunities or seasonal events, like invasive species awareness weekend in June: dnr.wisconsin.gov/topic/invasives/eventsandvolunteering.

Continued from page 7

► Human health impacts

Our health can be directly impacted. The sap from giant hogweed burns the skin when exposed to sunlight. Poison hemlock causes significant issues if ingested. Studies show that Japanese barberry promotes the abundance of mice and deer ticks, increasing the transmission of Lyme's disease.

► The effect on your wallet

Research estimates that during the 2010s, expenses associated with ecological damage and invasive species control in North America totaled \$26 billion per year and are likely higher today.

The Great Lakes sport and commercial fishing industry, valued at almost \$5.1 billion and supporting 75,000 jobs, is at risk. Round gobies, for example, eat the eggs of smallmouth bass, walleye and sturgeon in the tributaries of Lake Michigan.

Invasive species clog freshwater intake at power plants and industrial and municipal water plants, resulting in higher water and electricity bills for Wisconsin consumers.

One study found that property values decreased by up to 19% on lakes infested with Eurasian watermilfoil, which has been found in more than 1,000 Wisconsin lakes and rivers.

Invasive shrubs, such as non-native buckthorns and honeysuckles, prevent the regeneration of young trees, causing a long-term but very serious impact on forestry in Wisconsin — a \$28 billion a year industry with 66,000 jobs.

Many of the invasive plants that impact our natural areas are also agricultural weeds and are frequently spread along roads, rail lines and utility corridors.

► There's hope for invasive species work

All is not lost in the control of invasive species. There are many ways to help, from actions you can take in your own backyard to the work being done by dedicated county staff, organizations and volunteers around the state.

This series of articles will touch on a few of the numerous invasive species and provide additional helpful resources.

The DNR and its partners stand ready to work with you and your staff. The challenges posed by invasive species can be significant — but so is Wisconsin's commitment to protecting its natural resources. ■

Karen Hyun was appointed secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources in December 2024. Prior to the appointment, she served as the chief of staff of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Hyun earned both bachelor's and master's degrees in Earth systems from Stanford University and a doctorate in marine affairs from the University of Rhode Island.



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Early Detection

WISCONSIN'S FIRST AND BEST DEFENSE

Invasive species often show up with little fanfare — on a trailer, in a seed mix, or clinging to a boat. By the time they are obvious, the costs to eradicate or at least control them have multiplied exponentially.

The examples that follow represent just a handful of emerging and ongoing threats, but they illustrate a common truth: when new invaders are identified early, responses are faster, less expensive, and far more effective. Early detection is Wisconsin's first and best defense.

► **Urban alert: Spotted lanternfly and tree-of-heaven**

The spotted lanternfly is eye-catching and destructive. Not yet found live in Wisconsin, this invasive insect has been found as close as northern Illinois, after first being detected in Pennsylvania in 2014.



Spotted lanternfly

The spotted lanternfly feeds on a wide variety of plants, with a preference for the invasive tree-of-heaven that primarily spreads in urban areas and along former railroad corridors. The insect extracts the sap and discharges a sticky residue, contributing to the plant's death.

While it's good that it prefers to attack an invasive tree, unfortunately, the spotted lanternfly also attacks a wide range of agricultural commodities, including grape vines, hops, cherry and apple trees, and blueberry bushes.

Although it prefers to jump rather than fly, the invasive insect has spread quickly by hitchhiking on vehicles and materials, such as nursery stock and firewood.

Catching the spotted lanternfly before it becomes established in Wisconsin is critical. In addition to mapping

tree-of-heaven locations, conservationists encourage residents to recognize the insect at all life stages: from egg masses that look like smears of dried mud, to its nymph and adult stages with distinctive markings.

► **Forest watch: Japanese stiltgrass**

Japanese stiltgrass, recently found in Rock, Walworth, and Grant counties, spreads aggressively, forming dense mats that crowd out native wildflowers and tree seedlings and over time, alters habitat conditions.



Japanese stiltgrass

"This plant is quite harmful to our forests," said Mark Renz, a professor and Extension weed specialist at UW-Madison. "It makes wildfires more frequent and severe, alters nutrient cycling and soil microbes, and reduces wildlife habitat, all of which decrease biodiversity."

Since forests are not regularly monitored, invaders can establish themselves and accumulate seeds in the soil before landowners notice. Early detection can lower the costs and effort of management and reduce the need to replant.

► **Lakes at risk: Starry stonewort, European frog-bit and Phragmites**

Ongoing threats to Wisconsin lakes include starry stonewort, European frog-bit and Phragmites, all of which are far easier to control when detected early.

Starry stonewort is a plant-like macroalgae that resembles native vegetation, but becomes dense



European frog-bit
Photo: WI DNR

underwater, interfering with boating and fishing and crowding native plants that provide essential fish habitat. The species spreads through fragments and small, star-shaped reproductive structures called bulbils that hitchhike on boats, trailers and gear.

First discovered in the United States in 1978 in the St. Lawrence River, stary stonewort was recently confirmed in several southeastern Wisconsin lakes. Because it can be mistaken for native plants, infestations often go unnoticed until they are extensive — at which point, control becomes complicated and costly.

European frog-bit poses a different but equally serious problem. A small, free-floating plant that resembles a miniature water lily, it forms thick surface mats that block sunlight and reduce oxygen levels below the water’s surface. Frog-bit spreads by fragments and overwintering buds called turions and can move between lakes on boats or via waterfowl. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources has documented 52 known locations statewide.

In Door County, an invasive species team and the county’s Soil and Water Conservation Department are prioritizing early detection. “European frog-bit is highly problematic,” says Jason Miller, the county’s conservationist and invasive species coordinator. “In surveys of high-quality coastal areas, staff have found four sites and are managing to control them with manual removal.”

Door County is also waging a decades-long battle with property owners against invasive Phragmites, a wetland grass. “The persistence of Phragmites and the logistic challenges property owners face in controlling it independently make this partnership critical to protect Door County’s natural areas,” says Miller.

► On the farm: Palmer amaranth

Cultivated elsewhere for its nutritional value, Palmer

amaranth grows rapidly, produces hundreds of thousands of seeds per plant, and can develop resistance to herbicides. As a result, it can compete aggressively with crops such as corn and soybeans for light, nutrients, and water. Even a small number of undetected plants can build a significant seedbank, leading to years of management challenges.

Palmer amaranth closely resembles other species, making accurate identification essential but difficult. Early reporting can stop a field-level issue from becoming a regional crisis.

According to the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, the state of Iowa has a “particularly severe problem, with more than half the counties now infected.” It has been confirmed in fewer than 30 Wisconsin fields as Extension and DATCP work collaboratively to keep infestations in check.



Palmer amaranth

► A shared responsibility

Invasive species do not respect boundaries. They move between cities and the countryside, forests and lakes, farms and neighborhoods. That makes early detection a shared responsibility.

County land and water conservation departments, zoning offices, highway departments, parks staff, and forestry programs are often the first to

detect infestations, coordinate a response and educate the public. But partners are critical.

State agencies supply regulatory authority, scientific guidance and funding support. UW-Madison Extension provides research-based education and technical expertise.

Conservation groups, lake associations, and industry organizations bring volunteer networks and specialized knowledge. Farmers, foresters, businesses, and residents serve as the eyes and ears on the landscape.

Wisconsin cannot eliminate every invasive species. But by working together, we can protect our ecosystems and our economy. ■

Join the UW-Madison Extension Wisconsin First Detector Network, a community science program that empowers people to take action on invasive species through monitoring, management, and outreach. In addition to providing volunteer opportunities, WIFDN offers training and resources through webinars, instructional videos and hands-on workshops. *Learn more at fyi.extension.wisc.edu/wifdn.*

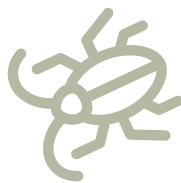


Eyes on the Landscape

THE IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC AWARENESS

By Michael Falk, Forest Pest Survey and Control Unit Supervisor, Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection

On the morning of April 30, 2025, Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection forest entomologist Mitch Lannan opened his laptop and nearly spat out his coffee. His screen displayed a public report of hemlock woolly adelgid (HWA) and elongate hemlock scale (EHS), two tree-killing invasive insects that had never been found in Wisconsin. The location of the report: Stevens Point.



With both pests gaining increasingly large footprints in Michigan, their arrival in the Badger State was less a matter of “if” than “when.” As a result, DATCP spent years crafting a response plan. Losing no time, Lannan contacted the person who reported the pests and caught his first glimpse of luck that day: the infested hemlock had just been planted so there was still time to prevent these pests from getting established.

HWA and EHS were accidentally introduced to the eastern United States decades ago and have been leaving ghostly stands of dead eastern and Carolina hemlocks

in their wake. As a keystone tree species, eastern hemlock plays an integral role in Wisconsin’s beloved Northwoods ecosystems, giving rise to the lush green forests, meandering streams, and bountiful wildlife that help drive the tourism economy. The establishment of either pest poses a direct threat to these ecosystems and the resources they support, as well as to a nursery industry that sells over 270 cultivars of ornamental hemlock.

Further sleuthing revealed that the infested hemlocks comprised a small portion of more than 2,000 seedlings shipped from an out-of-state nursery. Armed with truckloads of disposable gloves and trash bags, DATCP staff worked with the nursery to recover and destroy over 99% of the infested hemlocks that had already been sold or were destined for plantings across Wisconsin. Visual clues suggest hungry deer took care of the remainder.

DATCP’s response was rapid and effective, but any agency staff member would agree that the true hero was the



individual who recognized the insect and reported it.

“Their report allowed us to respond quickly and destroy the seedlings while these pests were still in their immobile life stage,” said Lannan. “We have surveyed the planting sites and will continue to do so for several years, but so far, we have found no signs of either pest.”

This event serves as a powerful reminder of the role of an informed public in invasive species prevention. DATCP puts quarantines in place to prohibit pests like these from entering the state and conducts surveys in areas where car and freight traffic create a high risk of unintentional pest movement. However, surveying every corner of the state is impossible. This is where public and municipal partners come in: knowing what to watch for and how to report it could be key to whether a pest establishes in Wisconsin.

“Getting the word out is essential to reduce the spread of these pests and delay negative impacts,” says Michelle Bogden Muetzel, DATCP plant pest communication specialist. “People working outdoors on a regular basis, like county staff, have an especially good opportunity to help DATCP detect pests early and respond rapidly.”

HWA and EHS are just two of the many plant pests DATCP monitors. Insects like the Asian longhorned beetle and the spotted lanternfly, and plant pathogens like beech leaf disease and sudden oak death, all pose a threat to our natural landscapes, urban forests, and green industries. To keep the public informed, DATCP provides web resources, handouts, social media content and electronic newsletters in addition to administering surveys and a pest hotline.

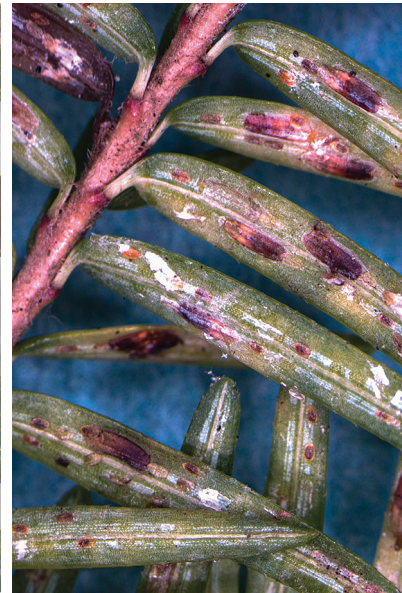
There is a common saying that “luck is when preparation meets opportunity.” DATCP staff and their partners at the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Forest Health, UW-Madison Extension, and many other agencies work diligently on “preparation,” by planning responses to the inevitable introduction of harmful plant pests. The best “opportunity” to utilize these plans occurs when pests are caught early.



LEARN MORE

Visit bit.ly/DATCP-Pests for more about the plant pests and diseases monitored by DATCP.

To report an invasive species or ask questions, contact the Pest Hotline at datcppesthotline@wisconsin.gov.



Hemlock woolly adelgid (HWA) on a hemlock branch (left) and elongate hemlock scale (EHS) on hemlock needles (right).

By staying informed about invasive pest threats and where to report them, Wisconsin residents play a key role in keeping our natural resources and green industries healthy. DATCP hopes that in doing so, Wisconsin can remain lucky to have resources like our lush, hemlock forests for many years to come. ■

Michael Falk is the forest pest survey and control unit supervisor for the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection.


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A young Snapshot Day volunteer learns to identify aquatic plants with Rock River Coalition's Snapshot Day site leader in Rock County. Photo credit: Rock River Coalition.

TEAMS IN ACTION

Working Together for Clean Waters

By Emily Heald, Rivers Educator, UW-Madison Extension Natural Resources Institute

With 437 lakes and 365 miles of streams and rivers, including the St. Croix River on its western border, Polk County residents understand the value of protecting their waterways from aquatic invasive species. To make that happen, county water resources analyst Katelin Anderson leverages available resources, coordinates volunteers and collaborates on initiatives with UW-Madison Extension and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

“We receive a good number of reports from volunteers and citizens, which highlights the importance of training opportunities,” notes Anderson. “In addition, being part of statewide initiatives allows us to offer more programming at the county level.”

► State and county coordination

Understanding where invasive species exist, how they

spread, and what local conditions influence them requires a coordinated effort.

To help counties meet the challenges of coordinating volunteer monitoring and response efforts, the DNR launched the Lake Monitoring and Protection Network in 2021. Today, 70 counties have aquatic invasive species programming funded through the network. Many are county employees, others work within watershed groups, nature centers, or conservation nonprofits. “Coordinators are the boots on the ground, providing critical education, monitoring, and outreach,” notes Katy Bradford, Water Action Volunteer program manager with Extension.

Statewide support is critical for understanding emerging species, ensuring message consistency, and implementing volunteer monitoring and outreach programs. The DNR and Extension work together to provide counties with resources and support.



To help counties meet the challenges of coordinating volunteer monitoring and response efforts, the DNR launched the Lake Monitoring and Protection Network in 2021.

“One important way we do that is by developing consistent monitoring protocols so data collected by volunteers in one county can be compared across the state,” said Bradford. “We work with local coordinators to ensure they have access to consistent training, high-quality educational materials and a statewide community of peers.”

The county’s ability to monitor all their waters is limited. “That’s where volunteers come in,” said Bradford. “Volunteers monitor and collect data, which is shared in statewide databases for invasive species specialists to study.”

► Community action across the state

Volunteers, local coordinators, and statewide specialists work together through numerous programs.

The Clean Boats, Clean Waters program trains volunteers and professionals on how to educate and engage boaters and anglers at boat landings. Administered by Extension Lakes at UW-Stevens Point and funded by the DNR, the program coordinates statewide educational campaigns on peak weekends such as the 4th of July. Participants have conversations about how to help prevent the spread of invasive species and assist boaters and anglers in taking preventive steps, while also collecting data on



Volunteers search for aquatic invasive species at a Snapshot Day event in Eau Claire County. Photo credit: Beaver Creek Reserve.



Volunteers learn to identify aquatic invasive species at a Snapshot Day event held in Dane County. Photo credit: Friends of Cherokee Marsh.

boater behavior and movement between water bodies.

Water Action Volunteers and the Citizen Lake Monitoring Network engage more than 1,500 volunteers and community scientists in monitoring stream, river, and lake health and identifying changes in aquatic ecosystems throughout the year. Together, the two programs monitor nearly 1,400 lake and stream locations.

Aquatic Invasive Species Snapshot Day happens each August. Over 100 volunteers statewide participate in a single-day search for aquatic invasive species. The event is centrally coordinated by Extension and the DNR, with local coordinators hosting events. In 2025, volunteers located previously unreported invasive species populations in 49 water bodies.

► Increasing interest

The more people know, the more interest there is in chipping in. “There is cross-volunteering for the different Extension programs,” notes Anderson. For her, that makes all the difference. “The earlier new populations of invasive species are reported, the greater likelihood they can be successfully managed.” ■

Emily Heald is an Extension educator with expertise in aquatic invasive species. She coordinates Snapshot Day and Project Riverine Early Detectors, working with Lake Monitoring and Protection Network coordinators and volunteers throughout the state.



A STRATEGIC APPROACH

Reshaping Roadside Management

Across Wisconsin, invasive plant species are quietly reshaping roadside management. What was once routine — mowing and maintaining rights-of-way — has become more complex and expensive and, in some cases, more hazardous for county highway crews.

Roadsides provide ideal conditions for invasive plants. Disturbed soils, steady traffic, and long corridors enable invasive species such as wild parsnip to spread rapidly from isolated patches to widespread infestations.

For counties, the impact goes far beyond appearance. Dense, invasive growth can block sight lines, hinder drainage, and speed up the deterioration of roadside infrastructure. Some species also present direct health risks.

Managing invasive species comes with a significant challenge: limited funding. County highway departments oversee hundreds of miles of state and county roadways and thousands of right-of-way acres. In response, counties are rethinking their approach.

► Rethinking roadside management

“Invasive species threaten natural environments across the country,” said Monroe County Highway Commissioner David Ohnstad, who oversees roughly 345 miles of roadway and more than 1,000 acres of roadside, spanning diverse landscapes from the Driftless Area to the Central Sands

region. “Managing highways and rights-of-way responsibly requires more than traditional methods.”

Historically, counties relied heavily on manual and mechanical control strategies, including roadside mowing. But mowing often spreads invasive species or fails to control them effectively, creating a costly cycle with limited long-term results. It also puts workers at greater risk. Wild parsnip sap, for instance, can cause severe burns when exposed to sunlight, making routine maintenance hazardous.

► Targeted treatments and smarter systems

“In 2020, wild parsnip had become a widespread problem, threatening highway workers, utility crews, emergency responders, and the traveling public,” said Dodge County Interim Highway Commissioner Nate Minnig. That year, the county began test trials of herbicide spraying to control noxious weeds.

The program is now countywide, with crews annually treating more than 1,080 lane miles plus 180 miles of the state system in about five days, weather permitting. Crucially, the program relies on existing resources. “We do this with five trucks, utilizing equipment we own for snow and ice control,” Minnig said.

By combining selective herbicides with growth regulators, the county has slowed vegetation growth and

By combining selective herbicides with growth regulators, [Monroe County] has slowed vegetation growth and reduced mowing.



reduced mowing. The result: lower costs, less equipment wear, and more staff time for other priorities.

Rock County similarly launched a pilot program in 2023 focused on targeted herbicide treatments that has expanded countywide. As they analyze its effectiveness over the next few years, the county hopes to reduce the application cycle to a three- or four-year rotation.

“The intent is to minimize treatments while maintaining an effective level to prevent invasive species from spreading,” said Public Works Director Duane Jorgenson.

Like Dodge County, Rock County emphasizes efficiency by equipping plow trucks with spray systems and training staff.

Rock County is also exploring growth inhibitors as a standalone treatment, which could further reduce summer mowing to specific locations where sight lines are important. “This would significantly reduce costs and provide better habitat for native species, like milkweed,” said Jorgenson.

Monroe County has taken a complementary approach centered on data and partnerships. Since 2019, it has worked with UW Extension, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, and other partners to map infestations and guide more precise, targeted treatments.

The county combines this data-driven approach with increased use of chemical controls and computer-assisted spray systems while coordinating closely with landowners, particularly organic producers, to avoid unintended impacts.

“Agriculture is big business in Monroe County, with over \$1.4 billion in economic activity each year and more than 5,000 jobs,” said Ohnstad. “A significant consideration of the county’s Integrated Vegetation Management Program is

working cooperatively with property owners.”

According to Mark Renz, a professor and Extension weed specialist at UW–Madison, counties can save \$50 per mile or more by reducing mowing from two or more cycles per season to one in select areas.

While cost savings and efficiency are key drivers, counties are also seeing broader benefits as native vegetation recovers. In Dodge and Rock counties, milkweed and other native plants have returned to some roadsides, supporting pollinators like monarch butterflies. These shifts contribute to stronger soil stability, improved water quality, and healthier roadside ecosystems — all while maintaining roadway safety.

Despite progress, challenges remain. Herbicide applications depend on favorable weather, and wide or complex rights-of-way can limit coverage. Counties must also carefully manage interactions with adjacent farmland to prevent unintended impacts.

And while new strategies stretch existing dollars, long-term funding constraints shape what counties can accomplish.

► A shared shift in approach

What’s happening along Wisconsin’s roadsides may not always be obvious at highway speeds, but it reflects a meaningful change in how counties manage one of their most widespread and evolving responsibilities. By reducing mowing, repurposing existing equipment, using targeted treatments, and relying on better data, counties are moving toward a more effective and sustainable model of roadside management. ■

OAK WILT: Avoid the “Danger Zone”

Art Kabelowsky, Communications and Outreach Specialist Senior — Applied Forestry/Forest Health, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

Did you know that oak trees can be at serious risk if they are pruned or damaged — even inadvertently — between April and mid-July?

During the “danger zone” period, which starts April 1 in the south and April 15 in the north, the deadly fungal disease oak wilt is carried by beetles that feed upon freshly cut oak. The disease can spread to neighboring oaks through interconnected roots. Infected red oaks die within weeks; mortality takes longer for

white oaks. Preventing oak wilt is much easier and less expensive than mitigating the damage to these high-value trees.

Oak wilt is just one of many threats the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Forest Health team collects and shares information about.

To learn more, visit dnr.wisconsin.gov/topic/ForestHealth, sign up for the Forest Health News electronic newsletter, or contact a DNR forest health specialist. □



A Tiny Beetle with a BIG Job

By Kristin Teston, Communications Director, WI Land+Water

On a late summer afternoon, a local wetland might look breathtaking as a rolling “sea of purple.” To the casual observer, it may be a postcard-perfect scene, but for county conservation staff and dedicated volunteers, it is a sign that there’s work to be done.

This is purple loosestrife, a hardy perennial that arrived on North American shores centuries ago. Once it takes root, it can spread rapidly, crowding out the native plants that wildlife and waterfowl need to thrive. Each year, a single mature plant can grow up to seven feet tall and produce up to three million tiny seeds, carried by wind and water.

Since the early 1990s, Wisconsin has been at the forefront of a sustainable solution. Rather than reaching for



herbicides, conservation staff and volunteers deploy two species of *Galerucella* leaf beetles. “They’re similar to the monarch caterpillar,” explained Tom Boisvert, Lincoln County conservation program manager. “They feed almost exclusively on one plant — purple loosestrife.”

From northern Wisconsin wetlands to the shorelines of the Rock River, thousands of people have helped raise and release these picky eaters in a labor of love. Each spring, county staff and volunteers head into the marshes to dig up the dormant roots of loosestrife plants while being careful not to transport any seeds.

The roots are then planted in pots and placed into kiddie pools filled with water to mimic a wetland. Mesh tents over the plants create a secure “insectary” or “rearing cage.” Once the purple loosestrife plants have grown to about a foot tall,

STOP SPINY! A Community’s Effort to Protect Northern Wisconsin’s Waters

One of the most disruptive aquatic invasive species is the spiny waterflea, a small, transparent crustacean about the size of a pencil tip that drifts near the water’s surface. They’re voracious predators that consume native zooplankton, disrupting the delicate balance of the food web and ultimately affecting larger fish such as walleye.

But preventing the spread is harder than it seems. Boats, kayaks, and fishing gear can unknowingly carry spiny waterfleas or their eggs from one area to the next.

“Douglas County has 427 water bodies and preventing the spiny waterflea from entering even one is worthwhile,” said

Zach Stewart, Douglas County surface waters program manager, who launched the “Stop Spiny!” outreach campaign.

To reach as many people as possible, the campaign spreads its message to professional organizations and lake associations and across social media, flyers, and local news, timed strategically around Wisconsin’s fishing opener.

Perhaps the cleverest campaign innovation was also the most practical: a specialized cleaning cloth with instructions for preventing the spread. When wet, the absorbent and tacky cloths are ideal for wiping down fishing lines — one of the primary ways



While the invasive purple loosestrife may look beautiful, it crowds out native plants and disrupts ecosystems.



Oneida County staff and volunteers grow purple loosestrife in secure mesh tents as a breeding ground for *Galerucella* leaf beetles.

around 10 beetles are added to each plant.

By early July, the beetles' offspring have devoured the plant's stems and leaves, and the once-vibrant plants are browning and defoliated. It's a sign that the population has exploded from a few dozen beetles to thousands, and it's time to release them.

In Oneida County's Three Lakes community, release day has become an exciting event. Staff and volunteers show up early in the morning at a local rearing cage. Using a modified vacuum and other techniques, they carefully collect the thousands of tiny insects.

The beetles are transported as far as possible to wetland



areas by pontoon and then by canoe to their final destinations, with GPS coordinates recorded at each release stop. "It's an exhausting day, but it is so much fun," said Steph Boismenu, aquatic invasive species coordinator and conservation technician for Oneida County.

The results, accumulated over years of patient work, are starting to show. At Spirit Lake in Burnett County, where Boisvert worked before joining Lincoln County, a shoreline that was nearly ringed with purple loosestrife now rarely shows a flower. In Oneida County, Boismenu returns each season to coordinates she's tracked for years. "There used to be 20 plants,

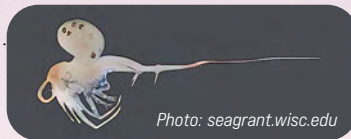
Continued on page 20

By Peyton Mueller, Outreach Assistant, WI Land+Water

spiny waterfleas travel between lakes. "The cloths remove the waterfleas and provide a memory cue every time someone reaches for their tackle box," explained Stewart.

The campaign recognized that some of the most important conversations about invasive species prevention happen one-on-one at the water's edge. With specialized training, Clean Boats, Clean Waters volunteers share what they know with boaters and anglers.

The Minnesota Aquatic Invasive Species Research Center contributed crucial research and donated digital materials to the campaign. Iron, Ashland and Bayfield counties came



on as partners as well, working alongside local lake associations and conservation groups.

The campaign has reached nearly 22,000 people, and most importantly, there has been no widespread expansion of spiny waterfleas in the project area. Stewart believes the combination of engaging science education, community partnerships, and practical tools has empowered people to protect their waters. And while the focus was on one tiny species, the habit it promoted — "clean, drain, dry" — protects our waters against all aquatic invaders. □



Continued from page 19

and now there's one," she said, "and it's really wimpy."

Short, thin stems, sparse seed heads, and diminished vigor are exactly what success looks like when it comes to battling purple loosestrife. "The beetles don't eradicate the plant," explained Boisvert. "But they make it struggle to compete, season by season, until the native plants around it have room to recover."

For Boisvert, now in his ninth year of working on purple loosestrife across multiple counties, the value of a biocontrol program is significant. "I wish there were programs like this for some of our other invasive species," he said. "To me, it's always a better option than chemicals, especially in sensitive areas near water."

The program faces real challenges, though. Boismenuet recalls the afternoon she paddled through a beetle release site and noticed the loosestrife nearest the shoreline houses was still thriving while plants further away were small and struggling. After seeing mosquito-control signs, she



GET INVOLVED

If you see purple loosestrife or want to get involved in beetle rearing, contact your county's aquatic invasive species coordinator. Learn more about purple loosestrife biocontrol with volunteer resources at dnr.wisconsin.gov/topic/Invasives/loosestrife.

suspected she knew the answer — residual pesticide spray was wiping out the beetles.

Roadside ditches, disturbed by mowing and traffic, are especially difficult to treat efficiently.

Many counties work with their highway departments to provide training and develop control strategies. Wet weather also makes wetland access harder, both for collecting plants and releasing beetles.

Thanks to the work of conservation staff and the volunteers who show up year after year, Wisconsin's wetlands are beginning to breathe again. After release days, staff regularly laugh at the discovery of stowaways. When Boismenuet finds a beetle crawling on her car ceiling or on a jacket sleeve a week later, she puts it in a jar and makes a special trip to the nearest loosestrife site. "We have a real dedication to the beetles," she said, "making sure each one gets where it needs to go." ■

Kristin Teston is the communications director for Wisconsin Land and Water (WI Land+Water), which is dedicated to advancing locally led conservation by supporting our county conservation members who work to protect, conserve, and enhance the state's land and water resources.

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Across Wisconsin, 14 nonprofit Cooperative Invasive Species Management Areas (CISMAs) bring together federal, state, and local governments, tribes, organizations, and individuals to prevent and control invasive species.

Each CISMA covers one to eight of the 59 participating counties. They focus on educating communities and providing resources for landowners. CISMAs often partner with county conservation departments to conduct outreach, monitoring, and management activities.

The Southeastern Wisconsin Invasive Species Consortium's annual Garlic Mustard Pull-A-Thon mobilizes residents in eight counties to remove one of the most persistent woodland invaders.

"It's about giving people a fun, productive way to improve their woodlands," said executive director Jill Hapner, noting that the event reduces seed production while building long-term awareness and stewardship. Since 2013, participants have pulled more than 124 tons of garlic mustard and dame's rocket.

The Northwoods Cooperative Weed Management Area, serving Douglas, Bayfield, Ashland and Iron counties, focuses on forested landscapes. According to coordinator Ramona Shackelford of the Bayfield County Land and Water Conservation Department, knotweed has been a major target.

A fast-spreading plant resembling bamboo, knotweed is difficult to get under control because of its extensive roots. The group's 2025 annual report outlined the persistent, multi-year efforts to eradicate the nearly 370 known sites, mostly on private property, in wetlands, and along rivers and roadways.

The Wisconsin Headwaters Invasives Partnership has numerous initiatives underway in Vilas, Oneida and Lincoln counties, including tracking invasive plants along all county highways, working with highway department crews on training, and partnering with homeowner associations like the Natural Lakes Private Preserve to map and remove honeysuckle along 24 miles of private roads.

"Each year, new landowners join the effort and help spread the word," said coordinator Rosie Page. The group is fiscally sponsored by Lumberjack Resource Conservation and Development, a coalition of 10 northeast counties.

CISMAs can make the critical connection between land managers and private landowners, who often lack the information, tools and other resources to complete control measures themselves.

Primarily funded by competitive grants at the state and federal levels, CISMAs are critical as species ranges shift northward and funding priorities change. ■



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Aerial view of road closure and pumping operations in Washington County on August 12, 2025.

After the Waters Receded

Lessons from the 2025 Southeast Wisconsin Flooding

When the rain started falling across southeastern Wisconsin on Saturday, Aug. 9, 2025, it didn't immediately raise concerns. In Milwaukee County, the Wisconsin State Fair was in progress, with thousands of visitors enjoying sweet corn and cream puffs and lining up to see Lynard Skynard on the main stage.

But the storm system moving across the region had other plans.

Thunderstorms began repeatedly tracking over the same areas — a phenomenon known as “training.” Instead of moving through quickly, the storms stalled, releasing wave after wave of heavy rain. Stormwater systems struggled to keep up. Rivers and creeks surged. Streets and neighborhoods began filling with water. Fairgoers fled State Fair Park to escape the rising water.

Shortly after 1 a.m., the National Weather Service escalated warnings as flash flooding became life-threatening. Emergency responders scrambled to respond to road closures, stranded vehicles and flooded homes. Some neighborhoods were evacuated as water rose rapidly in the early-morning darkness.

When the rain finally tapered and the waters began to recede, emergency management teams quickly got to work assessing and documenting the damage. It would take weeks

of close coordination among local municipalities, county officials, and state partners to collect the hundreds of field observations and process thousands of data entries.

The effort ultimately paid off for many residents. As of Jan. 21, federal individual assistance funding totaling \$198 million has been approved for the region — including \$176 million in Milwaukee County, \$19.5 million in Waukesha County and \$2.5 million in Washington County.

Unfortunately, the federal government rejected the state's request for public assistance to local governments, even though the damage exceeded the standard threshold.

However, the process revealed critical lessons about disaster preparedness, coordination and the growing importance of data in emergency management.

▶ Three counties, three approaches

Although the same storm hit the region, the counties approached the damage assessment process differently based on their resources, staffing and preexisting partnerships.

In Waukesha County, officials immediately activated the county's emergency operations center. “Over the next month, we utilized a hybrid model that leveraged the Waukesha County Damage Assessment Team, a mutual

aid network that had begun to be built a year prior to the incident,” said Alex Freeman, Waukesha County emergency management coordinator.

“The network brought trained responders from outside stricken communities to assist with damage assessment needs, while local responders, including public works staff, law enforcement and firefighters, also did incredible work building a comprehensive picture of our residential damage,” said Freeman.

In Milwaukee County, the response involved close coordination between local staff and the state Incident Management Team. “Activation levels of the county’s emergency operations center were adjusted based on the transition from response to recovery, allowing us to maintain continuity while prioritizing damage assessment and local coordination,” said Paul Riegel, director of the Milwaukee County Emergency Management Division.

Responsibilities were divided to keep the process moving efficiently. Field teams conducted assessments while county staff focused on data management and preparing documentation for state and federal review.

In Washington County, emergency managers took a more decentralized approach.

“While we didn’t formally activate our emergency operations center ... we involved the appropriate state, county and municipal leaders,” said Washington County emergency management coordinator Dustin Lofy. “The municipalities conducted their local damage assessments using the Survey123 mobile app while the county maintained situational awareness and coordinated resources.”

► A data challenge

The experience highlighted how critical data management has become in modern emergency management. Thousands of damage reports had to be verified and organized before they could be submitted to state and federal officials.

“Many early entries lacked photos or the information needed to confirm damage categories, requiring significant secondary review and follow-up deployments,” Riegel explained.

Waukesha County faced similar issues. “Incomplete field documentation or differences in the quality of incoming data” caused challenges, Freeman said, along with discrepancies between local, state, and federal interpretations of damage categories.

Washington County also encountered challenges with new technology and evolving processes.



Gold Drive in the city of Muskego, Waukesha County, after floodwaters receded the morning of August 10, 2025.

“Thankfully, we don’t have large-scale disasters like this often, but that means there were new faces, new technology, and changes to processes since the last disaster, which created its own challenges,” Lofy said.

Even so, technology ultimately became one of the strongest tools in the response.

► Technology as a force multiplier

All three counties relied heavily on digital tools and geographic information systems (GIS) to manage the flood response. The statewide 211 call service, which connects residents to local services, also played a key role.

“Waukesha County Emergency Management’s GIS and technological expertise enabled the deployment of a county-

Continued on page 26

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Continued from page 25

specific surveying app that significantly helped with data collection, quality control, and mapping,” Freeman said.

Milwaukee County also benefited from integrating GIS and data professionals into the response. “Leveraging 211 call data early in the incident allowed us to prioritize the most heavily impacted neighborhoods sooner, shorten the traditional startup time for damage assessment and deploy resources more strategically,” Riegel said.

Washington County relied on similar tools. “County GIS support for plotting 211 and damage assessment data helped us keep track of the status of assessments,” said Lofy.

► Preparation pays off

Another major lesson from the flooding was the importance of preparation — especially training and relationship-building before a disaster strikes.

“Having dedicated data professionals involved from the onset significantly improved the speed and accuracy of damage assessment,” Riegel said. “Counties should consider pre-identifying staff or partners who can focus solely on data cleaning, mapping and analytics, rather than relying exclusively on field personnel.”

In Washington County, a training seminar held just weeks before the flooding proved to be a crucial advantage. “We were thankful that we had just offered the Survey123 Damage Assessment Seminar by Wisconsin Emergency Management in early July — almost 30 days prior to the flood — because it brought greater awareness to damage assessment processes and technology,” Lofy said.

Training is essential because disasters rarely provide time to build systems from scratch. “Regular training on how damage assessment will be carried out and who is responsible is critical,” Freeman said. “You do not want to be behind the eight ball and playing catch-up when you have thousands of damaged homes in your region.”

► The power of partnerships

Perhaps the most consistent lesson across all three counties was the value of partnerships. From municipal staff and county departments to volunteer organizations and state agencies, recovery efforts depended on cooperation across many disciplines.

“We relied on internal partners like IT and land information services to help with data management and mapping,” Freeman said. “External partners included

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IMPACT 211, which was very helpful by providing damage report information, and local municipalities that did excellent work bringing their own damage assessors to the field.”

Freeman emphasized that planning ahead can make a major difference when disasters occur. “Knowing who you can count on in a crisis is key, and those relationships need to be established well before the floodwaters start rising,” he said.

Lofy echoed that sentiment. “Relationships at all levels were a big factor driving success from the beginning of the disaster,” he said.

► **Scaling for the next disaster**

The August 2025 floods also revealed how difficult it can be for local emergency management agencies to scale their operations during large regional disasters.

“We were competing for staffing with each other,” Riegel said. “A regionalized approach to events like this could go a long way for everyone involved.”

Even while responding to a major event, emergency management staff must continue handling routine responsibilities such as grant writing, planning and regulatory work.

Lofy noted that the scale of disasters often exceeds the staffing capacity of many local emergency management offices. “Our offices, staff bandwidth and overall responsibilities don’t always align with the scale of the disaster,” he said.

► **Recovery and resilience**

The success of the region’s damage assessment efforts ultimately helped thousands of residents access federal disaster assistance. But the experience also highlighted the importance of local resilience — particularly when federal assistance is uncertain.

Despite extensive documentation, the Federal Emergency Management Agency did not approve public assistance funding for local governments, leaving communities to rely on state programs, including the Wisconsin Disaster Fund.

The August 2025 floods were a reminder that extreme weather can develop quickly and overwhelm communities with little warning. Yet they also demonstrated the strength of Wisconsin’s emergency management network — a system built on preparation, collaboration and the willingness of local officials to learn from every disaster. ■

Editor’s note: The Wisconsin Counties thanks Alex Freeman, Waukesha County emergency management coordinator, for initiating and facilitating this article.

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At a Crossroads

WISCONSIN'S AGRICULTURE IN 2026

By Pam Jahnke, Farm Director, Mid-West Farm Report Network

Whenever I see articles that highlight Wisconsin agriculture as a \$104.8 billion industry, I feel like it's a takeoff from a high school civics presentation. To just cite the economic punch that Wisconsin agriculture brings fails to really help the non-farm consumer understand what it's taken to reach that level — and how quickly it can go away.

Just like soil types across the state, farms and commodities face unique challenges in 2026. The success or failure of Wisconsin agriculture will dictate unemployment, rural infrastructure, and send ripples through many sectors of society that don't see the train coming.

According to the most recent U.S. Census of Agriculture, the average size of a Wisconsin farm is about 236 acres. We have more than 52,000 operating farms that manage and operate almost 14 million acres. Our hallmark dairy operations now number fewer than 6,000 but still have about 1.28 million cows.

From my lens, agriculture remains a bipartisan issue that is not well understood by most of the general public. I thought I'd share some of the insights we've gained through interviews, conferences, and meetings as part of the Mid-

West Farm Report Network.

I'll keep it simple. No matter what element of production agriculture you're involved in, there are some constants when it comes to challenges.

As the 2026 Wisconsin Agricultural Outlook Forum highlighted in late January, trade will remain the “defining factor” for the state. Wisconsin is the 12th largest agricultural exporter in the United States. Hosting our global partners here has become a key part of telling the “Wisconsin story.” Connecting the dots between our dairy farms and cheesemakers is much easier in Wisconsin than almost anywhere else. What we do is different, and that story matters to buyers today.

However, recent trade wars have disrupted critical overseas markets. Many of our Wisconsin dairy products have found great new buying partners in places like Saudi Arabia. But getting Wisconsin products into the Middle East is problematic with the war in Iran happening as I write this article.



Pam Jahnke

Connecting the dots between our dairy farms and cheesemakers is much easier in Wisconsin than almost anywhere else. **What we do is different, and that story matters to buyers today.**

Costs are up.

Energy. You think about your gas tank when you hear petroleum prices are up. Well, Wisconsin farming operations feel that, plus the added weight that most of their equipment runs on diesel. Diesel prices in Wisconsin are averaging about \$4.66 per gallon this March, up from \$3.30 per gallon in 2025. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the average field tractor uses about six gallons per acre. That means farmers will spend more than \$6,500 for one pass on an average farm this year, up from about \$4,600 last year.

Fertilizer. Wisconsin farms rely on potassium, phosphorus and nitrogen to get crops started and keep them going. All those inputs primarily come from outside our borders. Even if a farm secured its supplies last fall, they now worry that the fertilizers will not arrive on time.

Steel. For any farm or agribusiness owner thinking about expansion, the high price of steel is a difficult pill to swallow. I've talked to several farms and agribusinesses that either discontinued expansion plans or scaled back projects due to the high prices. It's not just the cost of bringing steel into the United States; it's also about the lack of domestic production.

Labor. For anyone in agriculture, labor is always in short supply. Spring demands really strain the labor supply, not just on the farm but throughout the agribusiness chain. Farm cooperatives often bring in seasonal labor to deliver seed and farm supplies and to help with custom applications of fertilizer and herbicide. If they can't deliver goods and services when the weather allows, it has a ripple effect on productivity for the rest of the growing season.

It may be hard to believe, but agriculture used to be the one area of policy where both sides of the political aisle came together. Agriculture was and is considered part of national security. Locally, these farms and agribusinesses are your friends, family and neighbors. Your constituents.

I know that Wisconsin agriculture is resilient. I grew up in it and remain in it today. However, operators of all sizes and types are under strain. They're using equity to pay their bills. Expansion and growth may be limited not just by



LEARN MORE

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economic factors, but also by ordinances, rules, permits, and regulations that are part of that mix.

If Wisconsin agriculture sputters and recedes, what replaces it? When a farm makes money, it generally spends that

money locally — paying wages to local people, supporting local businesses, and donating to the community and schools.

If you've never had a conversation with a local farmer or grower, now is the time. If you've talked to them in the past, refresh that conversation and see how things have changed today. Imagine walking in their shoes for a few minutes.

Wisconsin agriculture is a \$104.8 billion industry. It could get even better, or it could slip away. ■

Pam Jahnke has been dedicated to agriculture her entire life. Raised on a 200-acre dairy farm in northeastern Wisconsin, she started the UW-River Falls' radio "Farm Show" while a student there and has spent her career in farm broadcasting. Among other recognitions, Jahnke was the national Farm Broadcaster of the Year in 2013 and was inducted into the National Association of Farm Broadcasting in 2022. She continues to be active in farming, in partnership with her brother, sister, and parents on the home farm.



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Rep. Shelia Stubbs and Ms. Tanesha Howard testify in support of 2025 Senate Bill 404 in the Senate Committee on Mental Health, Substance Abuse Prevention, Children and Families on Dec. 16, 2025.

A CALL TO ACTION

Searching for Wisconsin's Missing and Murdered African American Women and Girls

By Shelia Stubbs, State Representative, 78th Assembly District

Since I was a small child, I have paid close attention to missing persons cases. As a young girl, I would study the posters at the grocery store I frequented with my mother, as well as the pictures and information about missing children printed on the milk carton that came with my school lunch.

When I saw the news coverage of the Atlanta Child Murders, I was terrified that children who looked just like me were going missing and being murdered. Between 1979 and 1981, at least 28 African American children and young adults were murdered in Atlanta, Georgia.

In the years since, missing persons have featured less prominently in our everyday conversations and public

awareness campaigns. However, recent high-profile cases, including those of Gabby Petito and Nancy Guthrie, have again increased our societal awareness. My heart and prayers remain with their families, and with all who have had missing loved ones.

Missing people in our state and across our country represent every imaginable combination of age, race and gender. No demographic is unaffected.

Similarly, there is no part of our society immune to the tragedy of homicide. Every year, hundreds of Wisconsinites lose their lives in acts of violence.

However, I was shocked to discover that, according to *The Guardian*, Wisconsin had the highest Black female

A Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women/Relatives Task Force was formed by the Wisconsin Department of Justice in 2020, after similar legislation failed to pass. The task force is charged with "helping fight the abduction, homicide, violence and trafficking of Indigenous women in Wisconsin." According to the DOJ website, no report has yet been issued by the task force.

homicide rate in the country at 20.2 per 100,000 in 2020, which was double the previous year's rate, and that five Black women were murdered every day in our country that year. In addition, 90,333 African American women and girls were reported missing in the United States in 2020, according to the National Crime Information Center.

In response to these unacceptable statistics, I introduced a bill during the 2021-22 legislative session and have reintroduced it in each subsequent session to establish a 17-member Missing and Murdered African American Women and Girls Task Force in the state. This task force would include legislators, law enforcement, legal experts, community partners, and African American women who have been victims of violence or their families.

The task force would analyze the systemic causes of violence against African American women and girls, improve data collection, develop strategies to prevent and reduce violence, examine the role of policies and institutions in these disparities, and create measures to support victims, their families, and communities.

This task force will specifically study missing and murdered African American women and girls because, among women in our state, they are most likely to be victims of violence. However, by conducting an in-depth examination, the task force will better enable our state to prevent, reduce and investigate violence against all women.

This bill has received vocal support from victims' family members, including Ms. Sheena Scarbrough, mother of Sade Robinson, who was tragically murdered in Milwaukee around April 1, 2024; Ms. Georgia Hill, mother of Lasheky Hill, who went missing from Racine on March 26, 2023; and Ms. Tanesha Howard, mother of Joniah Walker, who went missing from Milwaukee on June 23, 2022.

In addition to letters of support from national and statewide organizations, the legislation has received ongoing local and international media coverage from The Guardian, U.S. News & World Report, Capital B News, REVOLT News, "48 Hours," talk show host Tavis Smiley, TV commentator Roland Martin, and many others.

And yet, this lifesaving legislation still has not crossed the finish line.

When I first introduced the bill, it did not receive a public

In 2020, Wisconsin had the highest Black female homicide rate in the country and five Black women were murdered every day in our country.



Rep. Stubbins speaks in support of 2023 Assembly Bill 615/Senate Bill 568 at a press conference on May 16, 2024.

hearing in either house or a single Republican co-sponsor.

In the 2023 session, it received strong bipartisan co-sponsorship, passed the Assembly floor on a voice vote, but never reached the Senate floor.

In this session, the bill was unanimously passed by a Senate committee but was not brought to the Senate floor or scheduled for a public hearing in the Assembly. I am left wondering, why?

We know that every second counts in a missing persons case. Families are seeking support, closure and answers. We cannot afford further delays in enacting this critical legislation. How much longer must victims' families wait for answers, for justice?

As the legislative session comes to a close, I ask that we not forget our missing Wisconsinites and that we continue to search for them and say their names.

A safer Wisconsin is within reach, but it requires addressing the root causes behind the significant disparities that lead to more African American women and girls missing or losing their lives than their white counterparts. It also means examining our current policies and practices and improving them where necessary. True safety depends on ensuring that every case receives the same level of urgency, with prompt, thorough investigations and media coverage.

By passing the Missing and Murdered African American Women and Girls Task Force bill, we will be one step closer to a state where everyone can live and thrive without fear of violence. ■

Rep. Shelia Stubbins (D-Madison) represents the 78th Assembly District, which includes a portion of Dane County. First elected to state office in 2018, she served on the Dane County Board of Supervisors, and has been recognized by numerous organizations, including the Wisconsin Counties Association, for her support of local governments and social justice issues.



Stronger Counties, Real Results

2025-26 LEGISLATIVE SESSION HIGHLIGHTS

By Kyle Christianson, Marcie Rainbolt, Chelsea Shanks and Collin Driscoll, Government Affairs, Wisconsin Counties Association

The state Legislature officially adjourned for the 2025-26 session on March 17. As with previous sessions, the Legislature may reconvene for special or extraordinary sessions, specifically related to nonpartisan redistricting and property tax relief. With \$2.5 billion in surplus tax revenue in Madison, both sides of the aisle are eager to return funds to Wisconsin taxpayers before the highly competitive midterm elections in November. This article will focus on what has already been accomplished by early April.

Throughout this legislative session, the WCA proactively pursued solutions to issues and priorities that lawmakers could pass through both chambers and ultimately sign into law. From the start of that two-year period in January 2025 to now, legislators in the Assembly and Senate introduced 2,387 bills (many of which were companion bills introduced in both houses). Of the approximately 350 bills approved by both chambers and sent to Gov. Tony Evers for his signature, the governor has signed nearly 250 into law, including the 2025-27 state budget after exercising his partial veto authority, and has vetoed almost 100 bills in their entirety.

During a session where legislators showed little interest in spending money or creating new programs,

they continued to prioritize county government. From a biennial budget that increased funding for county transportation infrastructure and appropriated general-purpose tax revenue to help counties fund the circuit court system, to standalone bills that increased fees, fines, and forfeitures for certain crimes and doubled the thresholds for competitive bidding for local governments, county government had a very productive and successful legislative session.

The WCA adapted to the Legislature's wishes, which, in turn, strengthened our relationships. When lawmakers showed willingness to provide more funding, we advocated for increased funding. When they took a firm stance on raising funds, we explored innovative ideas that would ultimately lessen the stress and burdens on county government.

This legislative recap highlights our priorities and achievements in the state budget, along with other important legislation. While there is always more work to do, counties are in a stronger position than before the session began. The WCA looks forward to continuing the discussions and being even better positioned for the 2027-28 legislative session.



While there is always more work to do, counties are in a stronger position than before the legislative session began.

■ **2025 Wisconsin Act 15: The State Biennial Budget.**

Throughout the budget process, the Legislature repeatedly told stakeholders that no new funding was available. Despite a surplus in the general fund, leadership and members of the Joint Finance Committee remained very cautious amid rising costs and widespread federal budget cuts. However, the WCA still managed to ensure that county government remained a funding priority.

State budget: Circuit court funding. The WCA's main focus in the 2025-27 budget was to balance the cost-sharing between the state and counties for operating the state circuit court system. Before this budget, Wisconsin counties covered 80% of the expenses to run the state-owned court system, with the state paying only 20%. The WCA requested an additional \$70 million, knowing that it might not be feasible, but it was important to make the ask and explain why. By educating lawmakers about rising costs for interpreters, public defenders, and security, we secured \$10 million in new general-purpose revenue to help bridge the gap, which we called step one. While these budget discussions were ongoing, we also worked on step two, which involved introducing Assembly Bill 320 outside of the budget process to help counties save money.

State budget: Transportation funding. Over the past several legislative sessions, lawmakers have managed to invest in state and local transportation infrastructure despite tough financial challenges. This year's budget was no exception. The WCA requested increases in Routine Maintenance Agreement (RMA) funding, General Transportation Aids (GTA), and Local Road Improvement-Supplemental (LRIP-S) funds. The Legislature and governor worked together to increase funding for all three programs, along with an extra \$150 million for the Agricultural Road Improvement Program (ARIP) and a new Local Small Structure Improvement Program (LSSIP), which allocates \$30 million to assist local governments in repairing and replacing the 6- to 20-foot bridges recently inventoried and inspected.

State budget: Conservation staffing grants. Over the past decade, securing funding for conservation staffing grants has become progressively easier — and the credit

goes to county officials. In previous budgets, we would hear concerns and frustrations from legislators about issues between a county and a local farmer. This budget cycle, the conversation was entirely different. Counties have done an excellent job of building relationships with the agricultural community, so we didn't face much pushback on increased funding for conservation staff. Instead, we heard success stories about partnerships between county staff and farmers that have achieved remarkable results. While we're still working to secure additional base funding, this budget offers a \$7.6 million increase over the previous biennium, much of which is one-time funding.

■ **2025 WI Act 9: Psychiatric Residential Treatment**

Facilities. Act 9 is the first step in making sure that our youth, who are dealing with a mental health crisis, can access the resources they need at psychiatric residential treatment facilities. This will reduce some of the burden currently on counties, especially in the northern part of the state.

■ **2025 WI Act 25: Judicial Privacy Act Clean Up.** After working to implement the Judicial Privacy Act, which was passed and signed into law during the 2023-24 legislative session, additional legislation (i.e., Act 25) was enacted to provide necessary clarifications.

■ **2025 WI Act 62: Fees Charged for Coroner or Medical Examiner Services.** Act 62 allows counties to impose a one-time fee increase of up to \$100 for signing a death certificate or issuing a cremation permit to recover some costs of transitioning to a physician medical examiner.

■ **2025 WI Act 65: County Forest Administration Grant Eligibility.** Act 65 broadens counties' options for hiring a county forest administrator by expanding the qualifications required for eligibility for the County Forest Administrator Grant.

■ **2025 WI Act 116: SNAP Funding for Counties.** In a compromise agreement between the governor and the Legislature, Act 116 allocates \$32 million to help counties administer the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. It also requires the Wisconsin Department

Continued on page 34

Continued from page 33

of Health Services to apply for a waiver to prohibit the purchase of soft drinks and candy with FoodShare benefits.

■ **2025 WI Act 119: Chapter 980 Competitive Bidding**

Exemption. Act 119 creates an exception to counties' competitive bidding requirements for purchasing used mobile homes and park model homes to provide housing for individuals on supervised release under Chapter 980.

■ **2025 WI Act 125: Videoconferencing.** Act 125 authorizes the use of videoconferencing for expert witness testimony in cases arising under Chapter 51 (mental health) and Chapter 55 (protective services).

■ **2025 WI Act 163: Utility Aid Payments.** Act 163 authorizes utility aid payments to local governments for battery energy storage and liquefied natural gas systems approved by the Public Service Commission.

■ **2025 WI Act 169: Environmental Repair Fees.** Act 169 allows counties with a solid waste facility that choose to use a Clean Water Fund Program loan to build a wastewater treatment center to keep the environmental repair fees they collect and use that money to repay the loan.

■ **2025 WI Act 179: Fees, Fines and Forfeitures.** Act 179 raises certain fees, fines, and forfeitures and enables counties to keep a larger portion of those collections. The changes are projected to generate over \$20 million in new revenue for counties statewide.

■ **2025 WI Act 188: Competitive Bidding Thresholds.** After more than a decade of advocacy for this legislation, Act 188 finally became law. It doubles the competitive bidding threshold for public works projects from \$25,000 to \$50,000 and doubles the dollar threshold for providing public notice from \$5,000 to \$10,000.

■ **2025 WI Act 196: Sheriff Statute Clean Up.** Act 196 streamlines state statutes related to the county sheriff, consolidates references into a single section, and removes outdated language and provisions.

■ **2025 WI Acts 200 and 201: PFAS Remediation and Testing.** Acts 200 and 201 allocate \$132 million for PFAS remediation and testing, including \$79.5 million for community grants, and allow a limited number of "innocent landowner" protections.

■ **2025 WI Act 233: Medicaid Coverage for Incarcerated Individuals.** Act 233 requires the Wisconsin Department of Health Services to seek a waiver to run a program that provides Medicaid services to incarcerated individuals who are about to be released back into our communities. The goal is to make sure they have the necessary prescriptions and paperwork to prevent "falling through the cracks."

■ **2025 WI Act 234: Register of Deeds Statute Clean Up.** Act 234 makes various changes to the statutes relating to recording documents and registers of deeds' roles and responsibilities.

► **Looking ahead**

With Evers, Assembly Speaker Robin Vos (R-Burlington), and Senate Majority Leader Devin LeMahieu (R-Oostburg) choosing not to run for reelection, no one knows what leadership in the state Capitol will look like next session. Whether one party controls the executive and legislative branches or there is divided government, politics in Madison will be very different from this session. ■

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Honoring the Past Building *the* Future

Celebrating 250 Years



Wisconsin Counties Association
2026 ANNUAL CONFERENCE
September 20-22, 2026

See you in Sauk County!

GET READY TO EXPLORE the important issues facing Wisconsin's county officials at this year's gathering, taking place Sept. 20 – 22 in Sauk County.

As we celebrate America 250, we will reflect on our nation's history while looking ahead to the opportunities and progress that will shape the future. Attendees will hear from state and federal speakers, participate in engaging workshop sessions, and connect with colleagues through valuable networking opportunities.

— **REGISTRATION AND ROOM BLOCKS OPEN JUNE 1** —

TENTATIVE CONFERENCE SCHEDULE

► SUNDAY, SEPT. 20

- 11:30 a.m. – 5:30 p.m.* Registration
- 12:30 – 1 p.m.* Credentials pick-up for 2026 WCA Annual Business Meeting
- 1 p.m.* 2026 WCA Annual Business Meeting
- Evening Dinner on your own

**Times may change pending Green Bay Packers schedule*

► MONDAY, SEPT. 21

- 7 a.m. – 5 p.m. Registration
- 7 – 8 a.m. Breakfast buffet
- 8 – 9 a.m. Concurrent workshops
- 9 a.m. – 6 p.m. WCA Exhibit Hall open
- 10 a.m. – 12 p.m. Opening General Assembly
- 12 – 1 p.m. Exhibitor Luncheon
- 1 – 2 p.m. Concurrent workshops

- 2 – 3 p.m. Exhibit Hall challenge
- 2:15 – 3:15 p.m. Women in Government Networking Event
- 3:30 – 4:30 p.m. Concurrent workshops
- 4:30 – 6 p.m. Exhibitor Reception
- 6 – 7:30 p.m. WCA Dinner

► TUESDAY, SEPT. 22

- 7 – 10:30 a.m. Registration
- 7 – 7:45 a.m. Wisconsin County Mutual Insurance Corporation Breakfast
- 8 – 9 a.m. Concurrent workshops
- 9:15 – 10:15 a.m. Concurrent workshops
- 10:30 – 11:30 a.m. Concurrent workshops
- 11:45 a.m. – 1 p.m. Closing General Assembly and lunch

For the latest up-to-date information on registration, speakers and events, visit wicounties.org/conference.
Be sure to stay tuned for new events and details.



► Spouse & Guest Tour: Lunch, Legends & Live Music

Monday, Sept. 21 | 11:15 a.m.

Get ready for a fun afternoon of great food, great music, and a little dancing! Join us Monday, Sept. 21, at the Legacy Dinner Theater in Wisconsin Dells for a lively spouse and guest tour featuring the Fleetwood Mac tribute band Hypnotized. Enjoy a delicious lunch served at 11:45 a.m. before the show begins at 1 p.m. Sing along to classic hits like “Go Your Own Way,” “Dreams,” “Rhiannon,” and “Don’t Stop.” Whether you’re a longtime fan or just love great live music, this high-energy performance will have you tapping your feet — and maybe even dancing in the aisles! □

GENERAL INFORMATION

► Register Online

Registration for the 2026 WCA Annual Conference is **ONLINE** and opens June 1.



To register, visit wicounties.org/conference and click on the “Register Online” icon. This will take you directly to our online registration page, where you can register yourself, as well as any guests, spouses, or additional delegates. Once you have registered, you have the option to pay online with a credit card or have an invoice sent to you via email.

► Transportation

Complimentary shuttle service will be provided on Monday and Tuesday between the participating conference hotels and the Kalahari Resort and Convention Center. Look for a transportation schedule at the WCA registration desk.

► Housing Information

Conference hotel room block start date: June 1

Conference hotel room block cut-off date: *Varies by hotel location*

The WCA has room blocks at four hotels in Wisconsin Dells. All room blocks open June 1. County officials are responsible for booking their own hotel rooms. If booking multiple rooms at any of the WCA-selected hotels, you must have a different name for each reservation. Booking multiple rooms under one name is not allowed. Rooms are booked on a first-come, first-serve basis. Visit the conference event page for a complete list of hotel information, rates and registration links.

If you require an accessible room, please contact the WCA at 866-404-2700 to reserve your room by July 17.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, contact the WCA at 866-404-2700 or mail@wicounties.org.

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MARATHON COUNTY

Rooted in Tradition: Hsu Ginseng Farms

Hitting Our Stride in Season Four

After kicking off in late 2025, the fourth season of Uniquely Wisconsin is well underway, attracting millions of views and interactions for the participating counties. This three-time Emmy Award-winning project showcases what makes our state so special. As Wisconsinites, we all know it's the people, traditions and special places that define us.

The WCA is proud to partner with Discover Mediaworks, which produces this documentary-style series that has grown into a powerful storytelling platform, reaching millions of people across broadcast television, streaming platforms, podcasts and social media.

"This season, we are featuring Brown, Marathon, Outagamie, Pierce and Washington counties, with each sharing stories that highlight the character and creativity found in their communities," said WCA President & CEO Mark O'Connell. "We are grateful to them, and all Uniquely Wisconsin counties, for their vision to join us in promoting all that is great in our state."



By Michelle Gormican Thompson,
Thompson Communications

► The real "get" of Uniquely Wisconsin

Built on the legacy of Discover Wisconsin, the Uniquely Wisconsin series focuses on authentic local storytelling that highlights families,

entrepreneurs, artists, community leaders and organizations that shape the culture and economy of our communities.

The multi-platform format of Uniquely Wisconsin results in each participating county receiving tremendous exposure for its area.

"As counties join Uniquely Wisconsin, the question often arises, 'What do we get?' said Discover Mediaworks President Mark Rose. "Each participating county receives a portion of a broadcast documentary, three-part digital and streaming docuseries segments, social media features, and an appearance on 'The Cabin' podcast, allowing these stories to reach audiences statewide and beyond. But the real 'get' for counties is the opportunity to share their story with a broad audience while promoting tourism, economic development and community pride."

► Season four highlights

When a county joins Uniquely Wisconsin, the stories told come directly from its people. The unique county personalities work alongside the Discover Mediaworks and WCA team to demonstrate the diversity and innovation found within their county. Season four takes a deep dive into five counties and the fascinating stories in their backyards.

BROWN COUNTY chose to highlight the longstanding community impact of Seroogy's Chocolates, the fascinating history and modern-day treasure of the Brown County Reforestation Camp, and the important contributions of veterans from the county.

MARATHON COUNTY stories showcase the strong connection between agriculture, entrepreneurship and community life. The long history of Ginseng farming in the region, the natural wonder of the Dells of Eau Claire, and the creativity-inspiring Children's Imaginarium are all highlighted.

OUTAGAMIE COUNTY focused on the unique traditions and community initiatives that shape the Fox Cities region, with stories centered on the people, organizations and cultural landmarks that define the county's identity and quality of life. Their stories include a closer look at the county Community Emergency Response Team, Givens Farm and Woolly Green Grazers, and the fascinating use of old space in a new way with the History Museum at the Castle.

PIERCE COUNTY featured the transformation of the Mississippi River community of Prescott, where a local entrepreneur has helped breathe new life in the historic downtown; Vino in the Valley, which provides a community gathering place for family and food to converge; and the Ellsworth Cooperative Creamery that serves as a shining example of how our state's roots are deeply ingrained in the dairy industry.

WASHINGTON COUNTY, one of the original counties involved in launching the Uniquely Wisconsin concept, chose to highlight the region's history, recreational opportunities and



WASHINGTON COUNTY

Answering the Call: The Slinger Fire Department

community pride, including landmarks such as the Chandelier Ballroom, the important work of volunteer firefighters in Slinger, and the county's commitment and celebration of art.

"Season four illustrates the innovation, resilience and pride found in Wisconsin's counties," said Rose. "It is truly an honor to tell these stories."

► Looking ahead to season five and beyond

As Uniquely Wisconsin grows, the program is helping build a statewide narrative that highlights the importance of local communities and the people who make them thrive. Season five is slotted for filming in the coming months with Grant, Washington, Brown, Sawyer and Walworth counties, and season six is starting to fill up.

"With each new season, the series reinforces a simple message," said O'Connell. "Wisconsin's counties are at the foundation of our state and are among our state's greatest assets. We are honored to walk alongside them in telling their stories through this initiative."

Over the past nine months, the Wisconsin Counties has featured these stories. If you have not already done so, we invite you to visit discoverwisconsin.com to watch the videos and learn more about what makes Wisconsin unique. □

Current counties sharing their Uniquely Wisconsin stories in season four include Brown, Marathon, Outagamie, Pierce and Washington. Previous counties highlighted in the first three seasons of Uniquely Wisconsin include Adams, Ashland, Calumet, Green Lake, Jefferson, Kenosha, Lincoln, Marathon, Monroe, Oconto, Portage, Price, Racine, Rock, Sauk, Sheboygan, Washington and Wood.

To see season four stories, as well as previous seasons, visit Discover Wisconsin's YouTube page at youtube.com/DiscoverWI and scroll down to the "Uniquely Wisconsin" section. You can also listen to "The Cabin" podcast on your favorite podcast player, where counties in the program are featured. To learn more and join the Emmy Award-winning Uniquely Wisconsin brand, contact WCA President & CEO Mark O'Connell or WCA Communications Consultant Michelle Gormican Thompson at 866-404-2700.



Save the dates for upcoming webinars:

- June 24
- July 22
- August 26
- October 28
- November 18
- December 16

May “In the Board Room” Webinar on Roles and Responsibilities

The election is over and the organizational meeting set the stage for the next two years, so now what do we do? An important job of every county board is to ensure that citizens receive critical services efficiently and effectively. This means the public deserves a strong working relationship between the county board and other elected and appointed officials.

Join us at noon on May 27 for the next session of

“In the Board Room,” where Andy Phillips and the Attolles Law team will guide a discussion on the roles and responsibilities of constitutional officers and department heads in the Wisconsin county government structure.

Visit bit.ly/InTheBoardRoom26 to register for the 2026 webinars. There is no cost to register. Recordings of all webinars are available at wicounties.org. ■

GHT/COUNTY MUTUAL 2026 SCHOLARSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

Applications are being accepted until May 15 for scholarships to a Wisconsin college or university from the WCA Group Health Trust and the Wisconsin County Mutual Insurance Corporation.

Visit wcaght.org and wisconsincountymutual.org for details.

Submit Resolutions for WCA Annual Meeting by June 22

Each year, counties may submit resolutions for consideration at the WCA Annual Business Meeting, held in conjunction with the WCA Annual Conference in September.

Resolutions adopted at the Annual Business Meeting become part of the WCA Platform.

All resolutions must be submitted to the WCA office no later than 4:30 p.m. on Monday, June 22, 2026, to be considered at the 2026 Annual Business Meeting, which is scheduled for Sept. 20 in Sauk County. See page 41 of the April 2026 issue of Wisconsin Counties for full submission instructions. For questions, contact WCA Director of Outreach and Member Engagement Sarah Diedrick-Kasdorf at 608-663-7188 or diedrick@wicounties.org.

Local Government Summit 2026 JUNE 11, Stevens Point

Join local leaders, public safety professionals, and municipal partners. The agenda will focus on collaborative approaches in police, fire and EMS services; partnerships to improve efficiency and outcomes; best practices and real-world success stories; and opportunities for future intergovernmental cooperation. For more information visit localgovinstitute.org or contact Tim Hanna at timothyhanna24@gmail.com. The Local Government Institute of Wisconsin is hosted by the WCA, the League of Wisconsin Municipalities, and the Wisconsin Towns Association.



Prime Exclusive Offer for WCA Members

The WCA has partnered with Amazon Business for a new, exclusive program. WCA member counties and their departments are now eligible to sign up for a free Amazon Business Prime membership that includes free and fast shipping, a pre-approved line of credit, and a 25% discount on select office, maintenance, repair, operational and IT products.

WCA members can also leverage a competitively awarded contract by OMNIA Partners to purchase on Amazon Business across all categories for additional savings.

Contact the WCA for more information.

2026 County Officials Workshops

Listen. Learn. Lead.

In May, the UW-Madison Division of Extension Local Government Education program and the WCA will co-host their biennial County Officials Workshops across the state, with an online option in June.



Open to all members, these workshops are led by experienced educators from the WCA and UW-Madison Extension who will provide an in-depth look at:

- Roles and responsibilities of county officials
- Running effective meetings
- Wisconsin's Open Meetings and Public Records laws
- Agendas and minutes
- County budgeting
- Ethics and conflicts of interest

All in-person workshops are from 8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.



Local Government Education
DIVISION OF EXTENSION
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Visit wicounties.org for details and to register.

- **Monday, May 11:** Iowa County Board Room, Dodgeville
- **Wednesday, May 13:** Comfort Inn and Suites, Beaver Dam
- **Thursday, May 14:** Mid-State Technical College, Stevens Point
- **Friday, May 15:** Comfort Suites Hotel Rock Garden, Green Bay
- **Wednesday, May 20:** Florian Gardens, Eau Claire
- **Thursday, May 21:** Holiday Inn Express, Hayward
- **Friday, May 22:** Quality Inn, Rhinelander
- **VIRTUAL OPTION** (*attend all three*): June 1, 8 and 15

Monday County Leadership Meetings EVERY MONDAY AT 11 A.M.

This weekly virtual meeting features updates from the WCA Government Affairs team and Attolles Law, association announcements, and guest speakers, such as state agency staff and legislators. A link to the virtual meeting is emailed to WCA members each week.

WCA 2026 DISTRICT MEETINGS

All members are welcome at the WCA 2026 District Meetings in June. The agenda includes a county board supervisor roles and responsibilities refresher from Attolles Law, as well as updates from Forward Analytics and the WCA Government Affairs team. Watch your inbox for an invitation.

North Central Region: Wednesday, June 3, 12–2 p.m.
Hilton Garden Inn Wausau

East Central Region: Thursday, June 4, 8:30–10:30 a.m.
Hilton Appleton Paper Valley

Southern Region: Friday, June 12, 8:30–10:30 a.m.
Glacier Canyon Conference Center, Wisconsin Dells

Northwest Region: Wednesday, June 17, 8:30–10:30 a.m.
Sevenwinds Casino, Lodge & Conference Center, Hayward

West Central Region: Wednesday, June 17, 3–5 p.m.
Florian Gardens, Eau Claire

Western Region: Thursday, June 18, 8:30–10:30 a.m.
Three Bears Resort, Warrens

Southeast Region: Monday, June 22, 8:30–10:30 a.m.
The Ingleside Hotel, Pewaukee



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Expert Warns of Rising Cybersecurity Risks as AI Expands

By Mary Ann Barton, County News Editor and Senior Writer, National Association of Counties

County officials were urged to strengthen cybersecurity defenses and carefully manage the use of artificial intelligence during a presentation by Shannon Smith, director of public sector services for the technology firm CAI, at a February meeting of the National Association of Counties Mid-Size County Caucus.



employee training about data security and AI tools.

Education about how staff use AI systems is particularly important, she said. Employees may unknowingly upload sensitive information into public AI platforms, creating potential data risks for government agencies.

Speaking to members of the caucus, Smith discussed how emerging technologies — including generative AI and large-scale data centers — are reshaping both opportunities and risks for local governments.

Smith also encouraged regional collaboration between counties, cities, private companies and universities to share cybersecurity information and best practices.

Smith, who previously served as CIO chief of staff for King County, Wash., said counties must prepare for increasingly sophisticated cyber threats. Many local governments still rely on aging technology systems, some decades old, which can make them vulnerable to attacks.

Beyond security, Smith highlighted the rapid growth of AI infrastructure, particularly large “hyperscale” data centers operated by companies such as Amazon and Microsoft. Demand for computing power is driving a surge in new facilities across the United States.

“Threat actors look for weak usernames and passwords, outdated systems and employees who might accidentally click a malicious link,” Smith said. “Ransomware gets the headlines, but it often starts with those basic vulnerabilities.”

Data centers currently account for about 4% of electricity use in the country and could reach as much as 9–12% by 2030, she said. A single hyperscale facility can consume as much power as 100,000 homes and use millions of gallons of water daily.

Artificial intelligence is accelerating those threats, she said. Tools such as ChatGPT, Claude and Gemini allow attackers to automate phishing messages, refine scams and launch thousands of attempts in a short period of time at minimal cost.

While the expansion creates economic opportunities, Smith said counties must balance those benefits with infrastructure and environmental considerations.

“AI allows threat actors to move faster and learn from failed attempts,” Smith said. “They no longer need large teams to run sophisticated cyber operations.”

She also urged local leaders to engage residents early when adopting AI technologies in public services.

At the same time, Smith emphasized that AI can also strengthen government operations when used responsibly. She encouraged counties to focus on stronger password protections, multifactor authentication and improved

“People want to know how their data is being used and whether a human is still part of the process,” Smith said. “If you start those conversations early, you build trust and learn how your community actually wants to use these tools.”

Smith concluded that while AI and cybersecurity challenges may seem daunting, thoughtful policies and collaboration can help counties adopt the technology responsibly while protecting public data and services. ■

She encouraged counties to focus on stronger password protections, multifactor authentication and improved employee training...



ON ALERT: Cyber Threats Target U.S. Infrastructure and Communications

In April, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency issued a national alert due to increased efforts, some of which have been successful, by Iranian-affiliated cyber actors to exploit internet-connected devices that operate critical infrastructure in the United States.

CISA also issued a joint public service announcement with the FBI in March, warning the public about ongoing phishing campaigns against messaging apps (e.g., Signal, Google Chat, Facebook Messenger) by cyber actors associated with the Russian Intelligence Services. Phishing is a cybercrime

in which scammers impersonate legitimate organizations via email, text, or phone to steal sensitive information such as passwords, credit card numbers, or other personal data. After compromising an account, malicious actors can view the victims' messages and contact lists, send messages, and conduct additional phishing against other accounts.

To learn more about ongoing threats, how to keep your county's infrastructure secure, and to access resources, visit cisa.gov and the Wisconsin Department of Administration Division of Enterprise Technology website at det.wi.gov. ■

Don't Take the Bait: *Practical Tips to Avoid Phishing Scams*

The following guidance from CISA can be used to identify suspicious messages and help protect yourself from malicious cyber activity on messaging apps:

If it feels off, hit pause: Suspect a scam? Stop all interaction and do not share codes/PINs/passwords. Never share your PIN or two-factor authentication codes for an action you did not initiate.

Treat unknown messages with suspicion: Unexpected messages from unknown contacts (or even "friends" with odd or unusual requests) may be phishing attempts. Block and report these items to prevent any unauthorized access to your account. If you believe a message may be legitimate, contact the sender through an alternate means of communication to verify before you provide any information.

Scrutinize links before you click: Inspect links and files before clicking or opening. Do not click on suspicious links or attachments — it could install malware or enable unauthorized access to your account.

Verify your group chats regularly: Periodically scan participant lists for duplicates or fakes. If duplicate accounts appear, verify the authenticity of chat participants using another secure method outside the app.

Stay updated and locked down: Be aware of the security features available within the commercial messaging app you use and familiarize yourself with how they work. Enable message expiration features to automatically delete sensitive messages after a set period. For employer-issued devices, verify that applicable records retention policies allow for this setting to be enabled and that doing so is consistent with the law.

Report swiftly: Alert your organization's security team and/or IT department of suspected phishing scams. Additionally, report incidents to the Internet Crime Complaint Center at ic3.gov or your local FBI field office. For financial or identity fraud, also consider notifying local authorities.

Interacting with app support: Most commercial messaging app support services only communicate with users via their official email addresses. Legitimate support services will not request verification codes, especially via direct message within the application itself, or send users links to "verify" or "restore" accounts. Always go directly to the app or the official website before contacting support. □





LEGAL ISSUES

RELATING TO COUNTY GOVERNMENT

You've Got a Friend in Brief

How the WCA Supports Counties in Court

By Andy Phillips, Matt Thome, and Thomas Cameron, Attorneys, Attolles Law, s.c.

The Latin phrase “amicus curiae,” translates to “friend of the court.” An amicus curiae brief (sometimes shortened to “amicus brief”) is a formal legal document filed with an appeals court by someone who isn’t a party to the case. These briefs are intended to assist the court in making its decision, often by providing a perspective the parties cannot offer. In Wisconsin, amicus briefs are generally referred to as “nonparty briefs.”¹

In recent years, there has been more amicus brief activity, both in state and federal courts. This article provides an overview of how amicus briefs have been utilized historically and a summary of the WCA’s recent amicus brief activity.

► An overview of amicus briefs

While their history predates the United States, amicus briefs have been filed with the U.S. Supreme Court since the 1800s.² Because the amicus does not have an immediate stake in the outcome of the case, an amicus is able to offer a different — often broader — perspective than the parties to the case, which can help a court understand the consequences and implications of making certain decisions.

To be clear, not having an immediate stake in the outcome of a case does not mean the amicus has no stake in the outcome. For example, the WCA recently filed an amicus brief with the U.S. Supreme Court in *Pung v. Isabella County*, a case involving the disposition of a property acquired through tax foreclosure proceedings in Michigan. The court’s decision will apply immediately to the parties in that case. However, the decision could be written in a way that would change how

tax foreclosure proceedings must be conducted nationwide, which would affect Wisconsin counties.

Amicus briefs are particularly helpful to courts when they go beyond the party briefs. Some judges have been critical of amicus briefs that “duplicate the arguments made in the litigants’ briefs, in effect merely extending the length of the litigant’s brief.”³ At the same time, even those judges see the value “when the amicus has unique information or perspective that can help the court beyond the help that the lawyers for the parties are able to provide.”

In other words, the key to an effective amicus brief is that it supplements, rather than duplicates, the party’s brief. One way an amicus brief can do that is by focusing on a single issue, which is not always possible in a party brief.

In particular, an amicus brief can add value by expanding on arguments that a party could not make, or for one reason or another could not fully develop, such as page limits; providing reliable information beyond the record in a case; and explaining the potential effect of the court’s decision.

► Recent WCA amicus brief activity

The WCA has filed amicus briefs for many years. Over the past few years, this has increased, particularly in regard to mental health proceedings. When filing an amicus brief in support of a county, the WCA endeavors to go beyond the county’s brief, with particular emphasis on advancing and expanding arguments the county could not make directly and on the statewide impact of the decision.

The following are seven significant cases in which the WCA has filed an amicus brief in the last three years.

■ **Pung v. Isabella County (U.S. Supreme Court, 2026).**

In this U.S. Supreme Court case, Pung's home was taken through the tax foreclosure process for failure to pay nearly \$2,250 in delinquent taxes. The home sold for about \$76,000 at auction. The home was worth approximately \$195,000 at the time of the tax foreclosure.

As the court made clear in *Tyler v. Hennepin County* in 2023, the retention of surplus sale proceeds is an unconstitutional taking without just compensation. In the latest case, Pung argued that "just compensation" required Isabella County to pay them the "fair market value" of the property, minus the tax debt, at the time the deed was acquired. If this rule were adopted, it would have significant and immediate implications for tax foreclosures across the country. The WCA's brief focused on the tax foreclosure process in Wisconsin and the implications of Pung's proposed rule.

The court has heard oral argument on this case and is expected to issue a decision in May 2026.

■ **Winnebago County v. D.E.W. (Wisconsin Supreme Court, 2024).** This Wisconsin Supreme Court case addressed how much a physician needed to discuss a proposed medication that a county sought to administer involuntarily to a patient. The prior case law established that the conversation could be general in nature regarding the advantages, disadvantages, and effects of certain medications. In this case, the individual sought a new standard requiring physicians to have a specific discussion about each medication.

The WCA filed an amicus brief supporting Winnebago County, arguing that the court should reaffirm the existing standards regarding proposed medication and mootness.

While the court initially decided to consider this case, after reviewing all the briefs, the justices decided they had "improvidently granted" the request to consider the case and prior case law stands.

■ **Waukesha County v. M.A.C. (Wisconsin Supreme Court, 2024).** This Wisconsin Supreme Court case addressed the

notice requirement for a mental health recommitment hearing under Chapter 51 of state statutes. Specifically, the case addressed a situation in which the county provided notice to the attorney who represented an individual at the original commitment hearing but did not provide notice specifically to the individual because it could not locate the individual. Based on the 2019 state Supreme Court decision in *Waukesha County v. S.L.L.*, this was an acceptable procedure.

The WCA filed an amicus brief in 2024 supporting Waukesha County and argued that the court should affirm its 2019 decision. The amicus brief asked that if the court overruled the previous decision, then it should provide clear direction to counties on how to proceed with a recommitment hearing when an individual cannot be located.

Ultimately, the court overruled the previous decision but provided some guidance as requested.

■ **Outagamie County v. M.J.B. (Wisconsin Supreme Court, 2025).** Chapter 51 requires that two court-appointed examiners prepare reports and provide those reports to the attorney for the person to be committed at least 48 hours before the final commitment hearing. The Outagamie County v. M.J.B. case before the Wisconsin Supreme Court is about what happens if one of the reports is not provided to the attorney. If approved, M.J.B.'s position would mean that any failure by an independent examiner to meet the 48-hour requirement would automatically result in the circuit court losing the ability to proceed with the final commitment hearing.

The WCA filed an amicus brief supporting Outagamie County, specifically focused on the idea that any failure to meet the 48-hour requirement should be reviewed under the harmless error standard. This would mean that instead of the circuit court automatically losing the ability to proceed with the final commitment hearing when a required report is late, the key to whether the circuit court could continue to the final commitment hearing depends on the harm to the person to be committed due to the report being late.

The court has heard oral argument on this case but not yet issued a decision.

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LEGAL ISSUES

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■ **Racine County v. R.P.L. (Wisconsin Supreme Court, 2026).**

The Racine County v. R.P.L. case before the Wisconsin Supreme Court is about the appropriate standard for determining the elements of “dangerousness” and “permanent” in the context of an annual review in a protective placement case, known as a “Watts review,” and the appropriate standard with which to review that determination on appeal.

Often, cases like this turn on whether a determination is viewed as a “factual determination,” which is entitled to deference on appeal, or a “legal conclusion,” which is not entitled to deference on appeal. Racine County, which was successful at the circuit court level, has argued on appeal that this was a factual determination. The individual has argued that this was a legal conclusion.

The WCA filed an amicus brief supporting Racine County. It specifically focused on the fact that in these cases, the factual determination and the legal conclusion are inherently intertwined. As a result, the WCA argued that — in accordance with the court’s existing case law — these types of appeals should always be treated as “factual determinations.”

The court has heard oral argument on this case but not yet issued a decision.

■ **Waukesha County v. R.D.T. (Wisconsin Supreme Court, 2026).** In the 2019 decision in Portage County v. J.W.K., the Wisconsin Supreme Court held that appeals of expired commitment orders are moot “where no collateral implications of the commitment order are raised.” Since then, the court has expanded what constitutes a “collateral consequence,” such that commitment and recommitment orders are arguably never moot. Because commitment and recommitment orders only last for one year, this means courts could be asked to decide cases that, as a practical matter, won’t change anything.

In this case, the Court of Appeals decided that R.D.T.’s appeal was moot, and so did not address the underlying merits of the appeal.

Waukesha County’s brief to the Wisconsin Supreme Court focused on the argument that R.D.T.’s appeal was

moot under current law. The WCA took a broader approach and argued that the court should return to its previous mootness standard from Portage County v. J.W.K.

The Supreme Court has heard oral argument on this case but not yet issued a decision.

■ **Wisconsin Voter Alliance et al. v. Kristina Secord (Wisconsin Supreme Court, 2024 and 2026).** This case is about whether Notice of Voting Eligibility forms completed as part of a circuit court’s guardianship proceedings are subject to disclosure under the Public Records Law, or whether they are confidential and may not be disclosed.

This long-running case has already resulted in two Court of Appeals decisions and a Wisconsin Supreme Court decision. The case is currently on appeal to the Supreme Court for a second time. The WCA has filed three amicus briefs in this litigation. In each, it has emphasized the statewide nature of this particular issue, the importance of clarity, and its belief that the relevant statutes are clear and that the Court of Appeals decision in Wisconsin Voter Alliance v. Reynolds is correct.

As of this writing, the Supreme Court has scheduled oral argument for April 21, 2026.

▶ **Conclusion**

The WCA is actively monitoring cases in addition to those described in this article. If your county is involved in litigation that could have statewide implications and you believe an amicus brief from the WCA would be helpful, please contact the association. The WCA is committed to helping counties through the judicial process.

If you have any questions surrounding this article, please do not hesitate to contact the WCA or the authors. ■

Attolles Law, s.c. works on behalf of Wisconsin counties, school districts, and other public entities across the state of Wisconsin. Its president & CEO, Andy Phillips, has served as outside general counsel for the Wisconsin Counties Association for more than 20 years.

1. Wis. Stat. § 809.19(7).
2. The first instance of an amicus curiae being involved in a case in the United States is generally identified as Green v. Biddle, an 1823 U.S. Supreme Court decision addressing a land dispute.
3. See, e.g., Ryan v. Commodity Futures Trading Com’n, 125 F.3d 1062, 1063 (7th Cir. 1993) (Posner, C.J., in chambers).

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