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Law allows easier dairy growth

Legislation good for farmers and environment, Doyle says

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Gov. Jim Doyle said a bill he signed Tuesday will protect Wisconsin's dairy industry and its environment.

Supporters say the so-called Livestock Siting Bill will lead to consistent statewide standards for farms, especially dairies, that want to modernize and grow.

"Under this law, farmers will know up front the rules of the game," Doyle said Tuesday during a ceremony at the Equity Cooperative Livestock Sales Association south of Eau Claire.

The law will affect farms with more than 500 cattle. It requires the state Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection to create rules for the location and expansion of these farms. Local governments only can adopt stricter rules if there is a scientific basis for them.

"We're going to be able to grow our businesses and be good stewards of the land and base our decisions on science, not emotion," said Jay Richardson, who owns a 600-cow dairy near Plum City. Richardson is a member of the Dairy Business Association, an industry group that backed the bill.

But some environmentalists say the bill won't help most farmers.

"It's kind of a cosmetic approach to solving a problem that doesn't exist," said Andrew Hanson, an attorney for Madison-based Midwest Environmental Advocates, which opposed the bill. Hanson said the bill's backers assume local governments are the biggest barriers to expanding livestock operations. However, he said, local governments grant most zoning permits. Farmers who want to

expand would be helped best by consistent and fair prices for their products rather than altered regulations, Hanson said.

Hanson fears the bill will push more small farmers to expand or quit farming. He said bigger farms aren't necessarily better and can lead to environmental problems, especially because of large amounts of animal waste.

"We're going to get to a point in this state where we're not going to have enough land or enough clean water to sustain this trend," he said of expanding farms.

The requirement that stricter local regulations be backed by scientific findings could hinder local officials who can't afford to hire experts, Hanson said.

He also objected to a new statewide board that can overturn local decisions.

Doyle disagreed, saying the law sets statewide standards but retains local control.

Like Doyle, state Rep. Barbara Gronemus, who co-sponsored the bill, said the law didn't limit local control. Rather, the statewide board will settle disputes, said Gronemus, D-Whitehall. Gronemus added that the law will ensure governments make decisions affecting livestock siting more quickly.

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