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### **Why Ag initiative draws excitement to agriculture employment opportunities**

*New statewide program creates agricultural career connections at Wisconsin School Counselor Association Conference, Feb. 22-24, in Madison*

MADISON, Wis. [February 27, 2012] – The Why Ag Initiative was officially launched Feb. 22-24, 2012 during the 2012 Wisconsin School Counselor Association (WSCA) Conference at the Monona Terrace Convention Center in Madison, Wis.

More than 1,000 school counselors from across the state learned about employment opportunities available in Wisconsin's agriculture, food and natural resource industry through the Why Ag initiative, created by the Wisconsin Agricultural Education and Workforce Development Council (WAEWDC). Career guidance tools and hands-on presentations complemented the unveiling of the interactive website [www.WhyAg.com](http://www.WhyAg.com).

"With educational professionals across the state in search of information and resources to advise their students about careers, the launch of Why Ag could not be more relevant or timely," says Natalie Killion, professional school counselor at Green Bay Preble High School. "The more knowledgeable school counselors are about the promising future of the agricultural industry, the more likely they will be to discuss these opportunities with their students, thereby strengthening Wisconsin's workforce."

Killion kicked off the launch by sharing her professional agriculture and student counseling experiences. She has found that once students make career connections, they are more apt to focus on academics. Fulfilling that philosophy and creating individualized student plans as part of the Wisconsin Comprehensive School Counseling Model were essential in reducing freshman failure rates on her caseload from 40 percent to 9 percent in one year at Green Bay Preble High School.

"When the students learn what agriculture has to offer, they are excited about the opportunities and eager to learn more," she says. "Once the students make the career connection, everything else follows. If that connection is in agriculture, we can foster that passion as one out of 10 jobs in Wisconsin is related to the industry. Agriculture is here to stay and it has the potential to grow."

Counselors in attendance were most impressed with the diversity of employment opportunities in the technologically growing industry.

"Jobs in agriculture are not what you may first think of," Killion explains. "Biological sciences, biotechnology and international ag business are projected to be some of the hottest career opportunities for the future. The tools available at [www.WhyAg.com](http://www.WhyAg.com) can help students secure connections within the wide range of careers available in the agricultural industry."

Pam Jahnke, farm director at the Wisconsin Farm Report, Randy Zogbaum, education director for the Wisconsin Technical College System Agriculture and Natural Resources programs, and Ferron Havens, president and CEO at the Wisconsin Agribusiness Council, Inc., joined the launch discussion and outlined the functionality and adaptability of [www.WhyAg.com](http://www.WhyAg.com).

As the core portal of the Why Ag initiative, the interactive website connects students, displaced workers and those looking for increased employment opportunities with educational and employment advice. The tools demonstrate that many skillsets are transferrable between non-agriculture and agriculturally-focused jobs. A Skills-to-Jobs Matrix also matches individual skills to position descriptions from the fields of agriculture, biotechnology and life sciences.

"The website can help students find a job that interests them – and a job that will pay handsomely after training," Jahnke says. "Last year, there was an 18 percent increase in agricultural exports from Wisconsin. We are screaming for employees at all levels; if they're interested and motivated, we can find them a job."

Zogbaum and Havens added that the tools of [www.WhyAg.com](http://www.WhyAg.com) are applicable to workforce members at all levels.

"On average, employees change careers 10 to 15 times," Havens explained. "This site allows people to try agriculture and to see if their existing skills can be put to use in the agriculture industry. Skills of all kinds can be applied to agriculture; the possibilities are significant and the resources to learn more are available."

The official launch continued through the three-day WSCA Conference with agriculturalists on hand to share their experiences at the event's trade show. Carrie Mickelson, Human Resource Director at the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, staffed the event and noticed mindset changes in several urban-based school counselors.

"The excitement has been amazing," Mickelson says. "People who have stopped by are learning, they're excited about agriculture and they're making connections that they'll bring back to their schools to make a difference."

"The interest in agriculture that we saw from school counselors signals a successful future for the agriculture industry in Wisconsin," says Paul Larson, member of the WAEWDC and agriculture educator at Freedom High School in Outagamie County. "The goal of Why Ag is to connect students and non-agricultural workers with the emerging job opportunities in Wisconsin's \$59 billion agriculture, food and natural resources industry. The enthusiasm generated at the conference will help to carry out that goal."

For more information on the Why Ag Initiative, visit [www.WhyAg.com](http://www.WhyAg.com) or contact Jack Ourada, WAEWDC executive director, at 608-235-7148 or [jack.ourada@wisconsin.gov](mailto:jack.ourada@wisconsin.gov). Please direct interview requests to Mark MacPhail, chair of WAEWDC, at 630-857-4248 or [mark.macphail@mccain.com](mailto:mark.macphail@mccain.com) or Paul Larson at 920-788-7940x329 or [plarson@freedomschools.k12.wi.us](mailto:plarson@freedomschools.k12.wi.us).

The Wisconsin Agricultural Education and Workforce Development Council was created by Wisconsin Act 223. The group works to grow Wisconsin's ability to compete by creating a stronger and sustainable workforce for the agriculture, food and natural resources industry. WAEWDC recommends policies and initiatives, encourages youth to pursue related careers, facilitates public and private partnerships, recruits qualified workers and offers professional development throughout the state of Wisconsin.

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Editors Note: To download images, go to: <http://bit.ly/yCQBm4>

WhyAg\_logo.jpg

The Why Ag Initiative was officially launched as part of the 2012 Wisconsin School Counselor Association (WSCA) Conference, Feb. 22-24, 2012 at the Monona Terrace Convention Center in Madison, Wis. The program's objective is to highlight the availability of agricultural employment opportunities throughout Wisconsin.

WhyAg\_Killion.jpg

The statewide Why Ag initiative was officially launched as part of the Wisconsin School Counselor Association Conference, Feb. 22-24 in Madison. Natalie Killion, professional school counselor, told the group of Wisconsin counselors how demonstrating the opportunities of modern agriculture has helped her to increase student performance at Green Bay Preble High School.

WhyAg\_Jahnke.jpg

Pam Jahnke, farm director at the Wisconsin Farm Report, told counselors at the Wisconsin School Counselor Association Conference in Madison that agricultural jobs in Wisconsin are new, exciting and accessible. By sharing her life experiences, she helped school counselors from across the state to connect with the opportunities in the agriculture, food and natural resource industry.

WhyAg\_Trade Show.jpg

School counselors from across Wisconsin met in Madison Feb. 22-24 for the 2012 Wisconsin School Counselor Association Conference. Attendees had the opportunity to discuss employment opportunities in the agriculture industry at a display created through the Why Ag initiative. Here, Carrie Mickelson, Human Resource Director at the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, shares tools on how counselors can incorporate [www.WhyAg.com](http://www.WhyAg.com) into their teaching toolkits.

WhyAg\_Screenshot.jpg

The core tool of the Why Ag Initiative is an interactive website. Accessible free of charge, [www.WhyAg.com](http://www.WhyAg.com) offers educational and employment resources including a Skills-to-Job Matrix which matches an individual's existing skills to position descriptions from the fields of agriculture, biotechnology and life sciences.