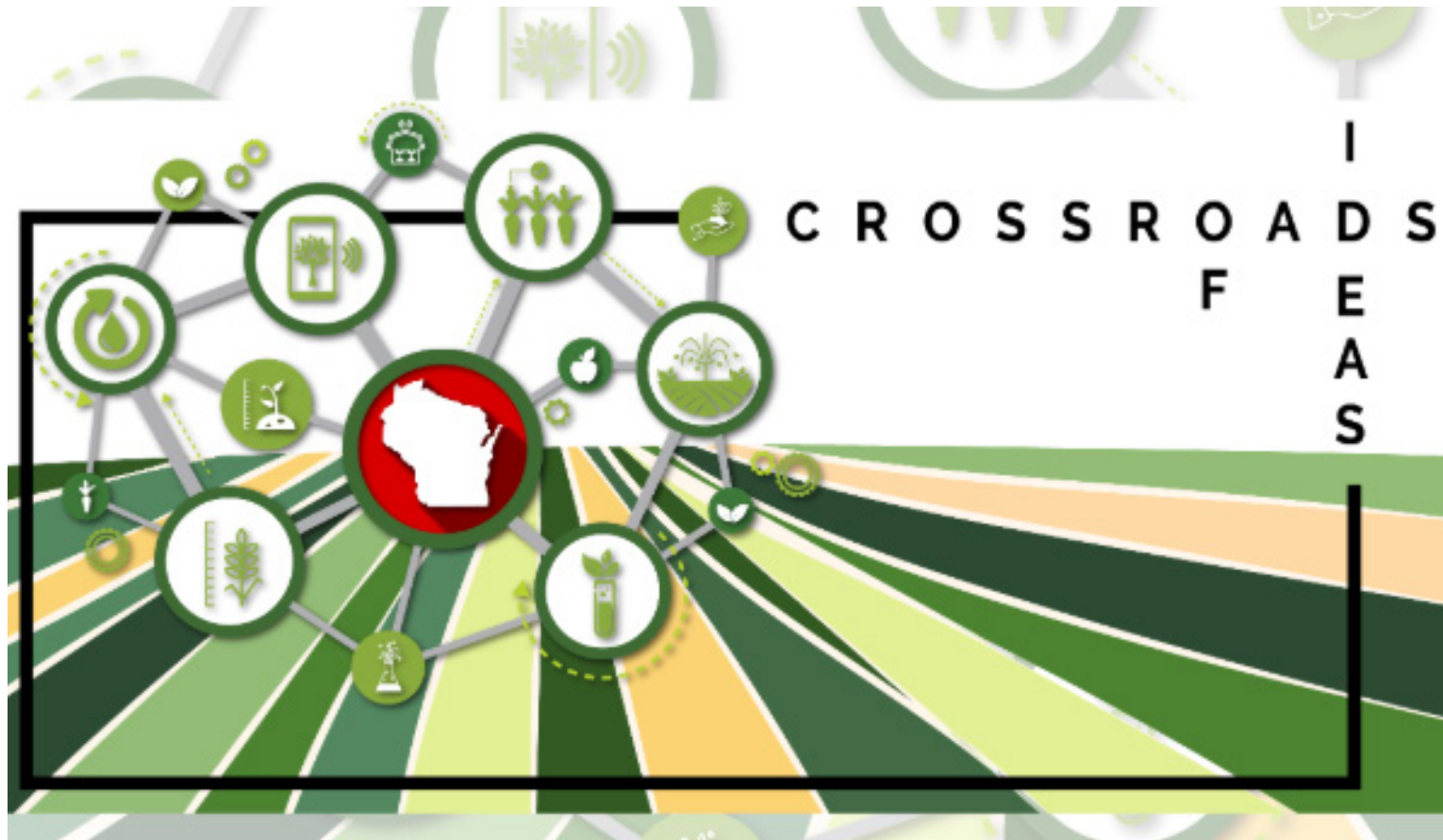


# CROSSROADS OF IDEAS: WISCONSIN'S ROLE IN SHAPING THE FUTURE OF AGRICULTURE

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Crossroads of Ideas: Wisconsin's Role in Shaping the Future of Agriculture event graphic.

To kickstart the Wisconsin Science Festival's feature of agriculture, the DeLuca Forum at the Discovery Building in Madison hosted an engaging panel discussion with a line-up of University of Wisconsin-Madison researchers from the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALs). The hour-long event took place Monday, October 14th, from 7-8pm and saw the panelists take a deep look into the innovation and tradition of Wisconsin agriculture, alongside the opportunities and challenges faced at the leading edge of sustainable systems. Dr. Glenda Gillaspay, Dean of UW-Madison CALS, moderated the event and helped highlight the incredible researchers who brought their own unique perspective to the discussion. This event, in addition to being part of the weeklong Wisconsin Science Festival, was also the first of a full year-long line-up of Crossroads events.



Left to Right: Dean Glenda Gillaspay, Dr. Julie Dawson, Dr. Sean Conley, Dr. Rebecca Smith, Dr. Randy Jackson.

## A Focus on Agriculture

To open the evening, Heather Gayton, Outreach Program Manager for the College of Agricultural & Life Sciences, welcomed the audience, setting the stage for a thoughtful dialogue on how Wisconsin is driving innovation in agriculture. She noted the integral role agriculture plays in shaping the state's economy and sustainability efforts, explaining how this event would explore the ways in which UW-Madison researchers are responding to critical issues in agriculture—everything from the economic pressures on farmers to environmental challenges like soil health and climate change.

## An Engaging Lineup of Panelists

**Dr. Julie Dawson**, a professor in the UW-Madison Department of Plant and Agroecosystem Sciences and Extension Specialist for Regional Food Systems, talked about her work in developing sustainable crop options for Wisconsin's farmers. As part of UW's Emerging Crops Accelerator program, she collaborates closely with farmers to introduce alternative crops like hazelnuts, food-grade grains, and perennial vegetables. Dr. Dawson is especially committed to small-scale, organic growers, helping to give direct-to-market farms the resources they need. She emphasized the importance of providing farmers with greater crop diversity as a crucial step toward building resilience within Wisconsin's agricultural sector.

**Dr. Shawn Conley**, a professor and the State Soybean and Small Grain Specialist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, leads the UW Soybean Research Program "a.k.a. The UW BeanTeam" which uses data-driven insights to help farmers make informed decisions on crop rotation, cover cropping, and economic sustainability. Over the past decade, his research has gathered data from over 600,000 acres of Midwest farmland, providing simulations that allow farmers to test various crop and soil management strategies. Dr. Conley's enthusiasm for the project highlighted his belief that research is key in helping farmers optimize their practices while keeping environmental impact in check.

**Dr. Rebecca Smith**, an assistant professor of Plant and Agroecosystem Sciences at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a researcher with the Wisconsin Energy Institute and the Great Lakes Bioenergy Research Center (GLBRC), talked about her involvement in the Dairy Innovation Hub project which focuses on boosting sustainability in the dairy industry both environmentally and economically. Her work centers around enhancing plant digestibility for dairy cattle to lower methane emissions. Her research integrates plant science and animal nutrition to foster a rounded sustainable strategy that showcases Wisconsin's dairy farms as pioneers in eco-friendly agriculture.

**Dr. Randy Jackson**, a professor of Grassland Ecology in the Department of Agronomy at UW-Madison, spoke about his work incorporating native grasslands and prairie systems into Wisconsin's farming landscape. Through the long-running Wisconsin Integrated Cropping Systems Trial, Dr. Jackson studied the environmental benefits of restoring grasslands, such as improved soil health and carbon sequestration. As a project leader of the Grassland 2.0 project, he stressed that restoring grasslands could make Wisconsin's agriculture more resilient and sustainable, providing both environmental and economic benefits.



Left to Right: Dean Glenda Gillaspay, Dr. Julie Dawson, Dr. Sean Conley, Dr. Rebecca Smith, Dr. Randy Jackson.

## Envisioning a Sustainable Future

The discussion primarily focused on the complex challenges in Wisconsin agriculture. Dr. Jackson advocated for an "agroecological" approach to balance environmental, social, and economic needs, pointing out that current agricultural models often overdraw on natural resources. Dr. Smith and Dr. Conley echoed these concerns in their respective fields, calling for greater flexibility and data-driven decision-making to support sustainable practices. Dr. Dawson added that industry consolidation limits farmers' choices, making it hard for them to adopt alternatives; her research calls for more diverse seed options to give farmers greater control over what they grow.

Technology and policy were central to the solutions discussed. Dr. Conley noted how drones and satellite imaging allow farmers to monitor and manage crops more effectively, while Dr. Dawson shared how digital tools connect smaller breeders and farmers to increase crop diversity. The panelists agreed that policy reforms are key, with Dr. Jackson and Dr. Smith emphasizing changes in the Farm Bill to incentivize sustainable practices. All underscored the importance of community collaboration, as exemplified by UW-Madison's extension programs, which help translate research into real-world solutions for Wisconsin's farmers.



Dr. Glenda Gillaspay, dean of UW-Madison College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, moderates a lively discussion.

## The Wisconsin Science Festival as a Crossroads of Ideas

The Wisconsin Science Festival, now in its 14th year, serves as a dynamic platform for exploring science, art, and innovation. This year's feature of all things agriculture exemplified its mission to connect people of all ages and interests with science. The Crossroads of Ideas event was one of over 600 events taking place statewide, spanning more than 50 of Wisconsin's 72 counties. These events bring together researchers, communities, and curious minds to discover and unleash their curiosity.

The Wisconsin Science Festival itself is a crossroads of ideas, connecting the public with the research and innovation taking place at institutions like the University of Wisconsin. By fostering dialogue on the future of farming, agroecology, and public policy it showcases how science and community collaboration can work hand in hand to address global challenges and build a brighter future for Wisconsin and beyond.

A video recording of the entire event is [available online](#).