

# County fair organizers worry about prize funds

**FAIRS, From 1B**

Under pressure to cut \$4 million from his \$76 million budget, Nilsestuen said the alternative was to reduce meat inspections or other core programs in the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection.

Still, as a onetime fair competitor in his native Trempealeau County, he acknowledged that eliminating the prize money would be unpopular.

"It isn't an easy decision," he said. "We're just going to have to face it."

County fair boosters are not ready to give up.

The Wisconsin Association of Fairs is encouraging its members to lobby their state lawmakers to reject Doyle's proposal.

Jane Grabarski, executive director of the association, said state funding is not only an important resource, but also an effective tool for ensuring that county fairs conform to state rules on such things as livestock handling and public health.

If there is no risk of losing state funding, fairs could disintegrate into haphazard operations, Grabarski said.

"That would change the whole fabric of fairs," she said.

In addition to livestock competition, children and other fair exhibitors traditionally compete for the honor of claiming the best in baked goods, flower gardens, arts and crafts, insect collections and a host of other categories.

Children often are organized through such groups as the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, 4-H Clubs and Future Farmers of America.

With the cash prizes, a blue-ribbon finisher typically gets a \$3, \$5 or \$10 premium, with lesser rewards for second place, third place and so on.

## 'It is something'

Last year, the Racine County Fair awarded \$18,500 in prizes to about 1,000 kids. The state provided \$12,000 of that, with the rest coming out of the fair's \$300,000 budget.

Racine County Fair Secretary Carol Steilein said officials have not decided whether they would continue to offer cash prizes without state help. Doing away with the prizes could reduce participation in the fair, she said.

"The prize is not great, but it is something. It does motivate them to some degree," she said of contestants.

The Waukesha County Fair said it would lose about \$12,000 a year in state funds under Doyle's plan.

Last year, the Washington County Fair awarded premiums to 894 children and 614 adults, for a total of \$14,500 in prizes, of which the state provided \$9,000.

Lang said that although adults can win prizes, too, a key concern with Doyle's proposal is its effect on children who might come away from fairs feeling unappreciated.

"You know how you felt when you were a kid and you got 50 cents put in your hand," she said. "It's the kids who are going to suffer."

Other fair organizers said that even adults value their chance to take home a few dollars from the fair.

Kenneth Riemer, president of the Ozaukee County Fair, said he would work to maintain the cash prizes, no matter how insignificant they seem to some people.

"It's just like going to the store with a 25-cent coupon," he said. "You want to use that coupon."