



CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

YOUR RURAL NEWS FOR MORE THAN 45 YEARS | LYONS, NEBRASKA | POPULATION 851 | JANUARY & FEBRUARY 2023

A farm bill for rural America

BY KAYLA BERGMAN, KAYLAB@CFRA.ORG

Rural America is affected significantly by the farm bill. As we approach the expiration of the current farm bill, the Center for Rural Affairs has developed a set of recommendations for the next legislation.

The plans in “A Farm Bill for Rural America: 2023 Farm Bill Platform” came from extensive outreach and relationship building in rural communities across Nebraska, Iowa, Minnesota, South Dakota, and Kansas.

The recommendations will protect and improve the Conservation Stewardship and Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance programs. They will also ease the enrollment process for underserved producers accessing U.S. Department of Agriculture programs, better serve producers that implement cover crops or are certified organic looking to buy crop insurance, and secure long-term support for small meat processors.

—TURN TO PAGE 3 FOR A DEEPER LOOK



The Center's 2023 farm bill platform is based on dozens of one-on-one conversations with agricultural producers, several roundtables, a paper survey sent to nearly 5,000 individuals, and numerous conversations with organizations and individuals participating in USDA programs. | Photo by Kylie Kai

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Center for Rural Affairs launches multi-million dollar initiative to support small meat processing

BY RHEA LANDHOLM, RHEAL@CFRA.ORG

Nebraska independent meat processors now have access to \$10 million in loan capital through the Center for Rural Affairs.

The new initiative comes at a time when small lock-

ers across the state have seen an increase in use. When packing plants were suffering from COVID-19 worker health challenges and the national meat supply

—SEE **NEW INITIATIVE** ON PAGE 2

Editor's note

BY RHEA LANDHOLM, RHEAL@CFRA.ORG

The Center for Rural Affairs is approaching a major milestone. This year, on Sept. 5, we celebrate 50 years.

In 1973, we were founded by rural Nebraskans concerned about the loss of economic opportunity in agriculture and the decline of rural communities. Fifty years later, we remain focused on these issues plus more that affect rural people across the country.

The workload has expanded and will continue evolving as communities are faced with new opportunities and challenges. Our staff has multiplied—we now have about 50 full-time staff in four states. Our budget has



increased—in 1973, who could've dreamed of a \$10 million grant like what is featured on the front page of our newsletter?

I bet you have a story of how you connected with us. How many

years have you received our newsletter? Did you work at the Center? Were you a part of our work in the 1980s? '90s?

Throughout this next year, we'll be looking back at our last 50 years, studying our present work, and determining what the next 50 years of the Center looks like.

We want to hear from you. Send me an email at rheal@cfra.org. Tell us your Center story. Let us know what topics you are most interested in and what you see in our future. I look forward to reading your stories and may even feature them in a future newsletter story or blog (with your permission, of course).

New initiative, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

chain faltered, these small businesses kept serving local customers.

This boost to Nebraska's rural economy is made possible with a U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development Meat and Poultry Intermediary Lending Program grant.

"Small meat lockers—independent businesses by definition—help anchor small town main streets," said Brian Depew, executive director of the Center. "They provide jobs and a retail outlet for affordable and quality local food. Independent livestock farmers rely on them to process their animals into marketable products. And, as the pandemic illustrated, they're

a critical pillar of a resilient food system in times of crisis."

For more than 30 years, the Center has offered loans, one-on-one business counseling, and other support to small businesses in Nebraska. Expanding these services for independent meat processors and in turn, supporting local farmers, was the next step, according to Brian.

These loans can be used for expansion of existing processors, start-up of new processors, real estate purchase, facilities update or expansion, equipment purchase, energy efficiency upgrades to facilities and equipment, sale of an existing business in cases where the sale will avert closure,

or working capital.

Both primary and secondary meat processing facilities are eligible.

"Our local meat lockers need and deserve our support and assistance," Brian said. "We will continue to bring policy change, technical assistance, and lending support to the sector because we understand that local food processing infrastructure is a cornerstone of a vibrant and sustainable rural future."

More information will be available at cfra.org in early 2023. Interested borrowers can contact Wyatt Fraas at 402.254.6893 or wytatf@cfra.org.

PAPER & E-NEWS

This newsletter is available both electronically and in print. To receive it online, visit cfra.org/sign-up or email outreach@cfra.org.

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2023 FARM BILL PLATFORM SUMMARY

The Center for Rural Affairs (CFRA) has been at work for nearly 50 years with a mission to establish strong rural communities, social and economic justice, environmental stewardship, and genuine opportunity for all while engaging people in decisions that affect the quality of their lives and the future of their communities. The farm bill is an important legislative vehicle that can be used to support this work. Below is a summary of our organization's priorities for the next farm bill.

CONSERVATION

CFRA supports action to:

Promote annual soil testing for acres enrolled in a Conservation Stewardship Program contract by adding a standalone soil-testing enhancement.

CFRA supports action to:

Require the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service to develop and share guidance on soil testing data interpretation for producers who need it.

CFRA supports action to:

Increase the number of practices available for Conservation Stewardship Program renewal contracts by adding additional enhancements that allow producers to continue to build off of their previous enhancements.

USDA LANGUAGE ACCESSIBILITY

CFRA supports action to:

Direct the U.S. Department of Agriculture to reduce the barriers for producers with limited English proficiency by releasing non-English versions of program announcements simultaneously with the English version.

CFRA supports action to:

Direct the U.S. Department of Agriculture to translate Natural Resources Conservation Service and Farm Service Agency educational materials and program sign-up forms in 12 additional languages.

CFRA supports action to:

Direct the U.S. Department of Agriculture to create a list of reliable interpreters with connections to agriculture in each state.

CROP INSURANCE

CFRA supports action to:

Direct the the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Risk Management Agency to set a separate planting date for certified organic crops, or build in a grace period for certified organic operations so they are not penalized for a certain period after the final planting date.

CFRA supports action to:

Make the Pandemic Cover Crop Program an annual program.

CFRA supports action to:

Keep later reporting deadlines available for relevant producers within the Pandemic Cover Crop Program.

CFRA supports action to:

Direct the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Risk Management Agency to change the cover crop termination date for both Zone 3 and Zone 4 to "required termination of cover crop by 30 days after planting."

RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

CFRA supports action to:

Raise the maximum loan amount available to microentrepreneurs through the Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Program from \$50,000 to \$75,000.

CFRA supports action to:

Modify the prohibition on new construction found in the Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Program to allow for renovation of existing buildings.

CFRA supports action to:

Stop requiring Microenterprise Development Organizations to use multiple sources of funding to provide loans to underserved rural business owners.

SMALL MEAT PROCESSING

CFRA supports action to:

Secure long-term funding for the Meat and Poultry Intermediary Lending Program.

CFRA supports action to:

Allow intermediary lenders to use up to 5% of a grant award for expenses related to establishment or maintenance of a loan loss reserve for the Meat and Poultry Intermediary Lending Program revolving loan fund, lender training, technical assistance to prospective borrowers, and new operational costs related to the Meat and Poultry Intermediary Lending Program revolving loan fund.



To view our entire platform, including background information on each section, please visit cfra.org/farm-policy.

Coffee shop owners create environment that promotes and celebrates rural

BY LIZ STEWART

Take the risk. For Rachael Barlow and Heather Veik, those are words to live by. Although they weren't sure what it might turn into, these two good friends dreamed of doing something unique together. And, while all sorts of ideas, projects, and plans crossed their minds, one in particular kept coming back to them.

"We were dreaming of something that we could put our creative minds to work at," said Rachael. "In a mix of lots of aspirations, we threw the idea of a coffee shop around, but put it on the back burner until we couldn't take the burning desire off our minds."

That desire became reality when Heather and Rachael opened River Mill Coffee Co., in Neligh, Nebraska, on Sept. 27, 2021.

The road to becoming business owners had some twists and turns.

The women first turned to the Neligh Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development Office for guidance. From there, they were directed to the Center for Rural Affairs and Senior Loan Specialist Lori Schrader, who helped them develop a business plan. Lori also connected them with a Center contractor who helped the entrepreneurs put together financial projections and bookkeeping options.

And, the Center worked alongside a bank to provide Rachael and Heather with a loan to help start their dream business.

In addition, the City of Neligh provided the entrepreneurs with city funds for the business. Lori and a microenterprise tax expert from the Center helped Heather and Rachael gather the docu-



Rachael Barlow and Heather Veik's vision for River Mill Coffee Co. was to create an environment that didn't feel like rural, yet also promotes and celebrates rural. They opened the shop in Neligh, Nebraska, in September 2021. | Photo by Kylie Kai

ments, fill out the application, and qualify for the Nebraska Microenterprise Tax Credit.

The owners are grateful for the support.

"Lori was always available, no matter if it was questions or worries," Heather said. "She felt more like a close friend than a loan officer. We really value her support and enthusiasm for our dreams."

Today, River Mill Coffee Co. stands as a modern coffee shop specializing in quality espresso, coffees, and teas. They also offer smoothies, crafted sodas, homemade baked goods, and unique sandwiches and salads.

Along with help from half a dozen employees, Rachael and Heather work to make the coffee shop a place that offers more than food and beverages.

"Our vision for River Mill was to create an environment that didn't feel like rural Nebraska, yet also promotes and celebrates rural Nebraska," Rachael said. "Something that feels like a retreat immediately when you walk through the door. We also wanted it to be a

comfortable space for all ages to meet friends, do work, and create."

The business owners gained much knowledge through the process of opening their business, and offer their insights to anyone else who might be thinking of taking on that challenge.

"Be ready for a drastic life change and be willing to pour your all into it," said Heather. "Your success comes from being able to embrace those learning experiences—adjust, grow, and keep moving forward to the next one."

Taking the risk paid off for the business owners.

"If you have something in your heart, all you can do is go for it," Rachael said. "We believe we were called to do this, and even in the midst of exhaustion and feeling overwhelmed, it's incredible to think of all the beautiful moments, details, and events that have happened because of the space and the people that have been brought in. We are always dreaming and planning. We hope and pray there is a lot more ahead for River Mill Coffee Co."



ALTERNATIVE BEEHIVE CASE STUDIES

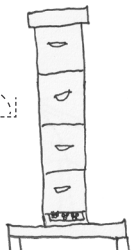
The standard hive in Nebraska is a traditional Langstroth. The Center for Rural Affairs conducted a research project with outside beekeepers, designed to compare and highlight four alternative hive structures: Nuc, Shallow, Top Bar, and Long Langstroth. Each beekeeper was required to keep an alternative hive, as well as two traditional Langstroth hives to use as controls.

This is real-life feedback over the course of three years from seasoned beekeepers. To learn more about our work with beginning farmers and beekeepers, visit cfra.org/farmers.

PROS

CONS

NUC

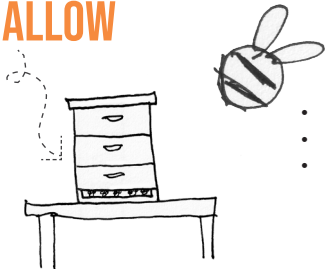


Half as wide as a traditional Langstroth, only holding five frames.

- Easier to store equipment when not in use
- Less disruptive to bees
- Could move entire boxes during instruction
- Entire hive uses deep frames
- Because of small box size, a whole box can go in a chest freezer if there is need to freeze frames

- Carrying a 5-frame deep box is heavy; difficult to take off the top of the hive
- Ladders and straps make working with the hive more physically challenging
- Standard candy board and top feeders don't fit
- Fall over easy
- Hassle to take straps off each time
- Height makes it difficult to manage; requires beekeeper to reach above head

SHALLOW

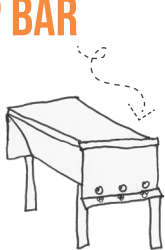


A type of honey super (upper-story hive box). About half as tall as a traditional Langstroth deep box.

- Perfect for cut honeycomb
- Light and easy to handle
- All the same size boxes and frames; don't have to keep track of two different sizes

- A lot of hardware required because more frames are needed
- Storage space required; sometimes bees will fill in three days
- Bees don't like to jump up to the next box because of gaps between shallow boxes, which can create problems
- Frame feeders span two boxes versus the normal one box
- End up with twice as many frames as normal to complete the hive

TOP BAR

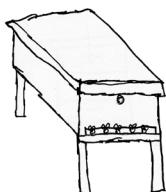


Oriented horizontally, with sloped sides.

- Natural habitat for bees
- Neat to watch the bees build the comb and manage the hive by themselves
- Smelled really good
- Aesthetically pleasing

- Did not do well in the winter
- Constant battle with mice
- Always making cross comb
- Heat made the wax very fragile, which made for slow work
- Messy and frustrating for beekeeper and bees to get in the hives
- Hard to harvest anything, except when it fell off
- More bees were harmed or killed than normal
- A lot of mice in the winter

LONG LANGSTROTH



Uses Langstroth frames, but the hive is oriented horizontally instead of vertically

- Inspection is easy; good snapshot of the overall health of the hive
- Beekeeper can get in and out of the hive quickly, which is best for the hive
- Would make a good breeding hive
- Not very tall so it is easy on one's back
- Three lids allows beekeeper to move from one area to another without disturbing the colony very much
- Easy to feed in the back of the box
- Even with a super added to the top, it isn't very tall and easy to work with

- Poor ventilation; difficult to get air to move to the back
- Condensation, mold, and wood warping
- Can be unstable
- Difficult to build up
- Wood swelling and bowing common, which causes gaps
- Entrances need to be along the long side of the hive; bees have a hard time getting out when the entrances are in the middle or back of hive



In 2020 and 2021, the historic courthouse in Jackson County, Minnesota, was refurbished with \$2.5 million in wind revenue funds. This project included fixing and replacing the copper dome and statue on top of the building, roof work, and tuck pointing. | Photo by Molly Malone

Transmission congestion is costing rural communities

BY MOLLY MALONE, MOLLYM@CFRA.ORG

The wind that steadily blows an open field of prairie grass in the Great Plains just as easily moves the blades of wind turbines.

Buffalo Ridge, in the southwest corner of Minnesota, has benefited from the industry since the 1990s. The geography of the ridge creates a wind rich environment favorable to energy production and taxes from the industry provide revenue to the region.

Wind farms pay tax revenue to the communities that host them based on how much energy they produce. In some cases, the wind industry is the largest source of property tax to a county or township. However, there is not enough transmission infrastructure to support the amount of energy generated, causing grid congestion.

This energy traffic jam not only delays new development, but also shuts down operational turbines. In 2021, some townships in the Buffalo Ridge area saw a more

than 50% reduction in wind energy production and associated tax revenue. More than \$1 million in revenue was lost among three rural counties, and another \$700,000 was lost among 15 more. Estimates from developers indicate 2022 production will be curtailed by about 50%.

To increase transmission capacity, the Midcontinent Independent System Operator (MISO) board unanimously approved a transmission expansion plan known as Tranche 1. The approval is a critical step in relieving grid congestion and enabling renewable energy expansion, but is it enough?

While Tranche 1 should help with grid congestion, the new capacity isn't expected to come online until 2028. In the meantime, transmission capacity deficits are expected to widen. There will not be enough capacity for 10.9 GW by 2027—the equivalent of 3,630 utility scale wind

towers. The problem is primarily in MISO's North/Central region, which includes Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, Michigan, Manitoba, Indiana, Illinois, North Dakota, and part of South Dakota.

Meanwhile, rural communities home to the industry are losing out on tax revenue crucial to economic resiliency and already operational turbines are forced to sit idle.

The Center for Rural Affairs encourages MISO, regulators, and regional utilities to employ other tactics to immediately alleviate grid pressure closer to the wind production sites, such as repairing equipment failures and moving forward with complementary grid improvements.

Read about how rural counties in the Buffalo Ridge region have used their wind energy production tax revenue, in our report "Industry on the Prairie" at cfra.org/publications.

Staff Spotlight: Kalee Olson talks conservation, farm bill in Washington, D.C.

BY TERESA HOFFMAN, TERESAH@CFRA.ORG

With feedback from agricultural producers in hand, Center for Rural Affairs Policy Associate Kalee Olson traveled to Washington, D.C., this fall as part of the 2022 National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC) Farmer Fly-in.

The trip came as Congress considers reauthorization of the farm bill, which is set to expire on Sept. 30, 2023. The fly-in brought together a coalition to talk with members of Congress about a range of issues.

As part of the Center's grass-roots work with producers in Nebraska, Iowa, South Dakota, Kansas, and Minnesota, Kalee met with U.S. Sen. Deb Fischer and staff of U.S. Reps. Don Bacon and Mike Flood about the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

"This was a good opportunity to meet with lawmakers and share



Kalee Olson

why CSP is important to our constituents," Kalee said. "Having that face-to-face time was valuable. We want it to be a familiar topic when it's brought up during farm bill discussions."

The Center's farm bill platform outlines opportunities for improvement within working lands conservation, among other U.S. Department of Agriculture programs. The Center is making recommendations to improve CSP through support for soil testing and additional enhancements.

"Producers currently or previously enrolled in CSP have told us that soil testing data is important in making management decisions in their operations," Kalee said. "However, simply gathering soil tests occasionally, or even regularly, without interpretation assistance is not useful."

Kalee said representing the Center in Washington and speaking on behalf of producers was a valuable experience.

"It was empowering to be part of a group representing different geographic areas coming together to support CSP," she said.

Art creates opportunity, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

CARNE y ARENA does not give us answers, but in sharing the stories of individual migrants who chose to make the dangerous (sometimes deadly) crossing, it can help us deepen our mutual understanding of the root drivers of migration. A second segment of the exhibit introduces viewers to several migrants who share their deeply personal stories.

Most of us hear the numbers of migrants detained and hear politicians and other public figures locked in fierce debate about the cause as well as the proper response. Few of us have the

opportunity to hear from migrants directly or understand the rise in border crossings from their perspective.

A fuller understanding can help people from different backgrounds come together in more productive dialogue. This is, perhaps, the only way we might develop new approaches to intractable challenges.

Community-based or socially engaged art doesn't need to be as complex as this exhibit to return benefit.

The Center has experimented with community-based art projects

and local art walks. We have seen how both can bring people from different backgrounds together around a common goal.

Almost every community has artists in our midst who can be engaged. How might you use art in your own community to prompt new ways of thinking, create ways for people to work together, or build relationships across differences?

CARNE y ARENA is a traveling exhibit, with current and future exhibit dates listed on its website: phi.ca/en/carne-y-arena/



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A farm bill for rural America

Summary of the Center's priorities for the upcoming farm bill

FROM THE DESK OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Community-based art creates opportunities for understanding

BY BRIAN DEPEW, BRIAND@CFRA.ORG

Community-based and socially engaged art can help to build community, deepen understanding, and encourage empathy. I experienced this first-hand on a recent visit to the traveling virtual reality exhibit CARNE y ARENA by artist Alejandro Inárritu. The exhibit was in Omaha at the KANEKO earlier this year.

CARNE y ARENA (Flesh and Sand) is an immersive, full-body, virtual-reality experience that seeks to replicate the migrant experience of crossing the Mexican border into the U.S. As a visitor

to the exhibit, you walk barefoot on rocky sand, feel harsh wind on your face, and experience 360-degree virtual-reality audio and video that places you alongside a group of migrants crossing and then apprehended by the Border Patrol.

The exhibit is based on interviews the artist did with Mexican and Central American refugees. The actors are the migrants themselves. Before I saw the exhibit, I did not know virtual reality could be so realistic or used in such deeply moving ways. The exhibit challenged me, provoked new

thoughts, and deepened my appreciation of the complexity of the challenges at hand.

In recent years, border crossings at the Mexico-U.S. border have become a red-hot political issue. A change in U.S. border policy, along with a pandemic-driven increase in economic instability, political instability and violence in several countries, have combined to lead to a record number of migrant crossings.

The challenge is difficult; solutions evade political actors.

—SEE ART CREATES OPPORTUNITY ON PAGE 7