



Celebrating 50 years in rural America: community remains focus after decades of work

BY RHEA LANDHOLM, RHEAL@CFRA.ORG

The Center for Rural Affairs is set apart from its peers nationally by the holistic way it takes a look at rural communities.

“We’re also thinking about the resiliency of these communities, the people, the leaders, the businesses, and all the spaces where they go to enjoy full engagement in civic, social, and economic life,” said Sandra Renner, director of Farm and Community.

All this work is done alongside community members, local partners, and national partners.

As the Center celebrates 50 years, we mark decades of thriving communities and take note of the struggles they have faced.

Remembering the past

“When I was younger, I knew the Center was mostly focused on policy issues as it related to farming. That was something that we were very much keyed into during the farm crisis,” Sandra said. “As an adult returner to this part of the state, I looked at the organization as a place I wanted to work. It seemed like an organization that worked on positive change and valued rural people and places, which are things I value myself.”

She previously worked in social services with clients receiving economic assistance benefits like SNAP and energy assistance. And she often reflected on what she saw in the field.

“I became aware that basic skills—cooking and gardening, producing and processing meat—were not handed down in a lot of



Since 1973, the Center has stood alongside those who have been systematically excluded, including engaging Latino leaders. | Photo by Kylie Kai

families like mine for a variety of reasons,” Sandra said. “What also stuck out to me was that some of my clients were living in rural areas but they had been systematically excluded or disinvested in. The economic programs made to supplement their lives were not really helping that much.”

As director of Farm and Community, she works to create programs that help people fill in the gaps.

“I hold a personal belief that everyone, especially children, have a right to nutritious fresh local foods, especially in rural places,” Sandra said.

Speaking up

The Center was started in 1973 in Walthill, Nebraska, by rural Nebraskans concerned about the loss of economic opportunity in

agriculture and the decline of rural communities.

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Editor's note

BY RHEA LANDHOLM, RHEAL@CFRA.ORG

One of my favorite parts of this job is visiting you, hearing your stories, and being able to share them. However, planning stories for our 50th anniversary has had me thinking for three years.

The biggest questions on my mind were: How can we celebrate, remember, and commemorate 50 years of an organization that does so much? How do we write about our past, present, and future at the same time? What stories do we need to capture for our archives? Who could I interview?

For the newsletter, we have



decided we will feature directors who focus on an area of work. Starting with this issue, we'll

showcase stories on community, farming, lending services, and policy, while taking a look at how the work was started, how it has evolved into the present, and see what is in store for the future.

However, this is just part of our history. I would love to collect stories from you to share on our blog and to keep for the next 50 years. What work have you been interested in over the years? Did you work at the Center? Did you participate in one of our projects?

Tell us your Center story. Contact me at rheal@cfra.org or 402.687.2100 ext. 1025.

Center looks at food truck permitting, inspection process

BY TERESA HOFFMAN, TERESAH@CFRA.ORG

With up to 625 political subdivisions developing unique rules and regulations for mobile food units in Nebraska, consistency is needed across the inspection and permitting process.

The Center for Rural Affairs recently conducted an interim legislative study as part of Legislative Resolution 328 which found mobile food unit entrepreneurs are navigating a permitting process unlike any other professional industry. Policy Director Johnathan Hladik said the process is designed for brick-and-mortar restaurants, not mobile food units.

“We came away from this research very surprised by the almost limitless variety of rules

and regulations being established by cities, counties, and health departments across the state,” Johnathan said. “As every business owner knows, it is extraordinarily difficult to succeed when you are subject to a different set of regulatory requirements in every community you operate in.”

Under state regulations, all food establishments, including mobile food units, must first acquire an initial permit from the State of Nebraska. Additionally, they need an annual health inspection permit, which four organizations—the Nebraska Department of Agriculture (NDA) and health departments in Douglas, Hall, and Lancaster counties—have the authority to issue.

A bill introduced this session in

the Nebraska Legislature seeks to offer a solution. It helps the state's three largest health departments establish a shared set of regulations. It also asks the NDA to host a registry listing the ordinances or requirements of every municipality that chooses to regulate mobile food units and to develop a pre-inspection checklist so food truck operators have clear guidance.

If passed, Nebraska would join other state legislatures in responding to the growing popularity of the mobile food businesses by modernizing their laws to eliminate redundancy and simplify regulations.

View the interim study at cfra.org/publications and get updates at cfra.org/legislative-policy.

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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The Center works alongside leaders to develop solutions to issues like food access and food security. Pictured, a nutrition workshop for the community at Nebraska Indian Community College on UMÓHOⁿ Nation. | Photos by Kylie Kai

COMMUNITY FOCUS, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Through the years, the work has advanced, just like small towns have evolved, to focus on solutions and building a more resilient rural America.

“We’ve established ourselves in the past 50 years so we’re no longer that scrappy small nonprofit,” Sandra said.

Today, the Center’s community development and food systems work centers on building local capacity through training, relationship development, and hands-on assistance in farm and food, equity, and community development. Although primarily focused in Nebraska, this area of work reaches neighboring states too.

“My vision is to look at the big picture of rural Nebraska as it is today and the potential for what it could and will become in the next 20 years and share that with other rural places,” said Sandra. “We really focus on replicability and programs that apply to rural communities no matter where you are. We just get to pilot them in the Center’s backyard.”

Staff provide outreach and education to help beginning farmers with production conservation practices as well as the business aspects of starting and running a farm, and marketing the results.

They help communities develop solutions to issues like food access



Farm & Community Director Sandra Renner’s vision is to look at the big picture and potential of rural Nebraska and share that with other rural places.

and food security—working alongside leaders to help rebuild their food systems through food sovereignty, in some cases.

“We also assist communities where demographics are shifting; we want to be more responsive to that,” Sandra said. “That might mean creating public art, community gardens, or farmers market spaces that all of the community can feel welcome in. It also creates a business opportunity for some of our other participants to take advantage of.”

Services such as providing translation support or intercultural leadership training to agencies and organizations have been added in the past few years.

“We often look for voices that

aren’t at the table or are often systematically excluded in finding solutions that will work for them,” Sandra said. “We’ve found ways to be more intentional with audiences that tend to get left behind. That’s the intent of the organization.”

Often, this means staff need to have an understanding of what it means to live, work, or start a farming operation or business on reservation land and other rural places.

“These are just a few of the realities and dynamics of rural Nebraska, and certainly, rural America,” she said. “That’s where we tend to focus, that holistic approach.”

Looking toward the future

The future of the Center’s work is designed with input from community members and farmers. They share what their challenges are, and staff provide them with resources and support to take the next steps forward. Future focuses of work are decided with these needs in mind.

“We can also connect community members to what I like to call the total package of the Center,” Sandra said. “If there’s a systemic issue that requires policy advocacy, we connect them to our staff focused on state or federal level policy. Do they need assistance with a business or home loan or technical assistance? We can connect them with our lending specialists.”



Emily Mauntel spent 2022 grazing 30 sheep under a 1 megawatt solar array owned by Maharishi International University and managed by local solar company, Ideal Energy. | Left photo submitted, right photo by Alex Delworth

Beginning rancher gains experience from solar grazing partnership

BY ALEX DELWORTH, ALEXD@CFRA.ORG

Just off the campus of Maharishi International University in Fairfield, Iowa, sits a 1.1 megawatt (MW) solar farm. Beneath the panels, a flock of sheep and their newborn lambs are grazing, while beginning rancher Emily Mauntel and her Australian Shepherd Ziggy stand back and admire their work.

Iowa has seen a rapid increase in solar project development the past two years, and solar farms pose a considerable opportunity for multipurpose agricultural uses in rural spaces.

According to the Solar Energy Industries Association, the industry is expected to add another 1,304 MW—a 250% increase over current installed capacity—during the next five years. Depending on the type of technology installed, this could mean 6,520 to 13,040 acres of land will be used for solar production. With proper native vegetation planning, this will increase open pastures and provide more opportunities to combine

agricultural land-uses with renewable energy.

Emily has already begun benefiting from this opportunity.

Originally from Michigan and a graduate of Maharishi International University's Regenerative Organic Agriculture Programs, Emily spent 2022 grazing 30 sheep under a 1 MW solar array owned by the university and managed by local solar company, Ideal Energy.

Earlier in 2022, the three parties came to agreement that Emily could have access to pasture in exchange for landscaping the property. This saved the company approximately \$5,000 in landscaping fees and saved Emily about \$2,500 in lease payments, according to Iowa State University's land-lease estimates.

What makes this story especially interesting is that the agribusiness model directly addresses two major issues beginning farmers face—access to land and infrastructure. A 2017 survey by the National Young Farmers Coalition found land

access was the No. 1 issue their respondents faced.

"The infrastructure was perfect for what I needed, the fencing kept the sheep in and predators out," Emily said. "We typically follow a three sheep per acre rule, but the site was able to support five per acre."

The site's native vegetation plan provided plenty of food for the sheep, and there was sufficient fencing and access to water. This proved to cut a considerable amount of money for the operation.

Newly energized by the experience she has gained through solar grazers and managing her own livestock, Emily is now looking to move to Colorado and continue ranching. Emily hopes to see the solar grazing model continue on the site, saying it has been a perfect opportunity for her to gain experience in the industry, and believes it will be a great opportunity for the next person as well.

Vanilla creates business opportunity in Nebraska

BY RHEA LANDHOLM, RHEAL@CFRA.ORG

Fouad Mhadji Issa says Nebraska vanilla will be the next big thing. Like beef. Or sweet corn.

Koponi Vanilla, his business in Grand Island, Nebraska, sells gourmet beans, paste, and extract. Fouad is working hard to make Koponi a premium product sought after by chefs and home bakers nationwide.

Yet the enterprise nearly died before it began, starved for lack of capital.

Armed with a business plan and vanilla samples, Fouad sat with bankers and traditional funders to pitch his dream and get a loan. They all said no.

He didn't have assets. He didn't have collateral. He didn't have credit.

Then Fouad found the Center for Rural Affairs who gave him the loan he needed to buy tanks, pumps, and equipment.

"I don't know where I would be right now because there's no way I could work myself and make the money. You were able to say, 'We trust you, we believe in you,'" Fouad said of the Center. "I can produce, sell, reinvest, and keep going."

Center staff worked with Fouad to ensure he was ready for a loan and had the financial knowledge to succeed. He's now making loan payments, growing sales, gaining equity in his business, and building credit to become bankable.

"Fouad is a perfect example of the client we want to be helping—those with limited assets and good work ethic," said Kim Preston, director of Lending Services with the Center.

Mixing Nebraska + vanilla

Education brought Fouad to the Cornhusker state. However, his father became sick, and Fouad left school to return to Africa. He later



Fouad Mhadji Issa pitched his business idea to bankers and traditional funders who all said no. The Center stepped in to give him the money he needed to start Koponi Vanilla. | Photo by Kylie Kai

found work in Nairobi and Paris but wanted a better life. He decided to seek opportunity through entrepreneurship.

Fouad learned that the U.S. is the single largest vanilla importer worldwide. And he knew just the place to source high-quality vanilla beans: Comoros, a small island north of Madagascar in Africa, where he grew up.

With the seed of a business idea, Fouad returned to Nebraska in March 2021 to start his dream.

"I wanted to be somewhere that any time of the day, of the year, I'd be comfortable," he said. "And, Nebraska, that's where I feel comfortable."

Building a business

Fouad's first stops were the Grand Island Chamber and the Grand Island Area Economic Development Corporation. He met a local business owner who offered him a building for rent and a basement to sleep in. He worked with chamber staff to create a business plan and the Nebraska Innovation Campus at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to develop and hone the vanilla extract recipe.

He also worked two jobs, the first at a meatpacking plant and the second at a coffee roaster,

where he got a crash course in roasting, manufacturing, order-taking, and shipping. Fouad has since left the roaster to focus on his own business and dreams of the day he can leave meatpacking.

He makes Koponi Vanilla Extract through a slow process that he says preserves complex flavors better than traditional methods. Each batch is extracted and matured for more than 2,000 hours, about three months, with no preservatives. Most large commercial producers add caramel, carbon dioxide, and heat to create extracts in two to three days.

"But, what happens when you use heat? You kill bonding molecules," Fouad said. "You don't get good vanilla. You kill 30% of it, which becomes less flavorful."

Fouad produces 100 gallons of extract at a time and distributes to retail stores. He also supplies to a brewery and sells online.

Demand has since outstripped supply. Fouad plans to scale up to 300-gallon batches soon.

"I would like to do it as soon as I can," he said. "I'm working to make sure I have an income, but at the same time, I'm losing production time and sales. I'd love to be able to wake up in the morning



Katie Bettin, a 2022 Beginning Farmer Conservation Fellow, wants her farming practices and experiences to allow for adaptability in the field and in farm planning. | Photo submitted

Conservation fellowship offers chance to gain knowledge, insights, and relationships

BY LIZ STEWART

An inquisitive mind is the first step to learning something new. For Katie Bettin, that curiosity has guided her throughout her pursuit of urban farming. With the knowledge she's acquired, she hopes to one day see a solid foundation built for local food production and systems.

Her desire to contribute to that process started in 2018. Since then, Katie has explored and practiced farming, first at an internship for a small nonprofit farm and educational resource in Colorado, and now in Omaha, Nebraska, where she lives.

Katie applied to the 2022 Center for Rural Affairs Beginning Farmer Conservation Fellowship Program and was chosen to participate.

The Center started the program for beginning farmers and ranchers looking for guidance in implementing conservation programs. The fellows complete coursework in conservation programs and practices, climate change adaptation and impacts, racial equity, and leadership.

Conservation fellows will also design and implement a conservation project on their own farm or

land they are farming and present their findings at a farm tour or at the annual Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society Conference.

"Conservation is a top priority because I see care and consideration for natural resources as a personal responsibility," she said. "It changes the perspective when I consider how what I am doing will affect the neighbors around me, the city I live in, and so on."

Katie says there are important conversations going on about how humans and other populations will continue to survive on this planet.

"Food production and systems are deeply intertwined," she said, "meaning growers, laborers, maintainers, and stewards have to contemplate how we interact in the spaces we work."

In an effort to contribute to healthier land and a healthier future, Katie implements conservation practices wherever she's farming or tending plots of land. She has built raised garden beds and bolsters their soil at the end of each season with compost and wood chips. The height and layering of garden beds increases organic matter and allows for extended root depth and water

retention.

Katie hopes being part of the Center's program offers her the opportunity to gain knowledge, insights, and relationships that will foster a continuing growth in her ability to practice and expand on conservation methods.

"I appreciate mentorship and close relationships where there are similar interests and values," she said. "I want to be a part of working spaces that allow open conversation, questioning, experimenting, and mutual motivation and inspiration."

Katie believes the fellowship will help her make informed decisions as she farms with a changing climate in mind. In the future, she hopes to have her own land, where she can nourish the earth as well as those around her.

"I want my farming practices and experiences to allow for adaptability in the field and in farm planning, as well as where I could best fit into my local food system or where I could help guide it," she said. "I hope to grow with others who are also dedicated to building and supplying a local food system that can sustain community needs."

Beginning organic farmers left to choose between crop insurance, smart planting

BY KELSEY WILLARDSON, KELSEYW@CFRA.ORG

Travis Scheffler, a beginning farmer in Lonsdale, Minnesota, routinely finds himself in a quandary. He has to choose between planting in the way he knows is best for his operation and his crop insurance coverage because of final planting dates set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Risk Management Agency (RMA).

The dates aren't ideal for Travis, who started an organic row-crop operation with his brothers four years ago. Following organic practices is important to the brothers who share concerns on water quality and conservation.

"We're very big into hunting and fishing, so we care about what's going into our lakes and our streams," Travis said.

He said they have learned a lot—including the extra hurdles organic farmers face when it comes to crop insurance.

Crop insurance is a risk management tool used by farmers to protect them from crop or revenue loss. Coverage is subject to certain conditions, including a final planting date set for each crop. Producers planting their crops after this date are penalized. For every day that passes, they lose 1 percentage point of their insurance coverage, while paying the same price.

Both conventional and organic producers are held to the same



Final planting dates set by the Risk Management Agency (RMA) are not ideal for Travis Scheffler and his brothers. He would like a bigger window and the Center wants to help. | Photo by Kylie Kai

date despite organic farmers planting crops, such as corn, later than their conventional neighbors. This is for several agronomic reasons, including avoiding pesticide drift and pollen contamination, weed management, and soil temperature. Cold and wet springs, which have become more common, can delay planting even more.

"I'm always pushing up against that date," Travis said, "If we had a bigger window, it would be huge. We plant the first part of June and the last couple of years the weather has become really extreme. It's either really wet or really dry and you're gambling on where you should be putting that seed."

Producers report that planting past the deadline does not nega-

tively affect the yields or quality of organic crops, yet farmers like Travis are faced with a choice between losing coverage or planting at ideal times.

In recent years, RMA has made significant progress in its program offerings to organic farmers, but this issue remains. RMA can address this by offering a grace period during which organic farmers would not be penalized, or establish a separate final planting date to meet their needs.

The Center is relaying this important farmer feedback to RMA. If you have faced challenges with the final planting date, or would like to be involved in this effort, contact me at kelseyw@cfra.org or 641.218.4694.

50 years, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

Throughout our 50 years, we have engaged in farm, health, small business, energy, and climate policy, always seeking opportunities to make changes to state and federal policy that align with

our vision for rural communities.

Today, we partner with you, rural people across the country, to build vibrant communities where all can participate in civic, cultural, and economic life. The Center

will continue to adapt our programs and activities to serve your communities. Our work in the decades ahead will be guided by those same values and vision that have led us since 1973.



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Center celebrating 50 years

Decades of work in rural communities across the U.S.

FROM THE DESK OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

50 years of meaningful rural impact

BY BRIAN DEPEW, BRIAND@CFRA.ORG

During the summer of 1973, a group of rural Nebraskans saw how their communities were changing. They were concerned about the future of the places they called home, about access to economic opportunity, and about environmental stewardship.

These residents decided to fight for a better future rather than be passive spectators to a changing economic landscape and shifting federal policies. From this, the Center for Rural Affairs was created. September 2023 marks the 50th anniversary of our founding.

The Center has remained a vibrant and growing organization while some of our peer organiza-

tions floundered or faltered in the 1970s and '80s. Our core vision of shared values and willingness to embrace change has kept our work relevant. Those values and vision guide our board and staff members as we navigate rural America's evolving landscape decade after decade.

Since our inception, we have brought rural people together around ideas and action. Our strategies and programs have adapted to remain relevant and responsive to community needs.

The Center's early focus was on small farm economic vitality, farm energy use, farmland conservation, and anti-corporate farming controls.

Then in the 1990s, the Center added work to support non-farm rural small businesses. Our small business training, coaching, and lending work has helped thousands of rural entrepreneurs. Thirty years later in 2020, we added housing lending, again responding to community needs.

When a wave of immigrants came to our communities, our staff added programming responding to the needs of both those new residents and the rural communities they now called home. More recently, the Center met community and small business needs arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

—SEE 50 YEARS ON PAGE 7