



# Planning for seven generations ahead, Jim & Lisa French dedicate lives to soil health

BY RHEA LANDHOLM, RHEAL@CFRA.ORG

Jim and Lisa French aren't rich farmers, but they have lived a rich life. "We've been really blessed, just so blessed," Jim said. The Partridge, Kansas, couple has dedicated their lives to community, healthy water, soil health, and conservation. That's why they are the Center for Rural Affairs' 2022 Seventh Generation Award recipients.

"You look seven generations forward," Jim said. "You look at the things that we're doing now. Will it have an impact upon that generation? We don't know all the seeds we've planted, but we've tried to look toward the generations that we are borrowing from right now."

## Getting to the roots

Both Jim and Lisa were born in Reno County, Kansas, and grew



Jim and Lisa French, of Partridge, Kansas, were presented the Seventh Generation Award at the Reno County Conservation annual meeting. They also received a Native American star quilt. | Photo by Pastor Sheridan Irick

up within 5 miles of where they live now. They started dating when they were in high school.

In 1977, both attended graduate school at the University of Ne-

braska-Lincoln, where Jim took classes from Paul Olson. Paul, who became a Center board member in the late 1970s, introduced the couple to the organization.

Then, in 1979, they moved back to Reno County and took over management of the farm in 1981.

They now live on the farm Jim's grandfather purchased in 1909 from Lisa's family. At first, continuing a wheat/milo rotation with livestock.

"I think, maybe because of the connection with the Center for Rural Affairs, and also then Wes Jackson (of the Land Institute), we thought, how do you model the prairie," Lisa said. "That began to guide changes that we made."

They thought about how they could reduce inputs by changing their management practices.

—SEE SEVEN GENERATIONS AHEAD ON PAGE 3

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# Celebrating 50 years in rural America: Lending boosts communities

BY RHEA LANDHOLM, RHEAL@CFRA.ORG

The Center for Rural Affairs' mission to establish strong rural communities continues with the Lending Services program, which today includes small business and housing loans as well as small business training and one-on-one assistance.

Small business development at the Center started in 1990 with a program (then called the Rural

Enterprise Assistance Project, or REAP) that provided loans, training, and business planning assistance to rural microenterprises, or businesses with no more than 10 employees.

"Small businesses are the heart and soul of community development," said Kim Preston, Lending Services director. "A strong business sector helps generate much-

—SEE LENDING BOOSTS COMMUNITIES ON PAGE 4

# Editor's note

BY RHEA LANDHOLM, RHEAL@CFRA.ORG

The Seventh Generation Award, our lifetime service award, is presented to someone who has made major contributions in improving rural life and protecting our land and water.

Jim and Lisa French, of Partridge, Kansas, are our 2022 recipients. In February, I had the privilege of visiting them and presenting the award in their community, in front of their friends and family.

They have been involved with the Center since the '70s. Their work throughout their careers and on their farm is something to look up to. Since the beginning, they have focused on soil health and making sure both the land and water are improved for future generations.

They have truly embodied the work of the Center from agriculture to community. They have served many of our partner organizations and worked for the



betterment of rural life.

You can read more about them in the front page story, and even more is added to the blog at [cfra.org](http://cfra.org).

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## Farm bill creates opportunity for advocacy, program improvements

BY KALEE OLSON, KALEEO@CFRA.ORG

Approximately every five years, the federal government passes a package of legislation that impacts all rural Americans: the farm bill. The current farm bill is set to expire on Sept. 30, indicating the time is now to advocate for programs that impact rural livelihoods and communities.

The farm bill consists of 12 sections, called titles, that set funding levels and guidelines for programs, including conservation, credit, rural development, and crop insurance. In addition, the farm bill provides funding for nutrition programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, commonly known as SNAP. Projected funding for the 2018 farm bill was \$428 billion, with approximately 76% of this total funding the nutrition title.

Developed by the agricultural committees in both the Senate

and House, farm bill legislation goes through rigorous debate and amending as lawmakers work together to address their constituents' needs. This includes gathering constituent feedback on aspects of programs that should be kept, improved, added to, or removed.

After each committee has drafted its version of the bill, it is put to a vote before going to the full Senate or House floor. The Senate and House must work together to create a version of the bill that satisfies both chambers, and vote to pass the legislation before sending it to the President for a final signature.

The Center is dedicated to advocating for a farm bill that serves the needs of our rural constituents. It is equally important to get involved in advocacy as a rural resident. Whether you are a producer enrolled in crop insur-

ance or conservation programs, own a small business, purchase meat from a local locker, or are interested in the well-being of your community, your voice can help us move important changes forward.

Before reaching out to elected officials to share your input on farm bill programs, it's important to gather your thoughts, develop talking points, and have resources at hand to support your position. The Center's farm bill platform outlines opportunities for improvement within working lands conservation, USDA language accessibility, crop insurance, rural development, and small meat processing.

If you are interested in joining the conversation or reaching out to your members of Congress about these topics, contact Kalee Olson at 402.687.2100 ext. 1022 or [kaleeo@cfra.org](mailto:kaleeo@cfra.org). Or visit [cfra.org/farm-bill](http://cfra.org/farm-bill).

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### PAPER & E-NEWS

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This year, in large part because of the drought, Jim and Lisa French have decided to farm less and lease out some cattle. They kept a group of bred and yearling heifers and are putting their larger focus on regenerative ag. | Photos by Rhea Landholm

## Seven generations ahead, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Over the years, they focused less on crops like wheat and grain sorghum and planted more and more forages or forage crops. About 20 years ago, they put a little more than 100 acres of their land into native grass. They also managed a registered Gelbvieh herd for more than 20 years until transitioning to a grass-based Red Angus herd in 2004.

This year, in large part because of severe drought in the region, Jim and Lisa decided to farm less and leased out some cattle. They kept a group of bred and yearling heifers and are putting their larger focus on regenerative ag.

“Just to give ourselves some space to do some other things,” Lisa said.

“Failure is not going to drive us off the land. But, maybe we can learn some lessons here,” Jim said. “We have a little more slack. Maybe we can try some things, take a little more risk, and others can learn from what we try. We look at it in ways that can improve our land, make it better in the face of climate change. Maybe we can help find ways to fight climate change and teach others.”

### Working for soil health

In the late 1980s, the Frenches were looking for a Kansas counterpart to the Center for Rural Affairs and connected with the Kansas

Rural Center. They both ended up working there, Jim on policy and communications and Lisa on water quality, and eventually served on the board of directors.

Telling stories on revitalizing rural led Jim to Oxfam America, where he worked for 12 years.

Meanwhile, Lisa was assisting farmers with conservation at the Kansas Rural Center. About that time, people became aware the Cheney Lake Watershed was having issues. Algae blooms were in the main water supply for Wichita, and farmers noticed bank erosion.

In 2002, Lisa was hired to head up the water quality project effort that worked with farmers in a five-county region. She retired from that position in October 2022.

### Getting involved

Both Jim and Lisa have been involved in policy advocacy alongside the Center for Rural Affairs. In 1990, they participated in a fly-in to Washington, D.C., to visit lawmakers.

Then, Jim worked closely with the Center campaign on payment limits during the 2008 farm bill. He was also a consultant with the Center on the 2018 farm bill.

And, Jim and Lisa have faithfully donated to the Center for Rural Affairs annually.

“The Center really embodies that connection between our earth,

community, and relationships,” Jim said. “It’s one of the few organizations that has always approached it that way. The environment isn’t separated from farming; they have to work together.”

Jim and Lisa said they’ve admired the Center’s work on immigrant communities, small businesses, and entrepreneurship.

Lisa, who has been on the board of the Hutchinson (Kansas) Community Foundation for 10 years, said the Center for Rural Affairs has had an influence on her community work.

One of the foundation’s newest initiatives is impact investing with recent contributions to rural broadband, Main Street businesses, and building renovations.

“The Center has long advocated for that kind of thing,” Jim said. “The work that the Center and others have done, like investing in your local community, sometimes may not pay off the highest return, but the returns aren’t always measurable in terms of money. The returns are in places that have schools with children, farms that are healthy. Those are the kinds of things that we need to look at.”

Both Jim and Lisa have served in many capacities for their church, educational institutions, agricultural organizations, water and ag policy advisory committees.

*Read more at [cfra.org/blog](http://cfra.org/blog).*



# Lending boosts communities,

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

needed economic growth and stability in the community.”

The program evolved with the addition of a Women’s Business Center in 2001, then an added focus on Latino small businesses in 2004. In 2013, the Center became a community-development financial institution (CDFI) and was able to provide larger loans with an emphasis on serving Latinos and low-to-moderate income individuals.

In 2020, a housing loan program was established.

“Rural communities are full of housing that is inaccessible to many residents,” Kim said. “Banks will avoid offering mortgages to many of the properties where they will be found to be upside down in a collateral position. These homes are then left to deteriorate and become eyesores in the community. When the Center added housing loans, we hoped to help address this need in our communities, and offer an opportunity for the homeowner to build a lifelong asset.”

Today, the maximum loan size for small business is \$250,000, with loans available for working capital, small equipment and inventory purchases, and business real estate. Housing loans go up to \$100,000 and are available for purchase or repair.

In late 2022, a new fund was created to serve small- and medium-sized meat processors with loans from \$50,000 to \$5 million.

“The very recent addition of meat processing capital offers even larger loans and capacity to assist more entrepreneurs than even our founders could have imagined,” Kim said. “I am excited to be a part of that growth.”



Since 1990, the Center has provided loans and training for small business owners, including this group of Latina entrepreneurs at a conference in 2022. | Photos by Kylie Kai

## Lending’s past, present, and future

While the lending program has grown at the Center, Kim said the organization does not work alone.

“Quite honestly, our rural communities are driving the work,” she said. “From the inside looking out, we can see some trends, but communications with those rural communities, their partners, residents, and business owners give us a perspective to assist where we are needed.”

This allows the Center to adapt its products and services to the needs of communities, which was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when business development services were offered virtually. Staff reached a broader audience and delivered services quickly since travel and distance weren’t barriers.

“We were able to rapidly jump in to assist businesses in their greatest time of need but also were able to slow down and take a step back to assess our work and how we help others,” Kim said. “We also developed our mortgage loan product and the processes behind all of this work.”

Small business owners not only need funding, they also need training and one-on-one coaching, which the Center has provided at no cost since 1990

“Small businesses are hungry for training and coaching,” Kim said. “When an entrepreneur has



Lending Services Director Kim Preston is building products and services that directly impact entrepreneurs and lawmakers.

an idea, they are often great at their idea/trade. However, proper business management is often overlooked. Our staff have the experience necessary to assist entrepreneurs as they start, grow, and transition their businesses.”

The Center’s work in lending will keep evolving, long into the future, she said.

“Lending Services continues to build products and services that directly impact entrepreneurs and homeowners and provides opportunities that expedite access to capital for those left out of traditional financing,” Kim said. “We are building capacity for businesses to increase assets, provide well-paying jobs, and transition to the next generation of entrepreneurs.”





Recently, the Center for Rural Affairs received a \$15 million grant to provide loans to small and medium meat and poultry processing facilities in Nebraska. On March 9, the Center’s Board of Directors toured McLean Beef prior to their spring meeting to learn more about processing and the type of businesses that would qualify for these loans. | Photos by Rhea Landholm

## Center Board of Directors tours meat processing facility

BY RHEA LANDHOLM, RHEAL@CFRA.ORG

**T**he fourth generation of a cattle family has grown their business into a meat processing business with the addition of a store and restaurant.

McLean Farms started in rural Benedict, Nebraska, in 1949, with a focus on cattle care and feeding. The operation expanded into a finishing fed cattle operation in 1961. In late 2020, they opened a meat processing facility and store in York with the capacity of up to 50 beef per week.

A restaurant opened in 2022 and they’re soon expanding their offerings to steak nights.

In 2021, McLean Beef testified in support of Nebraska Legislative Bill (LB) 324 to create the Independent Processor Assistance Program (IPAP) to provide funding to certain federally inspected, state inspected, or custom-exempt slaughter and processing facilities in Nebraska that employ fewer than 25 people. Recipients may use the funds to pay for capital improvements, utilities upgrades,

equipment, technology, building rentals, costs associated with increased inspections, and educational and workforce training.

In 2022, they testified for LB 755 in support of funding IPAP, and again in 2023 against LB 117, a proposal to relax eligibility guidelines for larger processors.

McLean Beef was one of 64 small- and medium-sized processors to get an IPAP grant in fall 2022.

Find out more at [cfra.org/meatprocessingloans](http://cfra.org/meatprocessingloans).



Owner Max McLean was on hand to answer questions, as well as his wife, Jeanette, and daughter Char Mae Glause. Max hand picks the beef to be processed and sold as McLean Beef.



Manager Brian Kurth shows Center board and staff the killing floor, and explains the process. McLean Beef has a processing capacity of up to 50 beef per week.



Johnathan Hladik and Nick Bergin check out the hanging meat, all with a U.S. Department of Agriculture-certified stamp. A USDA inspector is at McLean Beef 40 hours per week.



Kelsey Jones and Patricia Pinto present at the Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society Conference in February. They recently completed a Beginning Farmer Conservation Fellowship with the Center for Rural Affairs. | Photo by Center staff

## Conservation, production, farmers market, and farm to school featured at NSAS Conference

BY CAIT CAUGHEY, CAITC@CFRA.ORG | KIRSTIN BAILEY AND LUCIA SCHULZ CONTRIBUTED TO THIS STORY

The Center for Rural Affairs' farm and community-focused work was highlighted at this year's Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society (NSAS) Conference in Aurora, Nebraska.

Center staff led five sessions during the two-day conference in February, including sessions on Nebraska Farmers Market Toolkit, beekeeping for farmers, farm to school, and presentations from our first-year conservation fellows.

"The conference brought local food advocates, beginning and experienced farmers, and many present and past Center board members together," said Cait Caughey, beginning farmer and market associate with the Center.

Additionally, Center staff led an all-day training for the Beginning Farmer Conservation Fellowship, a Center initiative alongside NSAS, Big Muddy Urban Farm, and Metro Community College. The project equips and trains beginning farmers on conservation and climate mitigation practices. During the one-year program, fellows receive mentorship, additional training, technical assistance, and funding

for a conservation project on their farms.

Nine fellows attended classes focused on conservation practices and climate change. The day began with a soil health presentation featuring hands-on components with Aaron Hird, Natural Resources Conservation Service Nebraska state soil health specialist. Nebraska State Climatologist Martha Durr presented on effects of climate change on Nebraska agriculture, projections for how the growing season will change, and steps farmers can take now for climate change adaptation and mitigation. Kris Engler, a horticulture specialist from Metro Community College shared water conservation techniques for small farms with the fellows.

"This year's conference created an inclusive space for urban and rural farmers, folks who raise livestock, vegetables, bees, and more," Cait said. "The topics were broad and wide-reaching, such as organic certification, regenerative practices, beekeeping, business planning, and building urban farmer cooperatives. It is great seeing how this conference has

grown and evolved and still retains that farmer-to-farmer learning and camaraderie."

Meg Jackson, former program coordinator with NSAS, organized the conference. Meg is now a local foods associate with the Center.

"The NSAS annual conference has been our keystone event for decades for farmers to connect and share knowledge," Meg said. "This was the second year the Local Food & Healthy Farms conference was a collaborative partnership with NSAS, University of Nebraska Extension, and Nebraska specialty crop growers, with the intent to make it a more robust, dynamic conference and to build connections across the food system."

More than 200 farmers and food system professionals, researchers, and advocates joined the conference for learning, networking, and community building.

"That collaboration brought new people and new energy to the conference, building more networks across the local food system that we're excited to grow with future conferences," Meg said.



# A new era of renewable production in South Dakota

BY ALEX DELWORTH, ALEXD@CFRA.ORG

**R**enewable energy has been powering South Dakota for more than a century. Hydroelectric generation was introduced to the state in 1912 and has been vital in its energy landscape since, powering three of South Dakota's four largest power plants.

But in 2021, wind power surpassed hydroelectric to become the state's leader in total electricity generation. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), in 2021, renewable energy accounted for 82% of South Dakota's generation in. Of that, 52% was from wind, the second largest share in the U.S. behind Iowa at 58%.

The recent growth has been impressive, boasting nearly a 100% increase in the number of turbines installed from 2019 to

2021. South Dakota still has room to grow. According to the Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy, the state ranked ninth in most untapped wind energy potential, with Nebraska coming in at eighth.

While solar development is further behind, according to the Solar Energy Industries Association, the state's first utility-scale solar projects will increase solar capacity on the grid from 2 megawatts to 246 in the coming years, enough to power nearly 33,000 homes in South Dakota. Nationally, solar is the fastest growing source of electricity. According to the EIA, a new national record for development is expected to be set in 2023 with just over half of new U.S. electric generation capacity to be from solar.

Individuals can also install solar

at home by talking to their energy provider and working with local solar contractors for installations.

Renewable energy expansion stands to produce several economic benefits, including additional jobs in manufacturing, installation, and maintenance, while also providing land-lease payments and increases in funds for local governments and schools. According to the American Clean Power Association, clean energy provided South Dakotans \$28.7 million in state and local taxes and \$20.6 million in lease payments to farmers, ranchers, and other private landowners in 2022.

As more renewable energy resources are developed, rural South Dakotans can look forward to the economic benefits they bring to the state.

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## Pragmatic approach, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

pragmatic part of the Center and is sometimes one of the more difficult questions with which we grapple.

For some important issues or challenges facing rural communities, we do not see a viable change strategy at hand. For others, we do not see a way in which the Center's engagement is likely to shift the course. This doesn't mean the issue isn't important, but it does mean we may choose to focus our limited resources elsewhere. We are also more inclined to work at the systems level, where progress has a farther reaching impact.

4) Do we have the financial and human capacity to commit to an issue or project? This is also sometimes difficult. There are things we would like to work on, but for which we do not have sufficient resources.

The Center maintains a core set of ongoing programs. We work first to raise funds to continue these efforts. New issues and new programs receive careful consideration before we commit to them. It is important that we have the financial and human capacity to engage in a meaningful way in each area of work we choose to take on. Those resources are not always available.

5) Are other organizations working on it? We believe in a robust ecosystem of change advocates, each working on different components of the work. When other organizations have the capacity and expertise or have built programming around a specific topic, we may let them take the lead. Often we seek to partner or help build the capacity of others to

address issues beyond our scope. We focus our resources where the Center can bring meaningful capacity and offer unique value.

A lot needs to happen to create vibrant rural communities with economic opportunity for all and stewardship of our natural resources. We employ multiple strategies to achieve our goals including policy change, community organizing, technical assistance, and lending. With this breadth of work, and to ensure that we are effective at the work we commit to, we are always making decisions on what to pursue.

The factors outlined here give you a sense of how we make those decisions. Your engagement with the Center helps to inform our decision making, and your support helps us implement the work.



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## Planning for seven generations ahead

Longtime supporters dedicate lives to soil health

FROM THE DESK OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

# Pragmatic approach guides Center's work

BY BRIAN DEPEW, BRIAND@CFRA.ORG

**T**he Center envisions a vibrant future with strong rural communities and robust local economies.

We work hard to ensure that everyone who calls rural America home will have the opportunity to fully participate in that future regardless of the size of their bank account, how many acres they own, or what language they speak. It's a bold vision of widespread economic opportunity and stewardship of natural resources.

With such an ambitious vision, I'm often asked how the Center decides what specific work to focus on. There are an endless number of things we could tackle, but we

don't have unlimited resources.

While we have a bold vision for the future, we also believe the best way to achieve this vision is through incremental change, day by day, year by year. Lasting positive change only happens through incremental improvements and with support and adoption by residents of rural communities.

With this in mind, several factors help guide our decisions.

1) Is it within our mission? The Center is committed to promoting social and economic justice, creating opportunities for all, and stewarding our natural resources. This commitment means we prioritize work that helps ensure everyone who lives in

rural America can be a full participant in civic, economic, and cultural life.

2) Is this a need or issue shaping the future of rural communities today? The Center is forward-looking in our approach. We engage with community members to understand their needs and concerns, and we research trends impacting rural places.

We work to remain relevant as circumstances change. We recognize that this sometimes means changing our approach or entirely ending or starting new initiatives.

3) Can we move the needle? Can we make change? This is the

—SEE PRAGMATIC APPROACH ON PAGE 7