



CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

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Farmer accepts fellowship, finds conservation and herbal healing go hand-in-hand

By Liz Stewart and Cait Caughey, caitc@cfra.org



From a passion project to healing therapy, Sara Brubacher’s interest in plants, food, and farming has evolved over the past few years. Now, she’s using her knowledge to run her own herbal clinic, Starflower Botanicals.

Two years ago, Sara moved to Cambridge, Nebraska, from Ontario, Canada, to be closer to her mom. She brought along her interest in growing local foods and started farming outside of Cambridge at Sky Chief Springs, which her family purchased in September 2021.

“As an adult at university, I became more interested in local food as a response to the global climate change and the injustices of the food system,” said Sara. “That sparked my interest in local medicines and is why I got into herbalism and became engrossed

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Two years ago, Sara Brubacher started farming at Sky Chief Springs, outside Cambridge, Nebraska. She wanted to learn more about implementing conservation practices so applied for and was accepted into the Center’s Beginning Farmer Conservation Fellowship Program. | Photo submitted

Organizations across the country unite to support rural small businesses

By Kalee Olson, kaleeo@cfra.org

Last month, Congress extended the 2018 farm bill for one year as part of a broader funding bill to keep the government open through early next year. The move gives lawmakers until September 2024 to craft a new bill.

As negotiations progress, Center for Rural Affairs staff will continue to advocate to ensure provisions outlined in the Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Act of 2023 are included. The legislation would make key improvements to the

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Editor's note

By Rhea Landholm, rheal@cfra.org

For the holidays, I purchased a Thanksgiving Bounty Box (pounds and pounds of fresh veggies) from One Farm Market in Logan, Iowa. During the past year, our local foods work has accelerated in southwest Iowa and, with family ties to Logan, I was especially interested in One Farm Market.

Owner Danelle Meyer has been featured in one of our case studies on innovative local foods access and she was a speaker at our first-ever Southwest Iowa Local Foods Summit in early November.

Purchasing a vegetable box gave me a good excuse to visit One Farm Market. The Market



started as a temporary farmers market booth in a vacant storefront in Logan. Now, Danelle has a year-round local foods store offering her own produce along

with vegetables, fruits, and herbs from other growers. She has shelves, coolers, and displays of meats, dairy, eggs, honey, seasonings, pasta, granola, and even locally-roasted coffee.

Danelle is a great example of how one person can make a difference in local foods in their community. You can read more about her on our website cfra.org—just search for One Farm Market.

By the way, the fresh sweet potatoes and red potatoes were a hit during our family gathering. I ate through the greens for lunches, and I'm cooking up the butter-nut squash for a nice winter soup. Even got some dried herbs that I'm excited to use.

Organizations unite, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Program and is based on recommendations made by the Center and partners.

Since the introduction of the Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Act last fall, Center staff has been working with partners across the country to garner support for the bill. In November, 46 organizations representing 28 states and Washington, D.C., sent a letter to leaders of the House and Senate agriculture committees expressing their support for the bill and rural small businesses. The letter was also shared with lawmakers in each of those states.

This coalition is a strong example of small business lenders and technical assistance providers



As farm bill negotiations progress, Center staff will continue to advocate to ensure provisions outlined in the Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Act of 2023 are included. | Photo by Rhea Landholm

coming together to support rural communities.

If you would like to contact your representative or senators to express support for the Rural

Microentrepreneur Assistance Act, please email kaleeo@cfra.org. Find contact information for your members of Congress at congress.gov/members/find-your-member.

PAPER & E-NEWS

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Farmer accepts fellowship, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Sara's interest grew even deeper when she needed to do her own psychological healing upon returning home from doing peace work in the Middle East. She found gardening and growing to be grounding, healing activities.

"I hope that part of my growing or farming can be a place where folks can come and interact and just be with the plants," Sara said. "I designed a walkway that includes native and pollinator species so people can experience the healing, live energy of the plants. I want people to interact with the plants that they come to know and utilize in my herbal clinic."

She also wanted to learn more about conservation practices she could implement on her farm, so Sara applied for and was accepted into the Center for Rural Affairs Beginning Farmer Conservation Fellowship Program.

The program began in 2022 with eight individuals, plus mentors. The second cohort began in February 2023 with eight beginning farmers, including Sara.

At Sky Chief Springs, Sara raises a variety of fresh culinary herbs and medicinal herbs, plus heirloom variety vegetables. She also sells her herbs and vegetables at the local farmers market in Cambridge, and has done a pre-order subscription box offering pick-up in a nearby town.

"I love growing lemon balm, and I grow five different varieties of basil, including holy basil," she said. "I am known at the market for having fresh herbs and greens. Customers love the cherry tomatoes and cucumbers most of all."

Program fellows also design and implement a conservation project on their own farms or land they are farming. They present their findings at a farm tour to their mentors, project partners, and other beginning farmers.

Sara's project includes designing, growing, and planting a native



As part of the Beginning Farmer Conservation Fellowship Program, Sara Brubacher led a farm tour to explore her project. Her project included designing, growing, and planting a native and pollinator garden around the perimeter of her vegetable garden. | Photo submitted

and pollinator garden around the perimeter of her vegetable garden. All of the species are pollinator plants that are either native or medicinal. They are planted along a walkway that leads to her clinic door, and she does not use any pesticides on them.

"I look at my project as an opportunity to teach people about the beauty of our native plants and see the benefits to pollinators," Sara said. "It is an example for people to learn at home. It also attracts pollinators that can support my vegetable garden and regenerative growing."

For her project, she researched what types of growing conditions were better for her plants as far as soil type, moisture, shade, and sun. Sara also analyzed the soil and the sun and shade cover, researched the bloom times of the species, and grouped them together accordingly.

"I wanted to make sure I was planting things so I had blooms all season long," she said. "The earliest bloomers are the shrubs. I also chose based on what was regional and what I had access to. I grew 70% of the plants from seed myself for the pollinator and native garden."

As a beginning farmer, Sara says it's been important to her to incorporate conservation practices into her plans from the start, which has helped her save time. And having a mentor to guide her along the way has been extremely helpful.

"This way I didn't have to backtrack and redesign, especially with pollinator plantings and co-planting," she said. "As a first-year farmer I had so many questions, and my mentor made all the difference."

After completing the fellowship program, Sara has big plans for Sky Chief Springs, including growing more herbs for her clinic to make teas and other simple herbal products available to her community, as well as having an extensive vegetable garden.

"I am seeing a lot of interest here in teaching classes for people to grow their own herbs and vegetables, why to grow heirloom varieties, seed saving, and even healthy cooking classes," said Sara. "I want to encourage more people to grow, and to explore wild spaces and wild harvesting. I am a big fan of that, and it's so important to me to help folks get outside of cultivated spaces."

Big dreams of boxing rings come true for Scottsbluff business owners

By Liz Stewart

For years, Rene Marquez dreamed of owning his own gym. He longed for a big garage or any sort of space where he could exercise and run a boxing program. With 20 years of fighting experience and a work history at fitness centers and of teaching boxing classes to kids, he was ready to have a place on his own.

Then, when he was least expecting it, the opportunity to buy a space presented itself. Warehouse Fitness & Training Center in Scottsbluff, Nebraska, had been open for a few decades, but it had changed owners several times during that period.

“When it ended up on the market again, my wife and I weren’t actively looking for a place, but we thought it might be the right time to take a chance and give it a shot,” Rene said.

Due to lack of down payment funds, Rene and his wife, Maricia, were unable to get financial assistance from a traditional bank. So, with a recommendation from their realtor, the couple reached out to the Center for Rural Affairs.

The Center approved a loan for Rene and Maricia, a loan made possible by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Program (RMAP). Created in the 2008 farm bill, the program has enabled numerous small rural businesses to access much-needed loan capital and technical assistance. RMAP makes grants to organizations, like the Center, that provide training and technical assistance and make small loans to new and existing rural small businesses.

With RMAP up for renewal in the farm bill being crafted in Washington, D.C., the Center is



Rene and Maricia Marquez were unable to get financial assistance from a traditional bank to purchase Warehouse Fitness & Training Center, in Scottsbluff, Nebraska. So, the couple reached out to the Center for Rural Affairs. | Photo submitted

advocating to see this important program continued and improved.

Kim Preston, Lending Services director with the Center, helped guide Rene and Maricia through the loan process, and they took ownership of the gym in November 2022.

The couple used their loan to buy the existing business and commercial building, as well as replace the failing geothermal units in the floors. The building is home to additional businesses including a barber shop, salon, and Airbnb units, so Rene and Maricia are landlords to these tenants.

Although he’s living his best life, Rene says there are ups and downs to being a business owner.

“Having hard conversations that most people don’t want to have about rent being due and repairs isn’t always easy,” he said. “There can be long days, but I don’t see it as work; I enjoy it.”

Maricia said the gym gives her a chance to connect with her community.

“When people are lost in life and looking for a way to get back on track, they come to the gym and I get to see their progress,” she said.

The couple puts in long hours running the gym, and they work outside jobs as well. Occasionally, their family helps with cleaning or small jobs around the building. Local youth also do community service work at the gym.

“The Center has been super helpful to us,” she said. “I think for most people, without the Center, a lot of their business ventures would not be possible. We’ve learned a lot during this process and we’re better financial managers because of it.”

Need financing to start your own business or make repairs to an existing business? Contact us at loans@cfra.org.



Jordan and Travis Classen were awarded a Value-Added Producer Grant to help with processing, marketing, and salaries. | Photos submitted

Classen Land & Cattle grows business with Value-Added Producer Grant

By Kelsey Willardson, kelseyw@cfra.org

Jordan Classen and her husband, Travis, are both native Nebraskans with a passion for farming. They recently started their own farming operation, with Travis raising their cattle and Jordan managing their beef processing, marketing, and sales. Starting a small business like theirs and keeping it running can be difficult, especially in the beginning.

The Value-Added Producer Grant (VAPG) program, administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development, was able to help Jordan in a time of transition and allow her to continue to focus on her operation.

"I'm super grateful we got the grant and I really feel like it's helping me," Jordan said. "It can be scary to be a small business owner sometimes, and having that reassurance is helping me believe in myself a little bit more too."

The grant program is designed to support agricultural producers who are creating value-added products. These include products that are processed, packaged, dried, or otherwise changed from

their raw version for sale. Through VAPG, qualifying producers, like Jordan, can get funding for business development, marketing expenses, processing costs, and salaries.

Jordan and Travis branched out from Travis' family operation in 2016 when they started raising cattle in Fullerton, Nebraska. In 2022, Jordan established Classen Land & Cattle, LLC and got to work creating a strategy and development plan. Soon after, she followed the recommendations of fellow farmers and applied for VAPG to boost marketing.

This year, she had to move locations unexpectedly and rent a new space, which was an additional cost that even Jordan's careful planning could not have anticipated. Funds from the grant helped her weather the storm, as they were used for beef processing and her salary.

"My husband and I are focused on creating a very stable business and that's what VAPG has helped us with," she said.

Even with the hurdles she has faced, she has been able to in-

crease her beef processing from five head her first year to more than 20 this year. After analyzing her business model and her competition, she realized the value in allowing customers to make custom orders online and will use the funds to create this option on her site. She will also increase her advertising to bring in new customers.

VAPG was the first grant Jordan applied for. The staff at her local Rural Development office helped her prepare for the deadline and meet the submission requirements.

"VAPG is something that I advocate for and I believe in," Jordan said. "I think it's wonderful and I wish there could be an unlimited amount of grant dollars for people to do it."

Producers interested in the VAPG program are encouraged to contact their Rural Development office for more information. Locations can be found at rd.usda.gov/find-your-local-area-office. In 2022 alone, the program supported more than 180 producers nationwide.

Minnesota project expands access to energy efficiency programs

By Cora Hoffer, corah@cfra.org

As Minnesota works toward 100% carbon-free electricity by 2040, a new goal set by the legislature in 2023, one southeastern Minnesota nonprofit organization is taking advantage of expanded clean energy funding initiatives to support its mission.

With funding from Seed Grants from the Clean Energy Resource Team's (CERT), a partnership of four public-private organizations in Minnesota, Project FINE (Focus on Integrating Newcomers through Education) has made clean energy resources accessible through educational programs, translating services, and outreach efforts to determine what gaps exist.

"Our mission is to help refugees and immigrants adjust to the community and the U.S. and work with partners and service providers to build equity and inclusion," said Katie van Eijl, program manager.

According to an Immigrant and Refugee Population Estimate study completed by Project FINE using 2020 Census data, while the overall population in Winona County decreased, the number of individuals who identify as non-white or Hispanic increased from 8% to 14%, with the total immigrant and refugee population of Winona County estimated at 9,550. With the population increasing, the role Project FINE plays in the community becomes more crucial.

"Much of the immigrant and refugee population in Winona lives in mobile homes or older housing that is more likely to have a higher energy bill," Katie said.

According to the U.S. Department of Energy, utilities in mobile homes cost up to 50% more compared to regular homes of the



An organization in southeast Minnesota is making clean energy resources accessible through educational programs, translating services, and outreach efforts. | Photo submitted

same size and age, and mobile homeowners spend 70% more per square foot on energy.

Through a partnership with the Citizens Utility Board of Minnesota, Project FINE has begun embracing energy efficiency initiatives. A local county commissioner helped connect the groups as part of a seed grant offered by CERT. The objective of the seed grant is to support community-based clean energy projects in each of the Minnesota CERT regions.

With the funding the two groups increased access to energy efficiency resources by translating materials into Spanish and Hmong, and hosting free energy bill clinics. In 2021, 12% of the state's population was reported to speak a language other than English, indicating an increased need for materials to be translated. During one of the energy bill clinics, they hosted a "Understanding Your Energy Bill" class. They offered individual consultations to break

down residents' energy bills and help them understand on a practical level how to reduce their bill with simple energy saving tips.

Overall, Project FINE assisted 175 people. Their efforts included providing 52 families with both Hmong and Spanish versions of CERT's Right Light Guide and other energy guides, assisting 15 families during the energy bill clinics, and hosting a presentation attended by 27 residents.

With more funding, Katie said the organization hopes to continue to expand its work and assist more immigrant and refugee families.

Having already taken action with hands-on efforts, Katie said Project FINE plans to continue to provide refugees, immigrants, and other community members with support and services to put energy efficiency initiatives to work.

Learn more about Project FINE's work in Winona County and the surrounding southeast Minnesota region at projectfine.org.

Grant re-opens for Nebraska meat processors

By Meg Jackson, megj@cfra.org

The capacity of Nebraska's small meat processors continues to improve and expand thanks in part to grants issued through the Independent Processor Assistance Program (IPAP). In 2022, \$10 million was allocated to the program as part of the state's allotment of funds from the American Rescue Plan Act.

Nearly \$5 million was awarded to 64 small- and medium-sized processors across the state as part of the first round of funding. These grants were used to update technology, purchase and upgrade equipment, and increase capacity and production. The remaining funds are now available through the Nebraska Department of Agriculture.

Meat processors Karmen and Jeremy Borchard, owners of Dundy County Processors, were among those awarded grant money in the first round. When COVID-19 hit, the Borchards were worried they would be forced to shut down. Instead, they experienced a historic increase in demand from both processing requests and customers who couldn't get meat through grocers. The Borchards needed



The Nebraska Department of Agriculture will soon accept applications for the Independent Processor Assistance Program. Eligible processors have until Feb. 16 to apply. | Photo by Kylie Kai

more processing capacity, so they applied for a grant under IPAP to buy new equipment.

To keep up with demand and a need that hasn't gone away, the Borchards are expanding their facility and will become USDA-inspected to keep local meat in the economy and support area producers, a direction in which fellow first-round grant recipient Mark Cornelius also is going.

"People want a source for local, reliable, and readily available

meats—not only as a consumer but also as a producer," said Mark, who owns Cornelius Butchery in Pickrell, Nebraska. "The IPAP grant helped make our expansion possible and led to our decision in becoming a USDA facility. This will open up new markets for us."

Mark used his \$80,000 grant award to buy equipment to increase production. The money helped to free up capital and increased revenues to finance expansion for building slaughter capacity.

The Nebraska Department of Agriculture is accepting applications for IPAP grants until Feb. 16. Eligible processors may apply for up to \$100,000 and must operate as either a U.S. Department of Agriculture-Food Safety and Inspection Service facility or a federally regulated custom-exempt slaughter and processing facility. Previous recipients will be eligible to apply, but preference will be given to applicants not previously awarded funding.

More information may be found by contacting the Nebraska Department of Agriculture or Meg Jackson with the Center at megj@

Clean energy, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

Department of Agriculture, the Rural Energy for America Program received an infusion of funding to provide grants and loans to support both farm and non-farm rural small business participation in clean energy and energy efficiency upgrades. Homeowners, businesses and developers, and nonprofits will be able to leverage new tax credits to support solar and other clean-energy technology.

As these new federal programs roll out, the Center's focus is on

developing programs, assistance, and resources to help rural people understand, access, and leverage the array of new opportunities in ways that align with Center values such as stewardship, involvement, and ownership.

As a Center supporter, you have long understood the importance of renewable energy. Now, for the first time in all of our lives, including the lifetime of the Center, federal policy is fully aligned with this goal.

This means new opportunities for communities, businesses, households, and farms to participate directly in clean energy development, participating in and benefiting from local or individual ownership as well.

Together we have an opportunity to meet the moment, harness these resources, and make sure they work for rural people. It's work we started in 1976, and work we will finish in the decades ahead.



CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

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Farm bill update

Lawmakers have until September 2024 after extension

FROM THE DESK OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Federal legislation offers new pathway for clean energy

By Brian Depew, briand@cfra.org

One of the inaugural projects of the Center for Rural Affairs was the Small Farm Energy Project.

A three-year research and demonstration project working with 48 farms in Cedar County, Nebraska, the Small Farm Energy Project sought to demonstrate that the adoption of alternative energy technologies by small family farms can make positive contributions to their incomes.

To make a three-year story short, it worked. In 1979, an average of \$1,138 in energy expenses was saved for each participating

farm. The project also brought attention to the Center as an organization empowering rural people to create change in their businesses or communities by providing credible and practical assistance and advice.

The Center already understood then that renewable energy offered both environmental and economic benefits for independent operators. In the following decades, the Center continued to promote clean energy, including through local, state, and federal policy change.

Now, in 2024, the country finds itself at the vanguard of a major

new emphasis on clean energy deployment. The Inflation Reduction Act, passed by Congress in 2022, provides an array of incentives, regulations, loans, and grants designed to help remake the way we produce energy. Many of these new programs are just beginning to roll out.

For example, the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund, a multi-billion-dollar program at the Environmental Protection Agency will make awards in 2024 to support low-income residential solar grants and financing. At U.S.

—SEE CLEAN ENERGY ON PAGE 7