



CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

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Latino farmer believes healthy food goes hand in hand with healthy soil

By Liz Stewart and Carmen Montes, carmenm@cfra.org

Sandro Lopes feels the most important thing people can do when farming is to care for the soil and environment.

Originally from Brazil, Sandro now lives and farms in David City, Nebraska. His speciality is growing microgreens, and he enjoys sharing his methods with others so they can try their hand at growing their own crops.

The farmer uses two production systems to grow plants for Huertos Regenerativos Na Terra, a project he's working on through his micro-green vegetable business. Huertos Regenerativos Na Terra was born out of concern for the environment and soil.

One system is set up under a canopy of trees, where Sandro

—See Healthy food and healthy soil on page 3



Center staff have helped Sandro Lopes with both technical assistance and with creating a business plan. He says the Center arrived at a moment in his life when he needed motivation. | Photo by Carmen Montes

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Rural advocates honored by Center for Rural Affairs

By Rhea Landholm, rheal@cfra.org

Each year, we honor the rural champions who help us accomplish so much for rural America. Your actions and your values lay the foundation for a better rural future.

This year, we recognize outstanding people and entities in two states.

Awards include:

Seventh Generation Award:

Denise O'Brien and Larry Harris, Rolling Acres Farm, Atlantic, Iowa, for lifetime service in making major contributions in improving rural life and protecting our land and water.

Citizenship Award:

Will Corman, Superior, Nebraska, for working closely with the Center

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Editor's note

By Rhea Landholm, rheal@cfra.org

There's a podcast I listen to that asks the same questions of its guests at the end of every episode: Who's a great manager you have worked for?

My answer is Linda Butkus.

We don't normally mention staff comings and goings in this newsletter, but there is a notable retirement coming up this month. Linda, our Chief Administrative Officer, is leaving us after nearly six years.

Linda was hired for this then newly-created position in response to staff growth. She helped alleviate the workload of our leadership, was in charge of handbooks and board devel-

opment, made sure more of our systems were intentional, led human resources efforts, and more. And, most importantly to me, she became my manager.

She has helped me make strides in my own leadership and has assisted in taking the Center's communications to new heights. When Linda started, she didn't know much about the nitty gritty parts of communications, like social media analytics and media outreach, but she was willing to listen and learn.

As Brené Brown says, "A brave leader is someone who says I see you. I hear you. I don't have all the answers, but I'm going to keep listening and asking questions."



Linda—thank you for listening, asking questions, and being brave. You have made a difference.

Rural advocates honored, Continued from Page 1

to advance public policies that strengthen family farms, ranches, and rural communities.

Rural Community Champion

Award: Candi Benge, Gibbon, Nebraska, for making extraordinary contributions in building community engagement within her own communities around nutrition education and food sovereignty.

Entrepreneur Award (two

businesses): Rachael Barlow and Heather Veik, owners of River Mill Coffee Co. in Neligh, Nebraska, and Maria Dolores Arias Villalpando, owner of Laundry Mex in Grand Island, Nebraska, for receiving the Center's services and achieving remarkable success in

business while demonstrating the values of innovation, community leadership, and social responsibility.

Entrepreneur Partner Award:

Maricela Novoa, of Educational Service Unit #10 in Kearney, Nebraska, for demonstrating outstanding support for the Center and exceptional dedication to small business development through technical assistance, business training, lending, and networking across rural Nebraska.

Awards will be presented to each recipient this spring.

With you by our side, we'll continue fighting for the future we know is possible.



Awards will be presented this spring to rural champions in two states. These people have helped us accomplish much for rural America. | Photo by Rhea Landholm

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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Healthy food and healthy soil,

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tries to imitate what would be found in nature. In this system, light shines on plants for a minimum of five to six hours a day. The other production system is set up for full sun, and he uses techniques for production of regenerative agriculture, with the goal being the construction or reconstruction of the soil.

“We believe the soil is a living thing,” said Sandro. “We try to disturb the soil as little as possible so the plants have the opportunity to grow their roots deeper and stronger.”

Sandro has received assistance from the Center for Rural Affairs, including technical assistance and help creating a business plan. He has also been one of the Center’s farmer hosts for events, as well as participated in other Center-sponsored events.

“I believe the Center gave me the vision,” said Sandro. “The Center arrived at a moment in my life when I needed motivation. With the Center’s help, I had the opportunity to meet professionals in the area and exchange ideas with them.”

While Center staff assisted Sandro in setting up his operation, they also took a soil sample before he started planting in order to complete a soil analysis. He believes healthy food goes hand in hand with healthy soil.

“Taking care of the soil for me is taking care of life; things cannot be produced if the soil is not healthy and right,” he said. “The more biodiversity, the more microorganisms in the soil, the better conditions you have to produce different plants in the same space.”

To others looking to start their own operations, big or small,



Originally from Brazil, Sandro Lopes now lives and farms in David City, Nebraska. His specialty is growing microgreens, and he enjoys sharing his methods with others. | Photos by Carmen Montes

Sandro recommends they become familiar with the agricultural production calendar for their area, as well as learn what amount of light the plants need each day.

Management is different for each plant, but Sandro says the most important thing is for people to grow plants that bring them joy.

“I believe that a fundamental factor is to do what you love and what excites you the most,” he said. “I’m going to try to plant as much lettuce as I can because that’s what I’m passionate about; seeing it grow and develop and feed several families. And, it’s a short cycle because it only takes 45 to 50 days, so the food is on the table faster.”

Sandro is grateful for the networking opportunities and connections he has been able to make through the Center. He also feels the Center has been a driving force behind bringing the Latino community of David City together with the rest of the city.

“The Center is the bridge that will unite the Latino community

with David City,” said Sandro. “It’s important for our community to have an institution that will take care of small businesses. That’s what it’s all about; how to take care of small agricultural businesses in a more sustainable way. I see that our Latino community has a connection to an institution that cares; cares for the soil, cares for the environment, cares for people, and cares for life.”

He strongly believes that everyone has a purpose in their life, and he feels his is to continue to grow food and to offer what he can to his neighbors when they are in need. In addition to producing food for himself, Sandro donates 70% of what he grows to the local food bank.

“For me, producing food is essential and sharing that food is a goal,” he said. “It’s beautiful to be in an environment where there are people from different countries, and they are discussing how to cultivate plants but also how to grow food and share it. For me, that’s the bottom line.”

Business owner creates welcoming atmosphere for entrepreneurs and community

By Liz Stewart, Carlos Barcenas, and Carmen Montes, carmenm@cfra.org

When Maria Dolores Arias Villalpando started working at Laundry Mex, LLC, in Grand Island, Nebraska, she had no idea she'd eventually own the business and the building it's in, plus become a property manager to other immigrant business owners like herself.

Maria's employers approached her several years ago about buying their laundromat, and she was thrilled to take them up on their offer. At the time, her son also rented a space in the commercial building for his transportation and parcel business.

"My son and I decided that if I bought the building he didn't have to pay rent, and we could use that money toward the purchase of the building," Maria said.

Center for Rural Affairs Latino Loan Specialist Griselda Rendon walked Maria through the loan process, and she received funding to buy the building in June 2022.

"Maria was great to work with, and she loves helping people and being around people," Griselda said. "Her customer service is absolutely amazing; all her customers love her because she is always willing to go the extra step for them."

What Maria lacked was a business plan, financial projections, and the documented income necessary for loan approval. With support from Griselda, Maria worked to get those pieces in place and attended classes offered by the Center on marketing, taxes, and business startup.

Maria used the knowledge she gained to construct a solid foundation from which she could access loan capital and build a multi-generational business that will



Maria Dolores Arias Villalpando, owner of Laundry Mex in Grand Island, Nebraska, has created a multi-generational business that supports a community of entrepreneurs and customers. | Photo by Rhea Landholm

support a community of entrepreneurs and customers.

"Center staff provided me with so much information, and I'm super grateful to everyone who was involved," she said.

Along with becoming a business owner, Maria also inherited the responsibilities of a property manager, which has presented her with opportunities to help other entrepreneurs.

"I feel proud and happy that I am able to help," Maria said.

Maria considers her building an incubator for businesses, and she loves to see new people, as well as spend time with her regular customers.

Her son helps out, maintaining and repairing washers and dryers and dealing with heating and air conditioning issues. Maria's daughter-in-law helps too, and the three of them take shifts supervising things throughout the day. Maria hopes her son will take over as the owner and property manager when she retires.

To others considering taking on

business responsibilities, Maria says to keep going, and trust the Center.

"The main thing would be not to give up," she said. "If you really want to do something, work hard for it. Get to know the Center and their services. The Center helped so much."

Bit by bit, Maria hopes to continue improving the laundromat by bringing in newer machines, and she's always looking for more ways to offer the best customer service she can.

"I am happy because everything worked out the way I was thinking," Maria said. "Every morning I thank God that I was able to accomplish something, and I feel happy to be able to provide for my three children. For them to see that I accomplished this will hopefully inspire them."

Need financing to purchase a business, or start one of your own? Contact your regional loan specialist. Find yours at cfra.org/lending-staff.



As a partner in the Heartland Regional Food Business Center, Center for Rural Affairs staff will provide assistance to Nebraska food businesses that use or sell locally produced food products. | Photo by Angelyn Wang

New Heartland Regional Food Business Center to support farm and food businesses

By Rhea Landholm, rheal@cfra.org

The Center for Rural Affairs is among more than 30 partners working together to increase business development assistance to small, mid-size, and diverse food and farm entrepreneurs in Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, and northwest Arkansas.

The Heartland Regional Food Business Center will help those entrepreneurs build the businesses and supply chain connections needed to meet growing demand for local and regionally produced food.

“It aims to grow the farm and food enterprises, markets, and community connections needed to make local food an everyday, easy choice,” said Kjersten Hyberger, local foods associate with the Center for Rural Affairs. “We’re excited to work with partners to strengthen food supply chains and put more regional foods on more

Nebraskan’s plates.”

The Heartland Food Business Center is one of 12 established in 2023, with funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), to support development of a more resilient, diverse, and competitive food system.

The Center for Rural Affairs will provide technical assistance to Nebraska food businesses that use or sell locally produced food products. Staff will also advise and train rural food business owners, including Latino and Native American entrepreneurs, for business and market development as well as help them access funding. Services are available in both English and Spanish.

“We will assist entrepreneurs locally while also working together regionally to identify and address challenges, such as gaps in local food storage capacity or distribution services,” Kjersten said. “A

region-wide asset mapping process will further this work to connect and advance resources and initiatives.”

In collaboration with partners, Center for Rural Affairs staff will help business owners connect to local, state, and national resources.

Reliable and ready access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food is a major objective of the USDA’s \$400 million investment in establishing Regional Food Business Centers.

“USDA recognizes that local and regional food systems are essential to the overall food supply chain, and the new Regional Food Business Centers are the cornerstone of our efforts to support them,” said Jenny Lester Moffitt, USDA Under Secretary for Marketing and Regulatory Programs.

More information can be found at heartlandfoodbusiness.org.

Food and Farm Business Loans are now available to small businesses in Nebraska

farmers • food business entrepreneurs • startups • retail businesses • other food supply chain businesses

Contact Meg Jackson at megj@cfra.org or 402.309.9096 | Visit cfra.org/food-and-farm-business-loans



Wind energy expansion in Iowa, South Dakota, and Nebraska contributes to rural investment. | Photo by Rhea Landholm

Capitalizing on wind energy is essential to rural growth

By Alex Delworth, alexd@cfra.org

The expansion of wind generation has been, and continues to be, a boon for rural development.

Wind energy is one of the fastest-growing sources of electricity across the nation. A handful of Midwest states like Iowa, Nebraska, and South Dakota are leading the charge in its development, according to recent reports from the U.S. Department of Energy.

In 2022, wind power accounted for 22% of new electricity capacity, representing a \$12 billion investment. While it was considered a down year for installations due to supply chain issues, forecasts for wind energy investments have grown by almost 60% thanks to passage of the Inflation Reduction Act in 2022.

Wind energy expansion has been a major contributor to rural investment and a source of

development. These projects can generate significant tax revenue for rural counties. In 2021, Iowa wind turbines paid out \$57 million to state and local taxing bodies as well as \$67 million in lease payments to landowners. County governments can use these funds to provide relief to taxpayers, improve critical infrastructure like county highways, revitalize town centers, and increase funding for essential services.

The industry has also created jobs for rural residents. According to Clean Jobs Midwest, more than 147,000 jobs were located in the rural Midwest in 2022.

Wind energy has been expanding in the Midwest for more than two decades. States like Iowa (62.4%) and South Dakota (54.8%) led the nation in the share of in-state electricity generation coming from wind, while Minnesota (23.5%) and Nebraska (31%)

ranked within the top 10. Iowa (81.9%) and South Dakota (76.9%) also led the nation in the share of in-state sales of electricity coming from wind energy, which accounts for most of the states' energy consumption.

In 2022, Nebraska ranked third in newly installed wind generation capacity at 602 megawatts, with Iowa, South Dakota, and Minnesota also ranking in the top 7. In total, these states combined for more than 1,600 megawatts of new wind capacity, which is enough to power nearly 500,000 additional homes annually.

Given wind energy's potential positive impact on rural development, capitalizing on it is essential for economic growth. Several Midwest states have paved the way as leaders in the industry's growth, which will pay dividends for rural communities for decades to come.

Congress must maintain support for conservation funding

By Kalee Olson, kaleeo@cfra.org

Farm bill negotiations that began in 2023 are now on Congress's to-do list for 2024, and an unclear path toward passage remains.

However, even as lawmakers will be required to divide their attention among a number of issues in the coming months, the Center will continue to focus on advocacy for its farm bill priorities—specifically, protecting conservation program funding.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's flagship working lands programs—the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)—benefit producers through financial and technical assistance to implement conservation practices on their farms and ranches. For many, these programs provide an important gateway to production methods that improve soil health and water quality, among other benefits to natural resources. Unfortunately, both programs have been chronically underfunded and oversubscribed, making a case for Congress to increase support for producers interested in enrolling.

In 2022, Congress passed the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA),

which included historic investments in CSP and EQIP. Specifically, the legislation provided \$3.25 billion for CSP and \$8.45 billion for EQIP through fiscal year 2026. This funding is in addition to the mandatory dollars already allocated to these programs each year.

To date, there has been no issue allocating this funding to producers. In Nebraska and Iowa, for example, 100% of program funding—both IRA and mandatory program dollars—for 2023 was distributed to enhance conservation across each state. Money from the IRA distributed in 2023, and now in 2024, is making CSP and EQIP available to more producers to implement more practices that are good for their operations and rural communities.

As we look ahead, it is essential that our elected officials in Washington, D.C., have a clear understanding of how important conservation programs are to producers. Not only are practices such as no-till, nutrient management, and prescribed grazing good for natural resources, they help producers build operations that are resilient to climate change and viable for future generations. Therefore, the



Working lands conservation programs—like the Conservation Stewardship Program and Environmental Quality Incentives Program—provide an important gateway to production methods that improve soil health and water quality. | Photo by Kylie Kai

historic funding allocated to these programs must remain available for its intended use.

If you would like to contact your U.S. representative or senator to express support for conservation funding, please email kaleeo@cfra.org. Find contact information for your members of Congress at congress.gov/members/find-your-member.

Solar project, Continued from Page 8

Rooftop solar — The Center's application also includes a behind-the-meter or rooftop strategy for qualified households. Interested residents would be screened for eligibility and site suitability, and then connected to both a technical service provider and solar installer.

If awarded, the Solar for All grant would provide resources for the Center, our partners, and contractors to provide both technical

and financial assistance to support each of the three strategies.

As submitted, the Center-led project will reach more than 15,000 households in the state and deploy more than 100 megawatts of new residential serving solar. The strategy envisioned by the Center will ensure low-income and historically disadvantaged residents can be full participants in the new energy economy.

In addition to our Nebraska application, Center staff are in touch with applicants in other states as well as national applicants on ways to collaborate and support the program nationally.

Solar for All is a competitive grant application. Public announcements of awards are expected by August 2024.



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03/24



Rural advocates honored

6 awards to be presented this spring

From the desk of the executive director:

Center proposes \$100 million low-income solar project

By Brian Depew, brian@cfra.org

The Center for Rural Affairs recently submitted a \$100 million proposal to the Environmental Protection Agency's Solar for All grant competition.

The Solar for All program will make \$7 billion available nationally to facilitate low-income and historically disadvantaged community participation in residential solar energy. The program is designed to deploy solar, save residential participants at least 20% on their utility bills, and transform the residential solar market.

If awarded, the Center would establish the Nebraska Solar for All program with the goal of ensuring that low-income and disad-

vantaged households in Nebraska have equitable access to solar power.

To develop the application, Center staff met with more than 50 stakeholders including utilities, state agencies, housing developers, housing organizations, solar developers, workforce partners, community-based organizations, and Tribes. Over the course of numerous meetings, conversations, and planning sessions, participants identified a three-part strategy that includes community solar, multi-family affordable housing solar, and rooftop solar, as well as a Tribal set-aside.

Community solar — Through our proposed community solar

strategy, the Center would collaborate with public utilities in the state to support the development of residential-serving community solar arrays. Eligible residents would participate through subscriptions or through ownership of panels.

Multi-family affordable housing solar — This is similar to community solar, but specifically serving income-qualified multi-family housing units. Through this proposed strategy, the Center would collaborate with utilities, housing developers, and low-income housing financing partners to deploy solar serving these housing units.