



# CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

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## Fifth-generation farmer finds new ways to care for the land as a conservation fellow

By Liz Stewart

**A**s a teenager, Corinne Kolm wanted to live in a big city and have nothing to do with her family's farming legacy. With time, her strong agricultural roots took her back to the land, and she's glad it did.

Originally from northeast Nebraska, Corinne is a fifth-generation farmer, a heritage of which she is very proud. Her grandfather and his siblings all farmed, as well as several of their children.

"When you get to my generation, my brother and I are the only ones still working the land and both of us have off-farm income as well," she said. "It is very difficult to make a living on a small farm these days, and I think the consolidation of farms into entities that own thousands of acres is a huge loss to our culture, health, and the environment."

—See Conservation fellow on page 3



Corinne Kolm is a fifth-generation farmer who lives with her husband on 80 acres near Beatrice, Nebraska. She is a 2024 Center Beginning Farmer Conservation Fellow and for her project, she is working to improve soil health primarily through reducing tillage. | Submitted photo

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## Grants available to farm and food entrepreneurs

By Kjersten Hyberger, [kjh@cfra.org](mailto:kjh@cfra.org)

**T**he window for the second round of Business Builder Grants will open mid-January. Food businesses can apply for the reimbursable funds that could promote business expansion, job creation, business capacity building, and increase local products in the local market.

Another \$3.7 million is available through the Heartland Regional Food Business Center for projects

in Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Nebraska, and northwest Arkansas.

The Center for Rural Affairs is excited to be a key partner in this effort, providing technical assistance to applicants and spreading the word to get needed resources to rural communities that could greatly benefit from this economic opportunity.

The Heartland Center will accept

—See Farm and food entrepreneurs on page 2

# Editor's note

By Rhea Landholm, rheal@cfra.org

**A**s we enter the new year, I can't help but reflect on the past 366 days and ponder what's next.

In 2024, I had the privilege of traveling to six new-to-me states—all east of the Mississippi River. While driving windy mountain roads, two-lane highways, and through small towns, I noticed one common factor: small businesses. Some had customers while others had for-sale signs in their windows.

What is clear to me is that in the next year, I need to focus more on supporting our small businesses. I admit it's easy to pick up my phone and order something with one click. But, how much more fulfilling is it to walk into a shop located in a historical building, across creaky wooden floors, and be greeted by a smiling proprietor. That person likely does it all, including donating to local causes.

With 2025 full of unknowns,



I know there is one thing I can control—my choice of shopping locally and supporting small businesses.

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## Farm and food entrepreneurs, continued from page 1

proposals to the Business Builder Grants program semi-annually for competitive subawards of \$5,000 to \$50,000. The second funding window is open through mid-March 2025.

The grant application is open to small and diverse food and farm entrepreneurs and nonprofit organizations producing in, sourcing from, and focused on local and regional markets. Small business is defined as a business with fewer than 50 employees and less than \$3 million in gross annual revenues. There is no size requirement for nonprofits.

Eligible projects include business development activities like marketing, feasibility studies, and loan preparedness, as well as equipment upgrades, food hub development, and worker safety improvements. Application requirements include completing a budget, providing a business plan, and obtaining a Unique Entity Identifier (UEI) through SAM.gov.

The Heartland Center offers free training webinars, office hours, and one-on-one business counseling to help applicants with these requirements and any other grant application needs they may have.

Grant awardees will be connected with a Heartland Center team member in their state to help navigate the post-award process and see their projects to completion. Applicants may apply for more than one grant award, as long as they do not exceed the \$50,000-per-entity limit. Award recipients have 12 months from the date of the award to complete their projects, with the option of one six-month extension.

Projects funded through the Heartland Center's Business Builder Grants will further their vision of making the region a place where locally produced food will be a major contributor to a resilient and safe food supply through regional networks that make local food an easy, everyday choice sup-

porting healthy people, community economies, and sustainable ecosystems.

The Heartland Center is ready for Spanish-language applicants and will work to accommodate other non-English speakers. Application materials are available in Spanish, and applications may be submitted in Spanish and be reviewed by qualified Spanish-speaking reviewers.

If you have questions or would like more information about Business Builder Grants and how they may be able to support food security in your neck of the woods, please visit the website and sign up for updates at: [heartlandfoodbusiness.org/business-builder](http://heartlandfoodbusiness.org/business-builder).

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has funded Regional Food Business Centers across the country, and each administers its own business builder program. To find out more about opportunities in your area, visit [ams.usda.gov/services/local-regional/rfbcp](http://ams.usda.gov/services/local-regional/rfbcp).

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## Paper & e-news

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The Center is an equal opportunity employer and provider.



The Center's Beginning Farmer Conservation Fellowship is in its third year, with eight individuals joining the program each year. One part of the fellowship is hosting farm tours to present their project findings. In fall 2024, six fellows were able to gather including Shahab Bashar, Gus Leigh, Angela Mueller, Laura Simpson, Stephanie Leigh, and Amy Gerdes. Pictured on the far right is Center staff member Cait Caughey. | Photo by Kylie Kai

## Conservation fellow, continued from page 1

Corinne grew up around crop ground, cattle, pigs, and chickens. She studied agroecology in graduate school and has worked in local foods and organic certification for nearly 20 years.

"My parents were always great lovers of the outdoors, but much of their concern about the food system came after I became ill at the age of 8 and was diagnosed with an endocrine disorder," Corinne said. "My mom eventually went to graduate school and did research on pesticide runoff, and my dad started questioning the use of chemicals in farming."

In 2018, Corinne and her husband purchased their 80-acre operation, Giving Tree Farm near Beatrice, from retiring farmers who wanted to keep the land in diversified sustainable production.

"Our farm is so beautiful and very diverse," said Corinne. "We have a small market garden, orchard, pastures, restored prairie, grass-fed cattle, and laying hens. We also have several hedgerows, windbreaks, ponds, creeks, and solar and wind power."

Interest in sustainable farming led her to explore other methods, including implementing conservation practices. This search led

her to the Center for Rural Affairs' Beginning Farmer Conservation Fellowship.

The program began in 2022 with eight individuals, plus mentors. The most recent cohort began in spring 2024 with eight beginning farmers, including Corinne.

Not only was Corinne intrigued by the program's mentorship opportunities and project funding, she also felt motivated to apply because friends and previous fellows Katie Jantzen, Sara Brubacher, and Elle Worley all gave her the encouragement she needed to give it a try.

"Katie was an intern at my farm for the previous owners and now has her own farm 30 minutes from me and is one of my closest friends," said Corinne. "We met Sara and Elle at a conference a few years ago and formed an informal female farmer group that tries to get together a couple of times a year. They really understand the trials and triumphs of farming, and we provide great support for one another."

As part of the program, conservation fellows design and implement a 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.

For her project, Corinne is working to improve soil health primarily through reducing tillage.

"Our ground has been intensively tilled for a really long time, and the soil really needs improvement," she said. "The project is going well so far. I'm setting up the framework now and will continue the process in the future."

Eventually, Corinne plans to develop her farm into a place where people can visit and learn about the food system, pick their own produce, and connect with nature.

Being a conservation fellow and working with other beginning farmers and her mentor has helped her get closer to bringing that plan to fruition.

"For me, one of the biggest benefits has been from my mentor; he is such a wealth of knowledge and encouragement," said Corinne. "Learning from other farmers means different voices bringing different perspectives and sharing ideas that make us all better. It's a great honor to have been named a fellow, and I would absolutely recommend this experience to other beginning farmers."

# Double cropping: connection between field and grid

By Cora Hoffer, corah@cfra.org

Combining row crops and solar energy has been relatively uncommon, but in Olivia, Minnesota, forward-thinking farmers John Baumgartner and Rolly and Larry Rauenhorst are demonstrating how solar power generation can be integrated into a corn-soybean operation, creating what they refer to as a “double-cropping” system.

Agrivoltaics, also known as dual-use solar or agrisolar, is the practice of using the same land for both solar energy and agriculture production. The practice can include growing crops, raising livestock, or creating pollinator habitats beneath solar panels.

After nearly five years of planning and building, the Rauenhorst Farm Agrivoltaics Project is up and running. Funded by an award from the University of Minnesota (UMN) Extension’s Southwest Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships, the project will allow UMN researchers to monitor soil and climate conditions as well the performance of a corn and soybean crop below the panels.

The one-of-a-kind solar project is a 36 kilowatt system comprising 10 individual sets of panels that tower 14 feet above a corn and soybean rotation field. The height of the panels allows the farmers to maintain use of conventional equipment below. The custom racking holding the panels was engineered using recycled oil field pipes as posts to accommodate the cropping system and equipment. Dual-axis arrays track the sun as it moves from east to west each day, shading only 7.5% of the ground. The panels also have the ability to level out horizontally if sensors indicate that wind speeds have become too high.

“We are looking at the inter-connection between the field and the grid, distributing our options



On Rauenhorst Farm in Olivia, Minnesota, solar arrays stand 14 feet above a corn field. The owners are demonstrating what they refer to as a “double-cropping” system. | Photo by Cora Hoffer

over the entire bread basket,” said Rolly.

At a recent field day planned by the organization Clean Energy Resource Teams, those in attendance met with the Rauenhorsts and others who made the project possible. Additionally, attendees trekked into the cornfield to see the project up close.

Minnesota is a leading state for agrivoltaics. According to the Innovative Solar Practices Integrated with Rural Economies and Ecosystems project, 584 agrivoltaics sites are in the U.S., with 258 located in Minnesota.

Most of the sites in Minnesota are managed as habitat, such as pollinator support or native grasses, or by incorporating animal grazing into the management of site vegetation. Before the Rauenhorsts launched their project, only two of the Minnesota sites included crop production activities, both specifically growing various types of vegetables. There is an opportunity to combine solar with

traditional row crops, like corn and soybeans, but there is a lack of research on using this method of farming.

UMN researchers will document the performance of the solar energy and crop production at the Rauenhorst site as they rotate between corn and soybeans over the next several growing seasons. A range of variables will be measured, including solar radiation levels, temperature, wind speed, and the effect of different levels of shade from the panels on corn and soybean growth. Through the current field research, researchers seek to understand how solar panels in the field affect corn and soybeans from planting to harvest.

Overall, the Rauenhorsts hope to show that there can be a balance between producing energy with little to no crop loss in a traditional row crop operation. Agrivoltaics provides an exceptional opportunity to support both Minnesota’s agricultural industry and its clean energy transition efforts.

# Rural Iowa grocer determined to overcome adversity

By Cynthia Farmer, [cynthiaf@cfra.org](mailto:cynthiaf@cfra.org)

The locally owned Mulholland Grocery store had been a fixture on Malvern, Iowa's Main Street for nearly 150 years before a fire on Dec. 13, 2021, inflicted severe building damage, including a collapsed roof.

A week later, after a powerful storm caused significant water damage to the basement, the remaining structure was demolished, leaving the community with not only a visible gap in its downtown facade but also a hole in the hearts of customers who came from near and far to shop.

Mulholland's was the only grocery store in Malvern before the fire. A Dollar General has since opened on the outskirts of town, but owner Tom Mulholland said if residents want fresh food options, the nearest grocery store is 11 miles away, in Glenwood.

"It's created a hardship for a lot of people, and I want to get this store rebuilt, reopened, and make it as strong as possible," Tom said.

The store's absence has also had an economic impact. Shortly after the fire, the city council had a special meeting to address the potential loss in tax revenue and the need to amend its budget.

## Sharing his story to advocate for support

The impact of locally owned grocery stores and the challenges owners face are not going unnoticed at the Iowa Statehouse. Last year, the Center worked with lawmakers to introduce legislation that would provide resources to owners fighting to stay open amidst economic and workforce challenges and competition from big box retailers. While the legislation didn't advance, the Center's advocacy efforts continue with the help of people like Tom.

Seeing the benefits his store brings to his hometown, Tom has found an interest in advocating for



Tom Mulholland, a grocery store owner in Malvern, Iowa, has found an interest in advocating for small business owners like himself. In summer 2024, he met with Center staff members Cynthia Farmer and Deborah Solie. | Center file photo

policies impacting rural communities at the local, state, and national levels. His experiences put him in a position to tell a unique story with an impression that spreads beyond Malvern's Main Street.

As lawmakers consider legislation to support local grocers, Tom shared that some policy changes may not always lead to solutions. For example, he said, recent tax cuts have not helped many smaller businesses in rural communities where rates are already low.

Tom is also preparing for other hiccups as he progresses to the opening of his store. Employees will have to be trained on the new equipment and daily tasks, as well as working with perishable products, which requires a level of training different from many other businesses.

"The need for staffing support, technical assistance, and improved infrastructure just tack onto the looming financial challenge I will have to overcome," Tom said.

Technical assistance programs, Tom said, can provide an avenue of support, particularly when it comes to understanding compliance factors associated with new policies written into law and how to apply for funding when it be-

comes available.

Additionally, as he and other longtime store owners contemplate retirement, Tom said programs to assist with the drafting of business transition and succession plans could ensure there is a mechanism to continue the operation.

"If we want to keep independently owned grocery stores [like mine] in business, we must invest in the infrastructure and support rural communities need to thrive, not just survive, in our economy today," Tom said.

## Progress on Main Street

Tom's commitment is paying off with the construction of the new Mulholland Grocery underway on the same Main Street lot.

"This is one of the days that I have been waiting for the most; the day the walls start to go up," Tom wrote in a Sept. 3 post on the store's Facebook page. "I know that many people had doubts at times. I know how many times I heard rumors that I had quit and this wasn't ever going to happen. I also know what it means to me to get this opportunity again to help my friends, neighbors, and community."

# Business owner offers a fresh way to get caffeine fix

By Liz Stewart

Pham's Coffee & Boba in Grand Island, Nebraska, is not a typical coffee shop. From placing an order to taking the first sip, customers are in for an immersive, educational, and delicious experience.

When Tuan Pham opened his shop in August 2023, he wanted to give residents something they'd never tried before, and he succeeded, in part because of guidance and a loan from the Center for Rural Affairs. He's now in the process of opening a second location.

"The Center has been an awesome resource," Tuan said. "When we got a loan, there were requirements for a full business plan, projections, cost breakdowns, etc. I appreciated that because it forced me to think deeply. It made us ask ourselves what success looks like for us."

Jessica Campos, the Center's Women's Business Center director, has been there to assist Tuan.

"Tuan is an innovative business owner and ongoing entrepreneur," said Jessica. "He has helped start a few family businesses and continues to grow as a small business owner."

After purchasing property in April 2023 that contained both a house and a commercial building, Tuan and his wife, Alyssa, contemplated the best approach to using the extra space. They decided to open their own business.

His desire to offer customers something new and different led him to one of his favorite beverages: boba. Pham's Coffee & Boba came to life several months later.

Tuan got a loan in summer 2023 to buy inventory for his coffee shop at 614 N. Eddy St.

In the months leading up to opening the shop, Tuan spent a lot of time doing social media marketing. By the time the shop had its



Tuan Pham opened Pham's Coffee & Boba in Grand Island, Nebraska, in August 2023. He received a loan from the Center to buy inventory and received guidance on creating a business plan. He is opening a second location in early 2025. | Photo by Carmen Montes

grand opening, many customers who had never tried boba before came because of the hype.

Spreading the word is only Tuan's first step in building his customer base. The business owner also takes great pride in giving customers an education on what boba is, where it comes from, and helping them find the right flavor combinations. Boba are bite-sized, chewy balls of tapioca in either juice- or tea-based drinks, combined with milk and ice.

Along with boba, Tuan specializes in Vietnamese coffee. Vietnam primarily grows robusta coffee beans, famous for their strong taste and high caffeine content. Tuan adds condensed milk to make traditional Vietnamese coffee, served hot or iced.

Customers can also order specialty waffles, including Vietnamese pandan waffles and ube waffles. Pandan waffles are made with tapioca flour and are crispy on the outside and soft and chewy on the inside, while ube waffles are made from a purple yam native

to southeast Asia that has a nutty, vanilla flavor.

"It sounds like we have a small menu, but we are very intentional about our selection and our boba drinks," Tuan said. "We are trying to make really good drinks, and I think people appreciate that."

Tuan has been extra busy recently as he renovates a space to open a second location of Pham's Coffee & Boba in early 2025. The original location has very limited space, and allows only for customers to order and go.

"The new location will be much bigger, have lots of seating and designated office rooms for meetings or parties, and more working space for the staff," Tuan said.

He feels grateful for everything he's learned along the way.

"We didn't know what we were doing at first, but no one really knows what they're doing even if they look like they do," said Tuan. "Learning along the way and making those mistakes have been much better lessons than we could imagine."

# Tax-exempt groups may qualify for reimbursements for energy efficiency improvements

By Val Ankeny, [valeriea@cfra.org](mailto:valeriea@cfra.org)

Public school administrators and board of education members across the country face tough decisions when addressing how to pay for the repair or replacement of aging equipment, vehicles, and infrastructure.

According to a report issued by the National Center for Education Statistics, the average age of the main instructional building among U.S. public schools that responded to the group's inquiry is 49 years, with 38% built before 1970.

The direct pay provision in the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) enables schools and other tax-exempt groups looking to fund projects or purchase equipment that improves energy efficiency to recoup a percentage of the cost.

Under direct pay, these organizations are eligible for cash payments equivalent to the tax savings they would have received if they were not tax-exempt. Eligible projects must have been put into

service after Jan. 1, 2023.

Entities can receive up to 30% of a clean energy project's cost, with the possibility of additional credits closer to a 50% reimbursement. Bonuses are based on the project's location, and for materials sourced in the U.S. Payments are issued when the project is completed and operational.

In Nebraska, Hastings Public Schools applied for the direct pay credit after installing a geothermal closed-loop heating and cooling system. The project cost was about \$3.6 million, with an estimated \$1.1 million eligible for direct pay.

"This is a great program that schools can use to upgrade facilities," said Trent Kelly, director of technology and operations. "We are happy with the process and have already talked to some schools about the process and savings."

Kelly anticipates the geothermal system will save Hastings Public Schools between \$75,000 and

\$100,000 annually.

School districts can also seek partial reimbursement for the installation of rooftop solar panels and the purchase of electric buses or other clean energy vehicles.

State and local governments, Tribal and Native entities, rural energy cooperatives, water districts, economic development agencies, certain public universities and hospitals, and other tax-exempt organizations are also eligible for direct pay. Qualifying projects include solar, wind, electric vehicle charging stations, battery storage, and community solar.

For more information on the direct pay program, visit [whitehouse.gov/cleanenergy/directpay](http://whitehouse.gov/cleanenergy/directpay). Additional guidance from the Internal Revenue Service can be found at [irs.gov/credits-deductions/elective-pay-and-transfer-ability-frequently-asked-questions](http://irs.gov/credits-deductions/elective-pay-and-transfer-ability-frequently-asked-questions).

## On the road, continued from page 8

We found our way on foot to the nearby Methodist Fellowship Hall, where we met with colleague Tod Bowman and half a dozen other inspiring Iowans. When you know you're all part of the Center family to begin with, quality conversation comes organically. Topics spanned from landowners and tenants working together toward common long-term goals to legislative engagement to ag drainage wells.

The cherry on top of this already great day was a visit with Pat Lamb, whose support of the Center was shared deeply by her late husband, Don. Pat's continued support of the Center carries out her own values as well as Don's

legacy. Jillian and I enjoyed Pat's home-cooked meal, reveled in the quilts she makes with her daughter, and finished the evening in the best way: rocking in chairs on her front porch, overlooking a lush field and quiet gravel road, enjoying each other's company.

The last day of the trip started with lunch in Ames. Our colleague Anna Johnson joined us at Neal and Jan Flora's home, and we enjoyed yet another robust chat over another tasty meal. We talked about cover crop trials, perennial grains, Solar for All, our families, and the other adventures we were all up to that week. This visit felt like a reunion with old friends.

## Wrapping up a wonderful trip

Jillian and I were nearly hoarse when we returned to our rendezvous point in eastern Nebraska. We sorted our jerky, our cookies, our coffee mugs. We embraced in that slightly delirious way after sharing such a rewarding and mentally stimulating experience.

We headed down our separate paths home, grateful to you all for your care and engagement in the Center's work, for your welcoming arms, and for the enthusiasm we share to build a thriving future.

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# CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

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## Fifth-generation farmer finds new way to care for land

Corinne Kolm is a Beginning Farmer Conservation Fellow

## On the road with Erin in Iowa

By Erin Schoenberg

*Note: Erin Schoenberg, development manager, has the pleasure of connecting with supporters across the country.*

Jillian Linster, the Center's policy director, and I don't get a chance to see each other often. But we both know how valuable it is to build connections with colleagues and within the communities we serve.

Last spring, Jillian and I put our heads together to develop a packed and productive mid-summer road trip through Iowa.

Then, we spent 40 hours over three days traversing the state.

We wanted to meet with our Iowa-based coworkers, visit dedicated Center supporters, and get to know different people and parts of the state better. Building relationships with rural communities and

landscapes is the foundation of our work. Your experiences inform our perspective at the Center, and help us be the best rural advocates we can be.

### Connecting with supporters

Our first stop was a field day at Center Advisory Committee member Lee Tesdell's farm near Slater. Here, we connected with coworkers, brushed up on conservation practices and all things soil pit, and sponsored a locally sourced lunch. The event was an opportunity for farmers, their families, and conservation professionals to come together, learn and share, enjoy some local food, and talk shop.

We pushed eastward, and stopped for a delightful conversation with Bill McDonald, a long-time family farmer and friend of the Center, in the North English

area. We sat in lawn chairs under the shade of a long-established maple, and from this spot in the yard we had a clear view of the fields Bill's dad farmed with a team of horses until 1940. We could see down the valley where Bill and neighbors came together to push back on the hog confinements slated for the area. And we had a view of solar panels near his bin site and of a happy hog catching some fresh air.

The next day, Jillian and I arrived in Kalona for coffee with Bill Furlong, another Bill who is passionate about policy, conservation, and conversation. We could have talked for hours, and lucky for us, we had arranged for just that. Bill joined us later for a group gathering of Center supporters from east central Iowa.