



# CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

Your rural news 50+ years | Lyons, Nebraska | Pop. 851 | July & August 2024



The Center's \$62 million is awarded from the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Solar for All program, a part of the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund established by the Inflation Reduction Act. The Solar for All program aims to lower energy costs and reduce pollution in underserved communities across the country by installing solar power systems. | Photo by Rhea Landholm

## Center for Rural Affairs selected for \$62.4 million Solar for All award

By Teresa Hoffman, [teresah@cfra.org](mailto:teresah@cfra.org), design by Kylie Kai, [kyliek@cfra.org](mailto:kyliek@cfra.org)

**T**he Center for Rural Affairs has announced that it has been awarded a \$62 million grant to transform solar energy accessibility and affordability in Nebraska.


The Center will work with partners and contractors to provide technical and financial assistance to support community, rooftop,

and multifamily affordable housing solar projects. The program will be implemented statewide and include rural, urban, suburban, and Tribal communities. In addition, the program will provide resources to help train workers to install and maintain the new installations.

"This grant will allow us to increase the amount of deployed solar energy in the state by more

than 60 megawatts over the five-year grant period," said Executive Director Brian Depew. "Solar for All will help catalyze development across all the major areas of the residential-serving market while ensuring low-income and historically disadvantaged residents can be full participants in the new energy economy."

—See page 3 for a timeline & how the grant will be used

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## Agriculture Committee drafts signal farm bill progress

By Kalee Olson, [kaleeo@cfra.org](mailto:kaleeo@cfra.org)

**A**fter months of anticipation, the U.S. House and Senate agriculture committees have taken initial steps in the long process of passing a new farm bill. The committees have been working on their respective versions since Congress approved an extension of

the 2018 farm bill in September. In May, Agriculture Committee Chair Glenn "GT" Thompson released a summary of the House bill, followed by the full draft—or "mark." Senate Ag Committee Chair Debbie Stabenow released

—See Farm bill on page 2

# Editor's note

By Rhea Landholm, rheal@cfra.org

Hiking in Minnesota is one of my favorite things to do. Its Department of Natural Resources, which runs the state parks and recreation areas, has a fun Hiking Club challenge. Almost all of the state parks have a designated Hiking Club trail, and somewhere along the trail is a sign with a password. I love this idea to scatter folks around to parks, especially lesser known or less popular parks.

I have been working on Hiking Club trails for a couple of years now. In May, I took a week and



completed 13 trails, while also taking advantage of state park campgrounds.

On the way to one state park, I noticed an extraordinary thing. In Winona County, between St. Charles and Whitewater State Park, almost every acreage and farm has solar. Rooftop solar,

barntop solar, solar in the yard, solar on the top of a fence at the edge of a field. And, in St. Charles, an assisted living facility had numerous panels of rooftop solar. At the state park, the visitor center and the shower buildings in the campgrounds are powered by solar.

Perhaps solar is at the front of mind with the news of our Nebraska Solar for All program. However, I can't help but imagine what it could look like in our home state. I encourage you to start thinking about how you can work solar into your buildings or even your community buildings. We are at least a year out from offering our loans and grants, but that time will be here before we know it.

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## Farm bill, continued from page 1

the Senate's bill summary the same month.

Each proposal outlines changes to all 12 titles of the current farm bill, ranging from conservation and crop insurance to nutrition and rural development. The proposed bills must pass out of the committees before either is presented to the full House or Senate.

On May 24, the House Agriculture Committee was the first to take this step, passing the Farm, Food, and National Security Act of 2024 on a 33-21 vote with the support of four Democrats.

Below are two topics of interest our staff will be monitoring in the months ahead.

**Conservation funding:** Since farm bill negotiations began, conservation funding—specifically money for working lands conservation programs allocated through

the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA)—has been at the forefront of discussion. In a win for the agriculture community, both chambers have agreed that this historic funding should be rescinded from the IRA and built into the farm bill baseline, ensuring the money will grow and be available to producers implementing conservation practices over time.

The conflict is over whether to maintain “climate guardrails” established by the IRA. The House bill removes the stipulation that IRA dollars solely fund climate-smart agriculture and forestry practices such as cover crops, no-till, and prescribed grazing. The Senate Agriculture Committee is supportive of maintaining these guardrails.

**Rural development:** In a big win for small business owners, the

House bill includes reauthorization of and improvements to the Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Program (RMAP) outlined in the Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Act of 2023. In addition to reauthorizing the program for five years, the bill would raise the loan cap from \$50,000 to \$75,000, allow entrepreneurs to renovate existing buildings, and allow lenders to fully fund loans using RMAP dollars. These changes are also outlined in the Senate summary.

If you would like to contact your U.S. representative or senators to express support for conservation funding or rural small businesses, please email me at [kaleeo@cfra.org](mailto:kaleeo@cfra.org).

You can find contact information for your members of Congress at [congress.gov/members/find-your-member](https://congress.gov/members/find-your-member).

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## Paper & e-news

This newsletter is available both electronically and in print. To receive it online, visit [cfra.org/sign-up](https://cfra.org/sign-up) or email [outreach@cfra.org](mailto:outreach@cfra.org).

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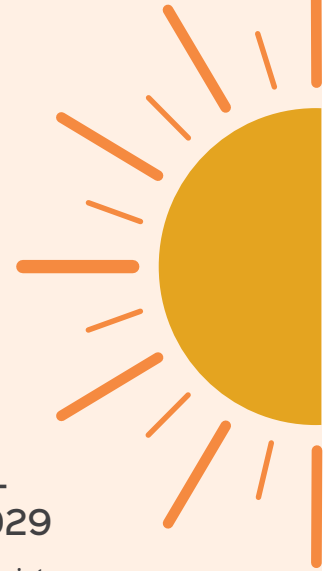
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# Solar for All

## What's next?

The Center for Rural Affairs is proud to be able to transform solar energy accessibility and affordability throughout Nebraska in the coming years. Good things take time, and we are hard at work making sure we have all the pieces in place for this new energy access. Take a look at the timeline below.



The Center's intention is to use the award to develop a long-lasting program that can continue to serve eligible households beyond the five-year grant period. This includes revolving funds from the initial projects into additional projects over time.

Here are the ways we plan on dispersing these funds:



### Community solar

Collaborating with public utilities to develop residential-serving community solar arrays, allowing eligible residents to participate through subscriptions or by owning panels.



### Multifamily affordable housing solar

Partnering with utilities, housing developers, and low-income housing financing partners to deploy solar for income-qualified multifamily housing units.



### Rooftop solar

Providing behind-the-meter or rooftop solar for qualified households, screening residents for eligibility and site suitability, and connecting them to technical service providers and solar installers.

## Join our team!

Does this new opportunity sound exciting to you? Maybe you know someone who would be a good fit. We want to hear from you! Visit [cfra.org/careers](https://cfra.org/careers).





Margaret Brady has transformed a vacant historical building in Shenandoah, Iowa, into a year-round indoor weekly farmers market and commercial kitchen. This boosts local food access and assists local producers. | Photo by Rhea Landholm

## Historic building houses farmers market, new opportunities for southwest Iowa town

By Liz Stewart and Deborah Solie, [deborahs@cfra.org](mailto:deborahs@cfra.org)

**A**fter witnessing the devastation of Iowa's floods in 2019, Margaret Brady felt drawn to help those affected. She had no idea that desire would lead to the revitalization of her community.

In 2020, Margaret started rehabilitating flood-damaged homes in her hometown of Shenandoah and sold her first to a young family. She found the process so fulfilling she developed it into a full-time operation.

Eventually, Margaret needed a workshop and a warehouse for storage, and the city attorney recommended the vacant Johnson Brothers Mill building.

She got funding to restore the historic building, which was bigger than she needed, and decided to use the extra space in a way that would benefit the community.

Staff from the Center for Rural Affairs and Golden Hills RC&D helped Margaret develop a plan that would offer new opportunities

in Shenandoah, including using the building to house an indoor farmers market and commercial kitchen.

"The lack of a commercial kitchen and vegetable processing areas were barriers that kept local growers from going to the next level of their production, as the nearest rentable commercial kitchen is 60 miles away," Margaret said.

Today, the former Johnson Brothers Mill is home to a year-round indoor weekly farmers market with food, artwork, and crafts sold by more than two dozen local growers and vendors.

Each week, live music and barbecue are available across the street. A nearby shop sells ice cream, and other stores stay open late to accommodate shoppers. The Market at The Mill is much more than a farmers market, Margaret said. It is part of the revitalization of downtown Shenandoah.

"Everyone is excited that this cool old building is coming back

to life," said Margaret. "One of the greatest things I've seen is people reconnecting with their neighbors. They are enjoying the best parts of the community and supporting local producers at the same time."

The market is open Thursdays from 4 to 7 p.m. and offers fresh produce, flowers, starter plants, baked goods, and more. Artists, craftspeople, and woodworkers also set up booths to showcase their talents.

"Our goal is the development of relationships between the customers and the vendors," Margaret said. "They're not only buying their products, they're also making friends."

Margaret is excited for the market's future and the community's continued involvement.

"We are getting people excited about food," she said. "We are making heroes out of our local growers and producers. There are so many great things in the works."

# Food truck owner offers authentic Mexican fare

By Liz Stewart and Carlos Barcenas

For the past few summers, customers in Fremont, Nebraska, have been able to sample authentic coastal flavors from Guerrero, Mexico, without leaving town.

They have Irma Lopez's love of cooking and desire to share her passion to thank for that opportunity.

"Everything is published on social networks these days, and when I cooked a dish I would take a photo and share it," Irma said. "People would ask me, 'Did you make that to sell?' And my answer was, 'No, that's what I ate today,' and they would encourage me to sell my food."

Irma realized that if she made food to sell on the weekends she might be able to make a little extra money, and she was correct.

"I made some sales from my home and people kept asking for my food," she said. "Since my dishes were selling well, I decided to open a small business."

Through an announcement in her church, Irma learned about a small business conference that she attended to learn more about starting her own operation. There, she met staff from the Center for Rural Affairs who gave her the information she needed to proceed with her plan.

Irma applied for a loan with the help of Center staff and received funding in April 2021. She used the money for startup expenses and raw materials for her food truck, Sabor Costeño, which opened the next month. Since then, Irma has kept her operation open during the summer months.

Luis Franco, senior loan specialist with the Center, has helped Irma with questions and business needs.

"Irma offers the community a great variety of dishes and efficient customer service," said Luis. "Her



Irma Lopez owns a food truck, Sabor Costeño, and serves up authentic Mexican dishes. She says her sauces identify her business as she sells it by the bottle. Along with the sauces, Irma prepares all of her dishes from scratch. | Photo by Kylie Kai

willingness to learn and improve their offerings will take Sabor Costeño to the next level."

She also attended several virtual classes hosted by the Center including accounting workshops, classes on how to grow her business, and more.

Irma offers a variety of dishes prepared by her and one other full-time employee. Irma says she offers more than people might expect from a typical food truck.

"I don't just sell tacos and burritos," she said. "I have a large menu, and the food is very good, and it's fast. People tell us that they come here because it is fast, and we try to do our best to satisfy each client."

Although Irma has been very happy with how her business has progressed, she's faced some hurdles. In October 2022, she was forced to change the location of her truck, where she had already established her business.

Irma had to look for another

place with only a few months left in her open season and found a spot on the other side of the street from where she was originally. However, that location was more expensive than she could afford long-term, so before the next season Irma had to find yet another place to park her food truck.

Irma still enjoys being a business owner, and she hopes to open her own storefront restaurant eventually. And, since her experience working with the Center has been so beneficial, Irma recommends the organization as a great resource for new business owners.

"I have never worked with a center like this, and they helped a lot," she said. "There are many people who really want to do something and they do not have instructions or cannot find resources because of the language barrier. The Center gives you the information that you need in Spanish, and they are very accessible and work with your schedule."





A key to Ryan and Shelby Vogel's success has been diversifying their southwest Iowa operation. They think of future generations who will work the land, and conservation continues to rise to the forefront. | Photo submitted

## CSP helps young farmer, family prioritize conservation

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

**R**yan Vogel and his family are laying a foundation on their southeast Iowa farm for the years to come.

Ryan knew he wanted to come back to his family's farm near Sigourney. After earning a degree from Iowa State University, things fell into place. Today, he stays busy growing row crops and operating a land improvement business alongside his wife, Shelby, two young children, brothers, parents, and a handful of employees.

A key to the Vogels' success has been diversifying their operation, both economically and in terms of management practices. They are always thinking of future generations who will work the land, and conservation continues to rise to the forefront.

"Every farm we farm, whether it's our own or rented, we try to leave it better than we found it," Ryan said. "Younger farmers are willing to try new things. Making those decisions to create change in an operation will help you stay in the game."

The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) has played an important role in helping them implement new practices. Administered by the U.S. Department of

Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), CSP provides financial and technical assistance for producers to address natural resource concerns for their operations while maintaining agricultural production.

CSP is designed for producers with conservation in place to scale up their practices. Ryan entered into the program doing no-till, and used his contract to plant cover crops and add practices such as low-drift nozzles, soil testing, tissue sampling, and a five-year nutrient management plan.

"I wouldn't have done the cover crops if I didn't get cost share through CSP," he said.

After two years of seeing successes in their initial contract, the Vogels maxed out their eligible acres and have been happy with the results. They have held two CSP contracts over the years, and also have multiple active contracts through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). EQIP is more targeted in nature and can help producers address a specific resource concern with a single practice or project.

"All of our contracts involve a cost share of some sort to make it economically feasible for us—that's why we do it," Ryan said.

"In the end, it's about making the best economic decision for each operation, while also keeping in mind the impacts on the land and environment."

Ryan also has a unique perspective on the programs. As part of his land improvement business, he has frequently served as a contractor on CSP and EQIP projects—including dirt work for terraces, ponds, waterways, and sediment basins.

"I deal with [the programs] every day," he said. "Working closely with NRCS, I see there's a lot of opportunity for farmers to incorporate conservation on their land."

The sign-up period for producers varies. Interested producers should reach out to their local USDA service center to get started. To find your service center, visit [offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app](https://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app).

"I think conservation programs like CSP are a good thing, I really do. I'm glad we use them, and now knowing the benefits, we'll definitely continue to do so," Ryan said. "These programs are a perfect example of tax money going to work. Knowing that the future depends on keeping the ground in good shape, we can all do a better job."

# Resources available for communities seeking federal grants

By Teresa Hoffman, [teresah@cfra.org](mailto:teresah@cfra.org)

Applying for federal grants can be challenging for rural communities. With limited resources and staff attention focused on day-to-day duties, dedicating time to the application process is not always feasible.

To ensure rural communities are not left out of an unprecedented opportunity to apply for federal grants for infrastructure, energy, and conservation projects through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) and Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), the Center for Rural Affairs has created two resources to assist with funding pursuits.

The Grant Application Guide for Rural Communities and Grant Writer Resource List are now available for download at [cfra.org/rural-resources](http://cfra.org/rural-resources).

Val Ankeny, policy associate with the Center, said the grant application guide can serve as a valuable tool for communities that have staff time or a desire to learn more about the process.

“The guide provides tips and information for identifying grant opportunities, preparing to apply, setting a timeline, and writing and submitting an application,” she said. “Additionally, the guide lists commonly used terms and phrases associated with grant application processes.”



Rural communities can benefit from new resources on applying for federal grants, a grant application guide and a grant writer resource list. | Photo by Rhea Landholm

Val said rural communities and organizations lacking the financial resources to hire a staff person can turn to an outside source with the time and expertise to assist them.

“A federal grant application process can be daunting and time-consuming,” Val said. “Grant writers are often dedicated to simplifying the process and can provide the personalized research and writing services necessary for creating a competitive application.”

Agencies and organizations included in the Center’s Grant Writer Resource List have experience with funding research and applications. Grant writer agreements can span from one-time application submissions to year-long con-

tracts, including assistance with grant management and reporting requirements.

Val hopes the resource guide and grant writer list can help local officials prepare competitive grant applications and secure funding.

“Grants through the BIL and IRA can bring financial stability and diversification of funding resulting in growth and increased impact,” she said. “Our goal in creating the grant application guide was to demystify the process by walking community leaders through the various planning and application stages. However, we also know communities may face limitations going through the process on their own, so we wanted to offer a list of grant writers.”

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## Solar increase, continued from page 8

ment programs to expand equitable pathways into family-sustaining jobs for the communities they are designed to serve.

Finally, the program will reduce 30 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent emissions, from over four gigawatts of solar energy capacity. Solar and distributed energy resources help improve electric grid reliability and climate

resilience.

With the reduction, Solar for All will help meet the goal of achieving a carbon pollution-free power sector by 2035 and net-zero emissions economy by no later than 2050. The 60 recipients, including the Center, have committed to delivering on the three objectives of the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund: reducing climate and air

pollution; delivering benefits to low-income and disadvantaged communities; and mobilizing financing to spur additional deployment of affordable solar energy.

Learn about Solar for All in your state at [epa.gov/greenhouse-gas-reduction-fund/solar-all](http://epa.gov/greenhouse-gas-reduction-fund/solar-all)



# CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

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07/24



## Center selected for \$62.4 million grant

The largest grant in the organization's history will boost solar

## Solar set to increase across the U.S.

By Rhea Landholm, rheat@cfra.org

**T**he Center for Rural Affairs is one of 60 recipients of the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Solar for All program.

The announcement came in late April, with an award of \$62.4 million going to the Center to increase solar in Nebraska. For more on the Center's award, see pages 1 and 3.

Across the nation, Solar for All will have a large effect. EPA estimates that the Solar for All recipients will enable over 900,000 households in low-income and disadvantaged communities to deploy and benefit from distributed solar energy.

No matter where you live, at least one Solar for All grantee serves your area. There were 46 state-based grants, as well as additional awards with both Tribal and multi-state scopes. Unfortunately, two states in the Center's home region did not receive state-based awards, Iowa and Kansas. Oklahoma and Alabama are the other two states that did not receive a state-based award.

Across the country, Solar for All will deploy residential solar for households by providing grants and low-cost financing as well as services to communities including siting, permitting, and interconnection.

Grant recipients will expand existing low-income solar programs and launch new ones. In at least 25 states and territories, Solar for All is launching new programs where there has never been a substantial low-income solar program before. In these geographies, recipients will open new markets for distributed solar.

In turn, this \$7 billion investment will generate over \$350 million in annual savings on electric bills for overburdened households.

All 60 recipients, including the Center, intend to invest in local, clean energy workforce develop-

—See Solar increase on Page 7