



CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

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Center conducts legislative study on role of local grocery stores in rural food access



By Carlie Jonas, carliej@cfra.org

Locally owned grocery stores are key to providing equitable and affordable access to healthy food, but rural communities often struggle to maintain these essential resources as stores close because of an increasingly difficult business landscape.

While this issue spans the country, the Center is launching a renewed effort to support stores in its home state of Nebraska.

Nebraska state Sen. Teresa Ibach, a strong advocate for independent groceries, introduced Legislative Resolution 374, which was approved by the Nebraska Legislature during its 2024 session and authorized an interim study to evaluate food access and the role of independent stores in the state.

According to the study, conducted by the Center for Rural Affairs,

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Nebraska saw a 30% decrease in the number of local, independently operated grocery stores between 2016 and 2021. With this in mind, the Center is launching a renewed effort in its home state to support stores. | Center file photo

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Planning for progress in Iowa's watersheds

By Cynthia Farmer, cynthiaf@cfra.org

Rural leaders working with two Iowa Watershed Management Authorities (WMAs) are taking an important step to improve the state's water quality by developing comprehensive watershed management plans. The plans enable buy-in from regional leaders and initiate efforts to understand the watershed's current situation and identify potential solutions to quality concerns.

With support from the Center for Rural Affairs, and following a robust application process in 2023, the Middle Iowa WMA and North and Middle Rivers WMA have secured grants to begin their planning. The grants, made possible by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, provide resources for each WMA to outline the watershed's specific needs, followed by a comprehensive planning process

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Editor's note

By Rhea Landholm, rheal@cfra.org

Our newest satellite office is open.

In late September, I had the opportunity to attend the opening of our latest office—in Walthill, Nebraska. You heard that right. In 2004, we moved our main office from Walthill to Lyons. Now, our food sovereignty and small business work has taken us back to the community.

The new Walthill office is unique. This building holds one of two makerspaces—a collaborative work space which includes



traditional, low-tech tools as well as cutting-edge technologies. (The other makerspace lives in Santee.) The goal is to assist students and Tribal members in advancing their small businesses.

Makerspace equipment may be too expensive for a budding

entrepreneur to purchase, but, after hands-on training, they can use the tools at no cost. Equipment includes sewing machines, a quilting machine, sublimation printer, a glow forge, and a Cricut machine.

At the open house, members of the community tried out the sticker maker and the Cricut machine, showing off beautifully-crafted designs. A handful of community members sold jewelry and other homemade items. And, healthy, fresh food was provided.

I can't wait to see the items that come out of our makerspace, and to meet more members of the community through this satellite office.

Watersheds, continued from page 1

coordinated through local input.

A WMA is a cooperative agreement among cities, counties, and soil and water conservation districts (SWCDs), enabling representatives from each entity to work collaboratively on planning and management within a watershed. Of the 29 WMAs in Iowa, 22 have watershed management plans on file, three are in the process of forming and approving their plans, and only four do not yet have a plan on file.

The Middle Iowa WMA, initiated in June 2023, is one of the most recently formed WMAs. Covering more than 1 million acres from Marshall to Johnson counties in east central Iowa, the addition of this group brings the total acres in Iowa overlaid by a WMA to nearly 50%.

Mike Wolfe, the stormwater coordinator for the City of North Liberty and Middle Iowa WMA board chair, has played an essential role

in laying the foundation for and pursuing the comprehensive watershed planning grant.

"The City of North Liberty looks forward to working with the other communities in the watershed," said Mike. "As a city, we recognize that water does not flow along political boundaries, so we must work with everyone around us to tackle larger water quality and flood mitigation efforts."

The North and Middle Rivers WMA, established in 2017, covers more than 610,000 acres in south-east Iowa. Tim Palmer, a commissioner for the Madison County SWCD and North and Middle Rivers WMA board chair, has been pivotal to the WMA's success since its launch.

"Receiving this comprehensive planning grant will allow our WMA to take an active role in solving issues locally," said Tim. "Crafting an all-encompassing plan is vital to improve water quality condi-

tions and help control flooding along the North and Middle Rivers."

Typically offered in a tiered approach, comprehensive management plans, when completed, outline the next steps for short-term and long-term solutions through conservation practices and project implementation. If successful, the plans serve as an essential reference tool and equip WMAs with the information needed to apply for funding to address the identified needs.

The power of WMAs lies in regional plans and approaches to progress Iowa's water quality goals. To see completed comprehensive watershed management plans and get involved in a local watershed group, visit the Watershed Management Authority page on Iowa DNR's website: iowadnr.gov/Environmental-Protection/Water-Quality/Watershed-Management-Authorities.

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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coordinated through local input. Nebraska saw a 30% decrease in the number of local, independently operated grocery stores between 2016 and 2021. Furthermore, Nebraskans—12.9% in 2023—continue to face growing food insecurity, which occurs when there is limited access to affordable, nutritious food.



In Nebraska, the number of rural independent stores has decreased **30%**, falling from 290 in 2016 to 204 in 2021.

Improving food access is a complex task, but the Center’s research found that support for independent grocery stores is essential, especially in rural areas. When stores close, it affects how people buy their groceries, especially low-income or older individuals



Studies have found that **48%** of each purchase at a local independent business recirculated into the community, compared to **14%** of purchases at chain stores.

who do not have resources, time, or access to reliable transportation, which can lead to choosing less healthy food options from dollar or convenience stores.

The Center’s research and results of the study will help inform new legislation to be introduced during the 2025 regular session.

To learn more, visit and download “Legislative Resolution 374: Interim Study to Examine the Availability of Healthy and Affordable Food Choices in Nebraska Communities” at cfra.org/publications.

Announcing: rural grocer’s cohort

By Deborah Solie, deborahs@cfra.org

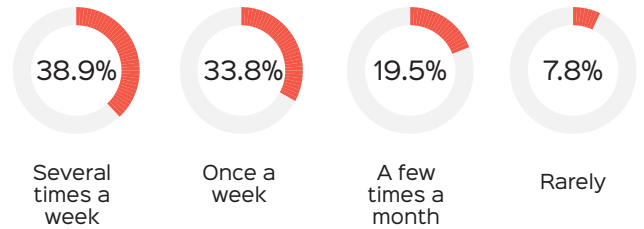
To advance the Center’s support of grocery stores in rural Nebraska, we are identifying several cooperative and community-supported grocery stores to participate in a rural grocer’s cohort.

The project is in collaboration with University of Nebraska Cooperative Development Center and UNL Rural Prosperity Nebraska.

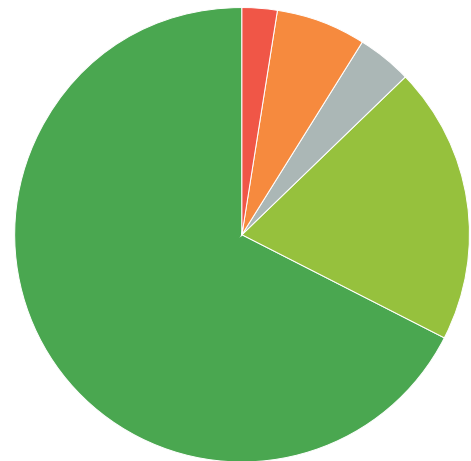
Participants in the cohort will create a supportive network where owners can share their opportunities, challenges, and best practices. They will also receive a mini-grant to help jumpstart needed projects such as technology improvements, upgrading equipment, store renovations, and accessibility improvements.

Finally, grocers will learn about sourcing products locally, how community-focused initiatives can positively impact their store, and have their questions answered by fellow grocers and experts in the field.

How often do you shop at your local grocery store?

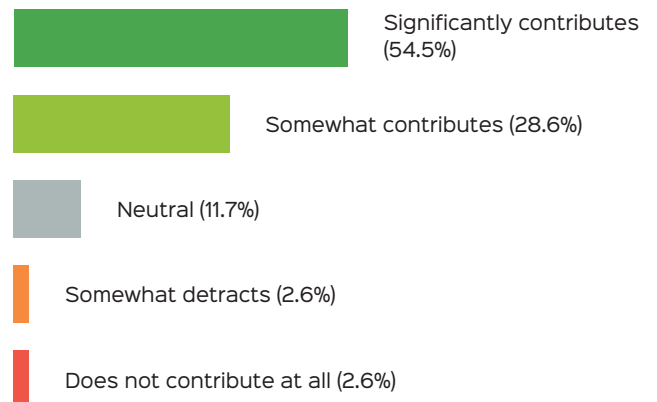


How important is your local grocery store to you?



- Very important (67.5%)
- Important (19.5%)
- Neutral (3.9%)
- Somewhat unimportant (6.5%)
- Not important at all (2.6%)

How do you feel your local grocery store contributes to the sense of community?





Prescribed grazing is one method producers use to improve the resiliency of their pastures. In times of drought, this practice can help ensure producers do not overgraze while maintaining the health of their livestock. | Photo by Rhea Landholm

Conservation Mentorship Network offers opportunity for peer-to-peer education

By Kalee Olson, kaleeo@cfra.org

When it comes to new farming methods, producers often turn to their peers for help and information they can trust. Implementing conservation practices is no exception.

To foster peer-to-peer education among farmers and ranchers and increase the number of conservation practices adopted across Nebraska, the Center for Rural Affairs is seeking participants for its new Conservation Mentorship Network.

“Nebraska has many farmers and ranchers who are at varying stages of conservation adoption,” said Andrew Tonnie, policy associate with the Center. “Whether a producer has been implementing conservation practices for two years or 20 years, there is something they can learn from each other.”

The Center has recruited men-

tors from across the state to help with network discussions and activities. The group represents an array of farm and ranch operations, and group members all believe that helping their peers succeed is essential to the continued progress of agriculture and rural communities.

The Conservation Mentorship Network will allow participants to learn in individual and large-group settings. In addition to attending field days and small-group discussions, participants may request one-on-one guidance from a mentor whose location, operation, and values reflect their own.

“If I can encourage anyone to participate and get back to a little more conservation, it’s going to be good for everyone,” said Teresa Otte of David City, who will serve as a mentor. “It means cleaner water and more productive soil that benefit rural communities.”

Participants must be located

in Nebraska and interested in the on-farm benefits of conservation practices despite the associated challenges and risks. Producers with any level of experience and operation size on rented or owned land are welcome to join, as well as those who have conservation experience and an interest in expanding their portfolios.

“Our mentors are excited to share their experiences using conservation methods to increase the resiliency of their operations,” Andrew said. “What’s important in the long run is that producers band together to implement good practices for soil health, water quality, and their bottom lines. The Conservation Mentorship Network is one important step toward that goal.”

For more information, interested farmers and ranchers should visit cfra.org/conservationmentorshipnetwork or email andrewt@cfra.org.

Food truck owners feel welcome and find financial success in Schuyler

By Liz Stewart and Carlos Barcenas

Sabino and Maria Hernandez have seen their fair share of trials and tribulations along their entrepreneurial journey from relocation to zoning permits to putting up a new building. But the word “quit” is not in their vocabulary.

What began with Maria’s passion for preparing food and experience working in restaurants has blossomed into a full-time labor of love for the owners of Corn Taco Mexican Food LLC, a food truck in Schuyler, Nebraska.

Maria started making tamales at home and sold them locally to friends, neighbors, and others who showed interest. Eventually, the couple bought and opened their food truck in June 2014.

Initially, they set up in David City, but soon moved their business to Schuyler.

“At first, people started trying our food to see if they liked it and to see what we offered,” said Maria. “Once they knew our products, we saw both acceptance and economic growth.”

That growth led to higher demand, so Sabino and Maria reached out to the Center for Rural Affairs for financial assistance to expand their business. They received their first loan in 2014.

“Maria and Sabino are two determined and hardworking individuals who have strived to make their business ownership dreams come true,” said Jessica Cabán, loan specialist with the Center.

The Center helped with two more loans in 2016 and 2021, both used to buy real estate. The most recent loan has helped the couple make a home for their new permanent restaurant, which is set to open soon. Center staff also helped them apply for Nebraska



Sabino and Maria Hernandez, owners of Corn Taco Mexican Food, Reyna Diaz Villalba, employee, and Jessica Cabán, Center loan specialist, have worked together to make the northeast Nebraska business a success. | Photo by Kylie Kai

Microenterprise Tax Credits.

In addition, Sabino and Maria have received business start-up training from the Center, as well as one-on-one counseling in business financing and capital sources, business operations and management, and tax planning.

They and their two employees operate the food truck selling tacos, burritos, and other homemade, authentic dishes. Occasionally, they cater events.

“At Corn Taco, we focus on Mexican food, since I am Mexican,” said Maria. “We want to deliver that authentic touch to all cultures in Nebraska.”

To others considering starting their own business in the food industry, the couple suggests researching locations to make sure there is enough clientele, and having great passion and dedication is a must. Maria and Sabino also recommend finding helpful resources, like the Center.

“Working with the Center has

been very good; the people are very kind, the speed in helping us with our loans was excellent, and they are always ready to help us with everything we need,” said Maria. “We have recommended the Center to several people. They have told us that they have received a lot of help and resources.”

The couple says their customers often ask them if they have future plans for the business, which keeps them motivated.

“We really like that they pay a lot of attention to us in that aspect, and they definitely make us feel desired and welcome,” said Maria.

Sabino agrees, and said they are both grateful for how far they’ve come.

“Along the way we are learning, and as my wife often says, ‘Little by little we have arrived,’” Sabino said. “They have accepted us in Schuyler and we are very happy to work here. We are lucky to have worked with the Center.”

Iowa community colleges meet rising demand for clean energy workers

By Mallory Tope, malloryt@cfra.org

The economic boom of clean energy across the Midwest has accelerated the demand for a qualified workforce in a rapidly growing industry.

According to Clean Jobs Midwest, more than 734,000 new jobs have been created across the Midwest since 2022, and that number is expected to grow as projects funded through the federal Inflation Reduction Act begin.

The IRA, passed in 2022, has infused nearly \$370 billion nationwide into the renewable energy sector. In addition to the new capital, the IRA provides tax credits to incentivize high labor standards, such as ensuring equitable wages for workers during the deployment of clean energy projects.

To meet the growing demand for workers to install, maintain, and repair the equipment, community colleges and technical schools, including Iowa Lakes Community College and Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC), offer technical training programs to supply students with the hands-on experience and essential skills needed to work as renewable energy technicians.

“There is a lot of interest in wind energy, and the industry needs students badly,” said Michael Gengler, assistant professor at Iowa Lakes.

Michael said clean energy companies often visit Iowa Lakes and other technical schools to hire students, but it is not enough.

“We have companies come in and they need 20 people, but we only have 10, so there is way more of a demand for people than we can keep up with,” Michael shared.

For many rural Iowans, clean energy jobs open a path to a fulfilling career. Michael said about



Students in the Des Moines Area Community College renewable energy program gain valuable hands-on training and experience at the college's 3-acre Energy Park site, which features an 11-story, 200-kilowatt active wind turbine and a 2.3-megawatt wind turbine generator nacelle donated by MidAmerican Energy. The Park is located on the college's Ankeny campus. | Photo courtesy of DMACC

90% of the students in Iowa Lakes' renewable technician program are from rural areas, usually because they know someone who works in clean energy and can attest to how well it pays.

The programs at Iowa Lakes and DMACC use full-scale wind turbines, solar arrays, and climbing rooms to build students' confidence and prepare them for the daily tasks and troubleshooting they will perform as technicians. DMACC's Energy Park offers a unique opportunity for students to learn on a full-scale 2.3-megawatt wind turbine.

“Students get real access; it's not just a simulation,” said Douglas Elrick, a professor at DMACC. “They're out there actually working on the same type of equipment that they'll work on in the field.”

Courses are often developed in partnership with clean energy companies to equip students with the precise skills necessary and to

facilitate connections to potential employers.

“Our program has students who have some experience and students who have no experience,” Michael said. “Throughout the program, they have the opportunity to make mistakes and learn from those mistakes.”

Financial assistance through various scholarship and grant programs is available for interested students to attend one- or two-year programs.

“Students can pay absolutely nothing, walk out the door, and get a job that pays them very well, which is something you can't get at most places,” Michael said.

With most career opportunities for technicians centered in rural areas, the Iowa Lakes and DMACC training programs benefit not only the clean energy sector but also the communities that host projects.



The Center is supporting farmer veteran leaders in forming a Farmer Veteran Coalition chapter in our home state of Nebraska. This chapter helps veterans transition from military service into careers in agriculture. | Photo by Wyatt Fraas

Farmer Veteran Coalition, continued from page 8

he said. “To my knowledge, the Center is the only organization that has offered long-term programs that assist farmer veterans by exposing them to different aspects of agriculture production.”

Gus got involved in the FVC about two years ago while he was searching for resources related to beginning farmers and veterans. He is also one of the Center’s 2024 conservation fellows.

“I was looking for an organization that could connect my wife and I with programs ranging from federal initiatives, such as those offered by the USDA, to state or local chapters that support beginning farmers through mentorship, on-site training, or similar opportunities,” Gus said.

“We feel that having a chapter here will further enable veterans who are interested in or already involved in agriculture to become established,” Martin said. “We hope to further the establishment of Nebraska-specific programs that enable farmer veterans to become the next leaders of agriculture.”

Farmer Veteran Coalition benefits & goals

Martin said the main objective is to advocate for fellow farmer veterans.

“We want to collaborate with other organizations and provide training and instruction that enables farmer veterans to start their business and gain practical experience which makes them eligible for

USDA programs,” Martin said. “We want to expand on their ventures through cooperation and establish a mentor program for farmer veterans. We also aim to help them gain access to needed resources such as land and equipment.”

The FVC administers the Farmer Veteran Fellowship Fund, which offers financial assistance to veterans by buying equipment and other supplies on their behalf.

“FVC offers comprehensive support to farmer veterans in many ways, including financial resources, business planning, career counseling, and job placement, along with apprenticeships, internships, and mentorships,” Gus said. “FVC also facilitates market access and provides member product discounts.”

Gus hopes a Nebraska chapter will foster interest and enhance food security. He’s working on obtaining financial support for the group by collaborating with stakeholders across the state.

“I aspire to facilitate a robust network of partnerships among individual farmers, ranchers, businesses, and organizations,” he said. “This network will aim to support both veteran and non-veteran farmers.”

There is also every reason to believe there will be future collaboration with the Center.

“We hope to develop mutually supporting programs and work with the Center and other nonprof-

its to achieve the aims and goals of our chapter,” said Martin. “The Center has been unapologetically rural and their dedication to farmer veterans has helped to establish a solid foundation for the chapter to build upon and expand.”

The Center is dedicated to the cause.

“The Center is committed to making sure the Nebraska chapter is successful and active,” Kirstin said. “These programs take a long time to get off the ground and to build a network. It takes time and patience to find leaders, and when we can take time to invest in the big-picture work, we really do see these networks come together successfully.”

A board of directors and advisory committee have been selected, and the required paperwork and planning documentation is complete. Organizers hope a formal application to the national organization will be approved in time for the October national stakeholder meeting and that the state chapter will be established as a 501C(3) organization by the end of December.

To join the FVC, visit farmvetco.org/membership.

For updates on the Nebraska chapter of the FVC, visit facebook.com/FVCNebraska.

To learn more about our work with veterans, visit cfra.org/veteran-farmers.



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11/24



Renewed effort supports rural grocery stores

We're starting in our home state of Nebraska

Farmer Veteran Coalition chapter opens in Nebraska, aims to build statewide network

By Liz Stewart

For many years, the Center for Rural Affairs has worked alongside active service members and military veterans. Whether coming back to their agricultural roots or starting as beginning farmers, veterans often get help from Center staff when they decide to operate small family farms and ranches.

The Center helps guide veterans in their endeavors through business and agriculture education. About four years ago, the Center began hosting on-farm and virtual AgVets workshops designed for active service members and military veterans interested in agriculture.

Kirstin Bailey, senior project associate with the Center, has been part of the planning and execution of these workshops since

they began. An underlying intention was to put together a network of veteran farmers throughout the state and eventually form a chapter of the Farmer Veteran Coalition (FVC) in Nebraska.

FVC is a nationwide nonprofit that helps veterans transition from military service into careers in agriculture. Joining is free and is open to both veterans and non-veterans. The FVC has a growing network of more than 30,000 veteran members across the country.

Martin Neal and Gus Leigh, both veterans and FVC members, have taken on leadership roles and have been instrumental in making the Nebraska chapter a reality.

“When we started these workshops, we were looking for lead-

ers at the same time as providing quality education,” Kirstin said.

Farmer Veteran Coalition in Nebraska

Martin participated in the first two years of the Center’s workshops and hosted the event in 2023, the third year of the project. He got involved in the FVC several years ago when researching the possibility of starting a farm after his retirement from the military.

His leadership qualities and dedication to agriculture made him a prime candidate to begin the process of creating a chapter, with support from the Center.

“I’ve been involved with Center programs for about as long as I have been a member of the FVC,”