



CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

YOUR RURAL NEWS FOR OVER 45 YEARS | LYONS, NEBRASKA | POPULATION 851 | JULY AND AUGUST 2020



Iowa landowner Ann Wolf has been working with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service for 25 years to protect soil and water resources locally, and ultimately sequester carbon on her farm to build climate resiliency. | Photo submitted

WOMAN LANDOWNER LEADS IN BUILDING CLIMATE RESILIENCY

BY KAYLA BERGMAN, KAYLAB@CFRA.ORG

Ann Wolf not only leads a strong conservation nonprofit organization in Iowa, but also as a woman landowner, focusing on building her climate resiliency.

Ann owns a 300-acre farm in Jackson County, Iowa—just 1 mile from the Mississippi River. The

land has been in her family since 1943, and has been a conventional farm since 1862.

After her tenant farmer, who was doing a corn/soybean rotation and finishing out beef cattle, decided to move on, Ann turned to the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation

—SEE [WOMAN LANDOWNER](#) ON PAGE 3

PACKING PLANT COMPANIES' ACTIONS HURT FARMERS AND WORKERS

BY ANNA JOHNSON, ANNAJ@CFRA.ORG, AND GLADYS GODINEZ, GLADYSG@CFRA.ORG

The Center for Rural Affairs is committed to helping our local business partners cope with the economic impact of COVID-19. It's part of our mission to build prosperous, healthy, and inclusive communities. And, it's the right thing to do.

Long an important part of rural communities, scrutiny on meat-packing plant companies has intensified as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

With the closure of some plants in response to the virus has come a new awareness and shock of what can happen to our meat supply. Many are left asking, "Why has our meat supply chain proven to be so vulnerable?"

The unchecked power of the packing plant companies plays a key role.

Farmers and ranchers who make their living raising animals—cattle, hogs, and poultry—have been at the mercy of the packing companies for years. As they have vertically integrated, the companies have ensured that all the production risk of raising livestock and poultry sat squarely on the shoulders of the farmers and ranchers, who often take on hundreds of thousands of dollars of debt to build the facilities needed to raise animals under contract. That debt is difficult to pay off, but

—SEE [PACKING PLANT COMPANIES](#) ON PAGE 2



Inside this issue

- | | |
|--|---|
| 2 Note from the editor | 6 Farm to School enriches our community |
| 4 Open for business: farmers markets taking precautions to keep you safe | 7 Large-scale solar energy production coming to South Dakota |
| 5 Rural location should not prevent business from receiving help | 8 From the executive director: We must confront racism where we live and work |
| 5 Rural Rapport | |

EDITOR'S NOTE

BY RHEA LANDHOLM, RHEAL@CFRA.ORG

The first value of the Center for Rural Affairs is “RESPONSIBILITY placed upon each of us to contribute to our community and society.” So, when COVID-19 hit the communities we live and work in, our staff each felt responsible to continue the work we do to support rural America.

Mid-March, each of us started working from our homes and we quickly pivoted to online technology. We postponed in-person learning circles, community meetings, small business trainings, and moved those to the internet.

Some of our work looks different. One piece is evident in this



newsletter. We have travel restrictions in place so we can't get out and take photos. The photos we are using have been taken prior to the pandemic or are submitted.

Other work, such as state legislative sessions, stalled. Conferences were cancelled or moved to rigorous one-day virtual events. On the other hand, projects ramped up. Small businesses need our help now more than ever. Producers who primarily sell to schools or farmers markets are looking for direction. Workers in meatpacking plants are getting sick. We were there to help, and will stand alongside you in the future.

Our organization—staff and board included—will continue to support rural America through whatever is thrown our way. We have a responsibility to do so.

PACKING PLANT COMPANIES, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

for many farmers, the restrictive animal production contracts are the only way they can stay on the family farm.

The current system, however, leaves no room for resiliency. When several packing plants temporarily closed after severe COVID-19 outbreaks, the market was thrown off balance. For independent producers, market prices fell sharply as slaughter capacity tightened. Others worried how to manage animals that were ready to move to market.

Farmers and ranchers weren't the only ones who feared for their livelihoods and faced tough decisions. Many packing plant workers also had to choose between their livelihoods or their lives, as the packing plants took almost no precautions to protect employees from

contracting the coronavirus while at work, which allowed the virus to spread unchecked.

Disassembling animals is hard, physical, smelly labor, and wages for it are low. Yet, for thousands of immigrants it has offered opportunity—many a shrinking rural community has rebounded from the energy and presence of new immigrants employed at packing plants.

However, when the coronavirus arrived, the packing companies gave the health of their workers even less regard than they give to the farmers who supply the animals. As the number of plant workers testing positive for COVID-19 skyrocketed and plant closures spread, the companies have dragged their feet to implement safety measures. Moreover,

the federal government has released safety recommendations that plants can use to protect workers, but has not made them mandatory, so conditions vary from plant to plant.

The toll of continued inaction from packing plant owners and the sickness and death of family members has brought deep distress and grief to the communities of packing plant workers.

We are struck that despite their different circumstances, both packing plant workers and farmers are both at the whim of the same forces—meatpackers with too much power. For both farmers and plant workers, we must continue the fight to bring meaningful anti-competitive oversight and worker protections to the industry.

PAPER & E-NEWS

This newsletter is available both electronically and in print. To receive it online, sign up at the Center's website, cfra.org, or email us at info@cfra.org.

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ABOVE & BELOW: Ann Wolf owns a 300-acre farm in Jackson County, Iowa, where she's implemented buffers, timber stand improvement, and a wetland. She also has 55 acres enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program pollinator program. | Photos submitted

WOMAN LANDOWNER, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Service (NRCS) to enroll the land in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

"Due to the highly erodible soils and steep topography of the farm being in the driftless area of Iowa, I have always put conservation in the forefront of the plans for my land," Ann said.

She's been working with the NRCS for 25 years. In that time, she's implemented buffers, timber stand improvement, and a wetland—all designed to protect the soil and water resources locally, and ultimately sequester carbon on her farm to build climate resiliency.

Currently, Ann has 55 acres enrolled in the CRP pollinator program. Because her farm is along the Mississippi River migratory pathway for insects and birds, she sees the increased importance to provide habitat for those crucial wildlife species.

"Any wildlife species you can think of that live in Iowa, we've seen on the trail cams at my farm," Ann said.

One impactful moment of reflection for Ann was a warm morning in August 2016, when she experienced an intense rain event.

"At my farm, I witnessed an 11.5 inch rain, which put my entire



pasture ground under 12 feet of water in a flash flood," Ann said. "I've never seen anything like this in my entire life."

Ann believes we're going to continue to see those types of extreme rain events with our changing climate, and she realizes the importance of protecting our soils and farmland when those times come.

"The first thing that popped into my head when I saw the flooding

was, 'What have we done?'" Ann said. "It only takes a moment to realize that you're seeing a lot of soil being washed off the tillable acres on the bluffs, right into the stream, down the Mississippi River, and eventually to the Gulf of Mexico."

Ann is executive director of Iowa Heartland Resource Conservation and Development of Indianola. In her role, she serves as one of the leads on a project focused on climate change and health equity in rural areas with numerous scientists from across the Midwest. Being a landowner has helped with her role on that project team—providing first hand experience with climate impacts in rural areas.

"I don't want to throw conventional farming out the window," Ann said. "I am a conventional farmer that has found a balance between agriculture and environmental sustainability."

Ann's advice for other women landowners who are interested in conservation is to start small and use the resources provided by the various networks and agencies.

"You still have to do what makes your farm profitable," she said. "But, it is essential for you to think about building your resiliency and protecting our soil and water."

OPEN FOR BUSINESS: FARMERS MARKETS TAKING PRECAUTIONS TO KEEP YOU SAFE

BY ERIN SCHOENBERG, ERINS@CFRA.ORG

Rural farmers markets play an important social and cultural role in addition to helping connect food providers and consumers. This spring, we've had the chance to talk one on one with dozens of market managers across the state of Nebraska. Our goal has been to gather insight that will help drive the content and format of upcoming trainings and a toolkit we are helping put together for rural market managers.

Together with our local partners, we're modifying Northeast Iowa RC&D's toolkit, which can be found at northeastiowarcd.org/toolkit/. While some of the information in these toolkits is state-specific, by and large the information provided is relevant regardless of what state you call home.

Around the country, most markets are either already open, or opening soon, and while they'll look a little different this year, they continue to bring value to communities. Those initially wary of attending a farmers market during the pandemic can take comfort that open-air markets are no less safe than grocery stores, and managers are taking necessary precautions to bolster customer, food, and vendor safety.

Just as locally owned grocery stores in small towns need our support, there's also great value in supporting our local farmers markets. Markets are a gathering place of people and products; they fuel our bodies with fresh food, and our sense of home and belonging.

This season, many vendors and markets are getting creative by

FARMERS MARKETS TIPS FROM MANAGERS AND STAFF

Are you a part of your local farmers market, as a customer, vendor, manager, cheerleader, or funder? Markets carry great tradition, and whatever your current or future role is, here are some tips and experiences from managers and staff:

- Markets need to be dependable and well-advertised—day of week, time of market, and location should be established, well-known, and consistent.
- A core group of vendors is important; customers want to know what to expect, and vendors see more consistent sales if they stick to a steady schedule.
- There's such a thing as too much product duplication—unique and value-added products are important for customer interest and demand, and for vendor revenue.
- Markets are often more successful when there are reasonable rules in place and enforced. Vendors and customers know what to expect, and any potential conflicts can be handled with respectful communication.
- Everyone should feel welcome at the market. Take steps to ensure race, religion, age, and income level don't discourage anyone from participating.
- Programs such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as Food Stamps), Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and the Seniors' Farmer Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) can play a crucial role in access to healthy local food, and can be taken advantage of at farmers markets. We're looking forward to providing resources to help put these programs in greater use at markets.
- A great opportunity exists in rural areas sprinkled with small towns within close vicinity to one another. Market managers can collaborate (not compete) for the greater good. Think about forming a coalition made up of multiple small town markets in different regions of your state; schedule market times so they don't overlap; hire one marketing coordinator for multiple markets to standardize messaging.
- Likewise, there may be innovative partnerships to consider that could help distribute the workload and make markets successful. We've seen markets partner with hospitals to provide nutrition information and demonstrations, and other markets invite the public library and local nonprofits to occupy a booth once a season.

having items pre-bundled and occasionally prepaid. Traffic flow, vendor placement, and product sampling are all more regulated this season. These temporary changes to guidelines can make the market more efficient for getting your groceries in the bag and back home safe, even if the social side of the market can't be as robust for the time being.

Remember your small town farmers market this year. Let managers and vendors know you

care about them, and you don't want this year's change in routine to throw them off course indefinitely. If you don't feel safe getting out of the house to visit markets in person, check in with farmers to see if they're doing curbside pickups or drop-offs. Even sending folks a quick note of support will go a long way in letting them know they matter to the community, for fresh food as well as rural vibrancy.



The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act passed by Congress in March provided relief to some small businesses; however, it left out small, rural businesses with loans through the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Program. | Photo by Rhea Landholm

RURAL LOCATION SHOULD NOT PREVENT BUSINESS FROM RECEIVING HELP

BY JOHNATHAN HLADIK, JOHNATHANH@CFRA.ORG

While states are beginning to reopen in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, businesses are still hurting. They will be for some time.

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act passed by Congress in March was a good first step in helping businesses overcome economic challenges.

Under the plan, the Small Business Administration (SBA) is paying all loans owed to agency lenders, including principal, interest, and fee payments, for six months. This allows business

owners to use money set aside for their loan payment to meet payroll, cover utilities, and manage unexpected costs.

Unfortunately, this relief effort left out small, rural businesses with loans through the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Program (RMAP).

The Center for Rural Affairs has joined 64 other small business lenders in asking federal lawmakers to offer rural entrepreneurs an equal opportunity by including these same provisions in future legislation for business owners with RMAP loans.

Businesses with loans through RMAP have 10 or fewer employees, are located in a rural area, and have been unable to secure funding through the SBA due to an absence of local lenders or a lack of credit. Many are in the service industry—retail, restaurants, and salons—and are especially vulnerable today.

This policy has the potential to keep more than 1,000 entrepreneurs in business—real men and women on the streets of rural America who deserve to be treated equally. We urge Congress to move swiftly and address this oversight in any forthcoming legislation.



RURAL RAPPORT

Join us in a conversation on the issues you care about.
Facebook Live every Tuesday at Noon CT. Learn more at cfra.org/RuralRapport.

BY JUSTIN CARTER, JUSTINC@CFRA.ORG

Due to COVID-19, local foods have become a buzzword. More farmers are utilizing direct to consumer marketing strategies to reach customers through online sales, community-supported agriculture (CSAs), and farmers markets. Is there room for schools in these markets? Farm to School can be concentrated in the procurement of local foods for the cafeteria as well as in outdoor and agriculture education programs.

FARM TO SCHOOL

enriches our community



In October, schools are encouraged to take part in a regional “Crunch Competition,” a contest that measures the amount of crunches into local fruits and vegetables per school in each state in a single day.



Harvest of the month promotes the sampling and use of a different Nebraska specialty crop each month of the school year.



Nebraska Thursdays encourage schools to begin serving locally sourced meals on just the first Thursday of the month.



Schools make local purchases using geographic preferences and establishing contacts through local farmers markets, food hubs, and distributors.



The Center for Rural Affairs started the Greenhouse to Cafeteria program to assist rural schools in revamping greenhouses and enriching their programs.



Outdoor education programs and FFA offer technical skills and teach kids where their food comes from.



*This is what's happening in Nebraska, and can be a great example for what can occur in your state.

LARGE-SCALE SOLAR ENERGY PRODUCTION COMING TO SOUTH DAKOTA

BY HEIDI KOLBECK-URLACHER, HEIDIKU@CFRA.ORG

South Dakota's solar industry is poised for significant growth as a result of two proposed utility-scale solar energy construction projects.

The first of their kind in South Dakota, the projects in Oglala Lakota and Pennington counties have the potential to increase the state's installed solar capacity from less than 1.8 megawatts to more than 200 megawatts in the next two years.

In February, the South Dakota Public Utilities Commission (PUC) issued its first ever permit for a large-scale solar energy construction project. The Lookout Solar Park, slated for completion in 2021, will be capable of generating 110 megawatts of energy and will be located on the Pine Ridge Reservation.

Also in February, Geronimo Energy announced its intention to build the Wild Springs solar project, a 128-megawatt facility near New Underwood. Expected completion date is 2022.

Basin Electric has agreed to purchase power from this facility and sell to its electric cooperative members, including West River



Two proposed solar projects in western South Dakota have the potential to increase the state's installed solar capacity from less than 1.8 megawatts to more than 200 megawatts in the next two years. | Photo by Center staff

Electric Association, which serves the area where the facility will be built. This project must still go through the PUC approval process.

Solar energy production offers untapped potential for South Dakota, which ranks 50th in the nation and derives only 0.02 percent of its electricity from solar. However, the Solar Energy Industry

Association ranks the state fifth in growth projection over the next five years.

As more solar projects are built, they bring new economic opportunities that will benefit our state. Demand for renewable energy continues to grow, and the cost of solar installation is at an all-time low, making solar energy a sound investment.

WE MUST CONFRONT RACISM, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

The Center began our own journey over the last decade. While we are proud to work alongside our Indigenous neighbors to support their goal of food sovereignty, and to work with new immigrants to break down barriers to full participation in civic, economic, and

community life, it also must be acknowledged as just a start of what is needed.

There cannot be social and economic justice, nor opportunity for all who live in our communities without an end to racism. We cannot create the future of rural

America without an end to racism.

The mission and values of the Center call on us to continue to build more racially just communities. The demonstrations across the country remind us that we have much to accomplish.



Inside: Climate resiliency in Iowa

One woman landowner is leading the charge

FROM THE DESK OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

WE MUST CONFRONT RACISM WHERE WE LIVE AND WORK

BY BRIAN DEPEW, BRIAND@CFRA.ORG

The death of George Floyd at the hands of police has ignited a movement. Floyd's senseless and brutal death is yet another chapter in a long history of racism in our country.

Demonstrations have spread around the world in response. We noticed the reports of gatherings in small towns in our region—Norfolk, Nebraska. Coon Rapids, Iowa. Marshall, Minnesota. Places not known as hotbeds of anti-racism action.

Small towns in our part of the country are often characterized as mostly white, and for many white

residents, racism can feel like a distant issue. Those of us who work here know the face of communities in our region are changing as new immigrants make rural America home.

These immigrants join long-time Black, Brown, and Indigenous people as fellow rural Americans.

Throughout history, our Black, Brown, and Indigenous neighbors have been subject to racism in rural America. From the horrific institution of slavery that built much of the rural South, to the displacement of Indigenous people from their land, to the modern day treatment of new immigrant work-

ers in meatpacking plants, there is a deep history of racism that rural people must confront.

For the movement to dismantle racism to succeed, we each must work to confront it where we live. This includes deepening our own understanding of how race and racism has shaped the places we call home. Place-based organizations must each do the work in their own place. We must join our neighbors in Norfolk, Nebraska, and Coon Rapids, Iowa, and Marshall, Minnesota, to speak up for Black, Brown, and Indigenous people.

—SEE [WE MUST CONFRONT RACISM](#) ON PAGE 7