



CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

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From family to finance: loan program supports community-rooted meat processing business

By Liz Stewart and Rhea Landholm, rheal@cfra.org

From 1945 to 2025, Fisher Packing has evolved and changed, with one constant at its core—family.

The third-generation, family-owned-and-operated business specializes in butchering and meat processing services with several locations in eastern Indiana. Co-owned by brothers Mike, Greg, Dan, and Brad Fisher, the company has been able to adapt to meet its customers' needs over the years.

“Family is at the forefront of everything we do,” said Greg, Fisher Packing president. “Not just our family, the families we serve and the families that work here.”

What began as a single butcher shop offering fresh cuts and custom processing has grown into multiple locations featuring retail stores, processing facilities, and value-added production. Its Fisher Meats line of award-winning snack sticks, sausage, and bacon is sold in more than 10 states and 100



Fisher Packing, a family business in eastern Indiana, obtained a Meat & Poultry Processing Loan from the Center, making possible an expansion project that represents a long-term investment in local food infrastructure, workforce stability, and farm viability. | Photo by Meg Jackson

locations. The company co-packs private-label and value-added products for both small producers and national brands. And true to its beginnings, Fisher Packing

continues to serve local producers with trusted slaughter and custom processing services.

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Cultivating calm: lavender farmer is creating lasting legacy for future generations

By Liz Stewart

Donnita Jimmis began her agricultural journey in fall 2024 by growing more than 2,000 lavender plants from seed in her home. The next spring, she transplanted those young herbs to a field.

Along with her strong passion

for agriculture and desire to bring beauty and purpose to the land, Donnita is the epitome of good stewardship—protecting the environment, promoting biodiversity, and educating others.

“I’ve always wanted to keep the land productive and sustainable so

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future generations,” Donnita said.

Those aspirations led her to the Center for Rural Affairs Beginning Farmer Conservation Fellowship Program, which emphasizes a variety of conservation topics essential to farming such as cover cropping, rotational grazing, pollinator habitat, soil health, water conservation, topography, and climate mitigation strategies.

Donnita’s decision to grow lavender came after a lot of deep thought and careful planning. She first considered putting in a pivot for alfalfa, row crops, or hay, but she was looking for a crop that could be profitable and offer creative opportunities through value-added products.

“Lavender stood out because it’s such a versatile plant,” she said. “It can be used for stress relief, aromatherapy, cooking, body care products, and even floral arrangements. It also fits well with agritourism, which gives people a chance to visit and enjoy the experience of the farm.”

As part of the conservation fellowship, farmers design and implement a project on their own farm or land they are farming. They then present their findings.

Donnita’s project focuses on ways to make her farm more sustainable and healthy. She’s working on a solar-powered micro-irrigation system, which gives the lavender the right amount of water while saving energy and reducing waste.

Another aspect of her project is creating a large pollinator habitat.

“Supporting these pollinators is so important, not just for the lavender, but for the whole farm ecosystem,” Donnita said.



Donnita Jimmis, owner of Loup Lavender, cultivates her lavender sustainably, using solar power to help water the plants, employing cover crops to prevent erosion, and tilling weeds between rows. | Photos by Elle Worley

“Altogether, these practices will help make the farm productive, resilient, and sustainable while also nurturing the land and the life it supports.”

Lavender is a monocrop, so the flowers are only available to harvest a few times per growing season. By planting native grasses in the pathways between the lavender rows, in addition to creating a native plant pollinator habitat, Donnita is able to provide extra food and shelter for pollinators throughout the season.

While her project isn’t yet fully implemented, for now her focus is soaking up all the information she can through the fellowship.

“Conservation and sustainability feel more important than ever, yet



seem so fleeting in today’s world,” she said. “Even though we’re connected through technology, it often feels like it pulls us further away from our communities and the things that really matter most. I hope to bring the ideas of sustainability and conservation to a more rural area, where access to this kind of knowledge can make a big difference for the land and the people who rely on it.”

Paper & e-news

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Mike Fisher, Fisher Packing treasurer, said that finding the Center's financing at a reasonable rate has really helped their business grow and take on new opportunities. It helps give local communities new food products to try that they didn't have before. | Photo by Meg Jackson

Meat processing business, continued from page 1

"The evolution has been heavy on the modernization of equipment," said Greg. "Also, instead of only servicing the local market, we branched out and do co-packing nationwide."

With that growth came the need for more space and processing capacity. Acquiring that extra room required financing, and the Center for Rural Affairs' Meat & Poultry Processing Loans were exactly what Fisher Packing needed to continue the expansion.

The processing loans are established under the U.S. Department of Agriculture Meat and Poultry Intermediary Lending Program guidelines, with the purpose of strengthening and expanding small and medium-sized meat processing infrastructure.

Fisher Packing received two loans from the Center: the first in September 2023 and a second in January 2025. The company has used the funding for renovations to improve production flow for food safety and efficiency, expand cold storage and value-added processing capacity, update its harvest facility, and purchase new equipment.

Meg Jackson, senior food systems loan specialist with the Center, worked closely with the

“ This expansion helps us serve more of the agricultural community, more of the local community, and we can produce in greater volumes and efficiencies. ”
—Greg Fisher, president of Fisher Packing

Fishers on their loan application.

"This is exactly the kind of project our loan program was designed to support: family-owned, forward-thinking, and community-rooted," said Meg. "The Fisher family's commitment to local producers and building a thriving, community-based meat business shows what's possible when vision and hard work meet the right kind of financing."

Meat & Poultry Processing Loans can be used to fund equipment, facilities, and working capital for existing, expanding, or startup meat processors. Loans are available to USDA-inspected primary (slaughter) and secondary (cut, pack, value-added) meat processors in Nebraska and throughout the Midwest.

With the funding it received, Fisher Packing has been able to expand slaughter capacity, reach out to more producers, and scale up in a big way.

"This expansion helps us serve more of the agricultural community, more of the local community,

and we can produce in greater volumes and efficiencies," said Greg. "It allows us to come up with a stronger product mix, and hire a lot more people, too."

Since receiving funding, Fisher Packing has added 20 to 30 new employees, roughly doubling the size of its workforce. For the first time in years, the company has been able to add management roles outside of the family.

As the business continues to grow, the Fishers know they can count on the Center, whether for information or additional financing.

"Dealing with the Center as a whole has been easy and a pleasure," said Mike. "Staff have been thorough and bent over backward to get the information we needed. They talked us through that information and helped us figure everything out. The whole process has been a good experience."

To learn more or apply for a Meat & Poultry Processing Loan, visit cfr.org/meatprocessingloans.

The definition of ‘good people’: donor Dixie Nelson’s love of her community shines

By Liz Stewart

Dixie Nelson believes the more we help each other, the better off we’ll all be. Her altruistic nature and commitment to community have influenced much of what she’s done in her life, as well as how she treats those around her. She spends her days sorting through recyclables to help the environment, and she served her hometown for eight years as director of the Chamber of Commerce in Alliance, Nebraska.

Dixie learned of the Center for Rural Affairs about 15 years ago. Since then, she has been so moved by the Center’s work that her giving spirit called her to start making monthly donations to the organization.

“I can’t give very much, but I see the stories in the Center’s newsletter and they are always so uplifting,” Dixie said. “Sometimes people just need that little nudge, whether financial or through coaching, and the Center does that.”

Erin Schoenberg, development manager with the Center, has enjoyed getting to know Dixie and sharing stories with her and other supporters.

“Every time I chat with Dixie, she’s out in her community making a positive difference,” Erin said. “She is the definition of ‘good people.’ When we talk, I always learn something new and I always put the phone down re-energized.”

Dixie is proud of her community and what it has become over the years. The town of about 8,000 people boasts an arts center, theaters, museums, 104 acres of parks, and many other amenities that make it stand out.

“That Dixie has chosen to be a monthly supporter of the Center



Dixie Nelson chooses to give monthly to the Center, providing one of our most reliable and flexible sources of funding. She has lived in Alliance, Nebraska, her whole life and is committed to preserving the convenience and kindness of small-town living. | Photo submitted

means so much to us,” said Erin. “She and others who choose to give on a recurring basis provide one of our most reliable and flexible sources of funding—and a monthly boost of moral support that is just as powerful.”

Dixie is passionate about the Center’s work and programs. From helping women entrepreneurs to growing and buying local foods and using local products at restaurants, she follows the Center’s work closely.

“Supporting this work helps the local citizenry,” Dixie said. “When the Center gives a shot in the arm to help someone succeed, everything goes out in a ripple effect. The people running these businesses and producing these crops, that’s their love. When you love something, you’re going to do it the best you can.”

For the past three years, Dixie has been putting her passion to practical use by working at Keep

Alliance Beautiful, the local recycling center, with a mission of encouraging others to reduce, reuse, and recycle every day to improve their community and environment.

“We try to recruit people to be volunteers; the more people we have as volunteers, the more knowledge there is about what we’re doing,” Dixie said.

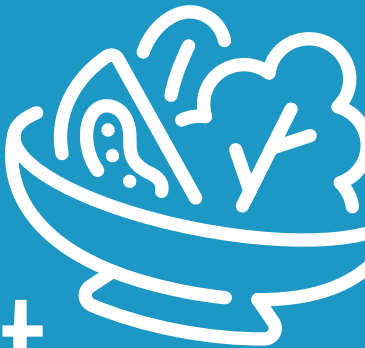
She feels the same way about the Center’s work, and wants to continue giving to projects that benefit rural America.

“I want to get more people to give, and I want to give more when I can,” she said. “It’s all about connections, too. The more you stay aware of things, the more you can help someone else. The Center helps people with that little nudge to get closer to achieving their life-long dream, and it all ties together. It’s amazing.”

To make a one-time or recurring gift to support the Center’s work, visit cfra.org/give.

Food and community celebrated in third annual

Southwest Iowa Local Foods Summit



Photos by Kylie Kai, kyliek@cfra.org



Southwest Iowans came together in Logan, Iowa, in support of local foods and local farms in a one-day summit on Nov. 14.

The third annual Southwest Iowa Local Foods Summit was hosted by the Center for Rural Affairs and Golden Hills Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D).

Session topics included farm to school, grants and funds available for local foods and farmers, rural grocery store initiatives, farmers market and farm stands, farm production, and more.

What are you doing in your community to support local farmers?

Win-win: program matches land owners with beginning farmers to get a start of their own

By Cynthia Farmer, cynthiaf@cfra.org

Trent Woltzen farms alongside his dad in Fayette County, Iowa, raising cattle, goats, corn, soybeans, and hay. However, even with the support of family, opportunities to rent or purchase land of his own as a beginning farmer have been limited. This makes it difficult for Trent to contribute to the growth of his family farm.

Fortunately, the Conservation Reserve Program - Transition Incentives Program (CRP-TIP) has helped him connect with local landowner Lavern Thyer.

Lavern owns approximately 400 acres, renting out most of the acres for row crop production and raising a handful of cattle with his son. A few years ago, Lavern was looking for a new tenant, and connected with Trent resulting in a land transition contract through CRP-TIP.

Administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Farm Service Agency, CRP-TIP creates a unique opportunity for beginning farmers seeking land and landowners looking to retire without a next-generation family member to take over the farm. The program provides two years of additional CRP payments to a landowner who sells or long-term leases their expiring CRP acres to a beginning or underserved farmer or rancher. The program brings CRP land back into agricultural production under an approved conservation plan implemented by the new operator.

Although new sign-ups for CRP-TIP have been on hold since early 2025, existing contracts continue to support beginning farmers and landowners like Trent and Lavern.

Trent has a rental agreement with Lavern to farm the acres that came back into production two



Landowner Lavern Thyer connected with beginning farmer Trent Woltzen for a land transition contract through the Conservation Reserve Program - Transition Incentives Program. The program creates a unique opportunity for beginning farmers seeking land and landowners looking to retire without a next-generation family member to take over the farm. | Photo by Cynthia Farmer

years ago. Of the 80-acre parcel previously enrolled in CRP, Trent is growing crops on about 30 acres. The other 50 acres remain in CRP and include two ponds to slow down water coming onto the property off the hilltop.

As Trent brought the ground back into production, he updated the conservation plan at the USDA office to include several practices.

Contour strips were previously used on the parcel, so Trent chose to plant them again. This practice involves cultivating strips for crops between strips of grasses or legumes. Placing the strips along the contour of the land, instead of up and down a hill, slows water runoff and reduces soil erosion.

Additionally, Trent is using crop rotations and vertical tillage to improve soil fertility and decrease disruptions to the soil.

Instead of charging Trent full rent during the first two years of the CRP-TIP contract, Lavern only required payment for the remain-

der of the market cash rental price after subtracting the CRP payment. The rent payment ended up being minimal due to the value of the previous CRP rental payments.

As they move into year three of the five-year contract, Trent will be required to pay the full rental price. From Trent's perspective, this has worked out well for him.

"I was able to ease my way into payments," Trent said. "It saved me money in the long run because I was able to build up to paying the full rent for years three, four, and five of the contract."

For Lavern, CRP-TIP was a great option financially. Although he charged very little rent for Trent the first two years, Lavern did not lose money because the CRP payments covered the rest. He has been grateful for the opportunity to work with a local beginning farmer.

"I wasn't out to make money," Lavern said. "It's good for young farmers."



The Center released three new publications last month that explore how the transmission system functions, the necessity of investing in the electrical grid, and barriers and opportunities for buildout. | Photo by Rhea Landholm

Powering the future: the Center offers new insights on electric grid expansion, load growth, and policy reform

By Cora Hoffer, corah@cfra.org

With the demand for electricity on the rise, the current transmission system cannot handle the level of growth it is expected to face without significant upgrades. This could have major implications for rural electricity customers and communities, which is why the Center for Rural Affairs is investigating solutions.

While future estimates vary, one study indicates the U.S. forecast of electricity demand is estimated to increase by 15.8% by 2029.

Last month, the Center released three publications that explore how the transmission system functions, the necessity of investing in the electrical grid, and barriers and

opportunities for buildout.

Expanding electrification of homes and transportation are adding substantial pressures to our current transmission system. There's also increased demand for energy from industry.

Addressing shortfalls of our transmission system is critical for maintaining reliability and keeping energy costs low. It also ensures we have enough electricity to power future economic growth.

With demand for electricity increasing nationwide, it's crucial the development of new transmission infrastructure and the replacement of aging assets is accelerated.

In addition, the Center highlights that new and existing energy

resources, such as wind and solar, need adequate grid access to move electricity. These actions are key to meeting demand growth, maintaining system reliability, and minimizing energy costs for consumers.

The publications also provide evidence that by advancing policy reforms that streamline project delivery, and prioritizing community engagement, a well-planned grid can be built to power the future.

Building new energy resources to supply electricity is needed to meet growing demand. Investing in a strong transmission backbone across the nation is essential to ensuring power can move efficiently where it is needed.

To read the resources, visit cfra.org/publications.

Farm bill, continued from page 8

such as Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) and the Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Program (RMAP).

The budget includes a nearly \$100 million cut to CTA, which supports USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service staff who work directly with producers to

plan and implement conservation practices. The program was cut from \$773.5 million to \$679.6 million.

Through RMAP, microentrepreneur development organizations receive funding to in turn provide loans and technical assistance to small rural businesses. The budget

for RMAP was cut to \$4 million for 2026, a \$1 million reduction from 2025.

If you would like assistance contacting your U.S. representative or senators to demonstrate your support for rural communities, please email me at kaleeo@cfra.org.



Look inside: Powering the future

Read about the Center's new insights on electric grid expansion

Third farm bill extension passes alongside continuing resolution

By Kalee Olson, kaleeo@cfra.org

On Nov. 12, Congress passed another extension of the farm bill alongside a continuing resolution to end the government shut-down. The continuing resolution will fund the federal government through Jan. 20, 2026, while the farm bill extension will last through Sept. 30, 2026.

The extension is the third since the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 originally expired in September 2023. Tensions among lawmakers, as well as events including the 2024 election and passage of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA), have impacted Congress' ability to negotiate on a farm bill. Additionally, OBBBA included significant provisions for crop insurance subsidies and

the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, which traditionally serve as a primary motivator for lawmakers to join the negotiation table.

While not preferable to a new, comprehensive farm bill, the extension provides important reauthorization for programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Unlike the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), which were reauthorized through OBBBA, CRP would not have opened for new enrollment without a farm bill extension.

The farm bill extension, however, did not leave CSP and EQIP untouched. The bill fails to extend payment limits for these

programs, which means there is no cap on the total amount of cost-share a single operation can receive. This is likely to result in the largest operations receiving a disproportionate amount of federal conservation funds.

Notably, the extension also protects commodity programs from reverting to antiquated permanent law, which would increase the price of commodity goods such as dairy to obsolete price-support levels.

In addition to a farm bill extension, the approved legislation included a "minibus" of three full-year spending bills, including the budget for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), which administers important programs