



CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

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Suzi French and her family recently installed a high tunnel gardening system on their farm near Walthill, Nebraska. The structure allows the growing season to be extended, allowing more fresh, healthy food to be harvested. | Photo by Kylie Kai

GARDENING TUNNEL A FIRST ON RESERVATION

BY LIZ DAEHNKE, COMMUNICATIONS CONSULTANT

This summer, a member of the Omaha Nation implemented a new gardening practice that could substantially increase the amount of vegetables grown on the Omaha Reservation.

Suzi French, along with her

husband, Davin, installed a high tunnel system on their farm, outside Walthill, Nebraska.

High tunnel structures, or “hoop houses,” are plastic, unheated greenhouses. These systems extend the growing season, improve the quality of plants and soil, and

reduce nutrient and pesticide transportation.

Suzi, a community food associate with the Center for Rural Affairs, says this is a milestone for members of the Omaha Nation – the high tunnel is the first

—SEE GARDENING ON PAGE 3

FARM BILL EXPIRATION PUTS UP UNNECESSARY ROADBLOCKS

BY ANNA JOHNSON, ANNAJ@CFRA.ORG

Our country’s foremost piece of agricultural legislation, the farm bill, has expired. The need for preservation of soil health and water quality has never been more important, uncertainty in farm country is high, and rural entrepreneurs need our assistance – but Congress has yet to reach an

agreement on a final farm bill.

A major chunk of farm bill programs is now left without funding or authority. This includes more than \$1 billion in funds frozen, programs serving beginning farmers and rural economic development halted, and conservation programs blocked from enrolling

—SEE FARM BILL ON PAGE 2

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NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

BY RHEA LANDHOLM, RHEAL@CFRA.ORG

Since its inception, the Center for Rural Affairs has chosen to advance a set of values that reflect the best of rural America. This month's newsletter focuses on "FAIRNESS that allows all who contribute to the nation's prosperity to share in it."

In this edition, you will read about our research on broadband internet and our urging to policy makers for fair distribution. We are also asking lawmakers in Washington to pass a new farm

bill, to be fair to our rural communities, farmers, and ranchers. In another report, we talked with farmers and water officials to make sure each side is fairly considered on a contentious issue.

Elsewhere, you will read about one of our staff members working to provide fair opportunity to members of the Omaha Tribe; our bee project helping women landowners and women beekeepers connect; and another staff member helping Latino entrepreneurs have a fair chance in the business



world.

Fairness is also found in our executive director's essay as he tells us about the Center's work calling for immigration reform. This would give new Americans a better chance at settling in our rural communities.

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new contracts.

The authority and funding of many programs has vanished, putting up a major and unnecessary roadblock for rural America.

Stalling conservation programs strikes a particularly deep blow. Productivity in agriculture stands on the foundation of healthy soil. Farmers and ranchers better stewarding their soil won't just happen overnight. Reducing tillage, planting cover crops, and changing grazing patterns require time, attention, learning, and resources. The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), not only helps farmers and ranchers implement practices that build up their soil and benefit their water quality but it also helps them strengthen the skills and knowledge to enhance their stewardship level overall.

For example, in 2017, Kansas was one of the top states with total acres enrolled in CSP, and had high numbers of new contracts.

One farmer, Troy Schroeder of Schroeder Family Farms, in Albert, Kansas, shared with me that CSP is the best conservation program they've used. It has made a real difference in keeping their farm operation afloat during low commodity prices. They've developed several habitat acres for pollinators while still staying in business.

This valuable conservation program has supported stewardship-minded agriculture for years, and for the good of everyone. But because the 2014 farm bill has expired, CSP is frozen and cannot enroll any more people.

Other major conservation programs are halted as well. The Conservation Reserve Program, the Agriculture Conservation Easement Program, and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program support activities ranging from establishing easements to taking marginal land out of production.

Beyond conservation, economic

opportunity is an additional essential foundation for rural communities. A host of farm bill programs helping facilitate diverse rural economic opportunities are also now inactive. This includes loans to rural start-up companies; cost-share for organic certification; value-added grants for farmers; beginning farmer training and education; and farmers market establishment. All offer a path for rural people to build businesses and create jobs – but right now, these activities are all in limbo until Congress acts.

Congress should take action to finalize the farm bill, revive and fund these programs, and provide certainty to rural Americans working toward a vibrant future.

Congress, put aside your differences, and step up for rural America.

Note: At the time of print, Congress had let the farm bill expire and hadn't yet taken action.

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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Because high tunnels don't allow for direct rainfall to reach plants, farmers can use tools, such as drip irrigation, to deliver water and nutrients to plants in an effective and efficient way. | Photo by Kylie Kai

GARDENING, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) practice installed by an Omaha Tribal member, and the first funded by the Thurston County U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office.

EQIP covered material costs, and Suzi, along with friends and family, installed the system. The structure measures 30 feet wide, by 72 feet long, by 14 feet high.

"We finished building the system in early August, and recently finished putting in the soil," Suzi said. "We worked with Nebraska Indian Community College to start our cool season crops, like cabbage, which are normally put in around the middle of September."

Suzi hopes to harvest in late November into December, depending on when winter weather sets in, and she intends to start next year's plants as early as February.

"Produce can be planted in the structure, or started in it and moved out," said Wyatt Fraas, Farm and Community assistant director for the Center for Rural Affairs. "The structure allows the growing season to be extended several weeks into early spring and late fall, which allows earlier pro-

WHAT ARE HIGH TUNNELS?

- Temporary structures that are only heated through solar gain.
- Range in size from 8 to 15 feet tall and 20 to 100 feet long.
- Allow better management of nutrients, water, and energy.
- Offer protection to plants from cold temperatures, pests and diseases, and improve opportunities for market gardeners.
- Some uses include soil health practices such as cover crops and crop rotations, which prevent erosion, suppress weeds, increase soil water content, and break pest cycles.
- Guard plants from pollen and pesticide drift.

duction or a longer harvest season. That's good either for home use or for market sales."

Wyatt says USDA has encouraged installation of high tunnels since 2010, and thousands of structures have been installed across the country.

"Perhaps the best thing about high tunnels is that they help farmers provide their communities with healthy, local food for much of the year – food that requires less energy and transportation inputs," said Wyatt.

In the near future, Suzi wants to implement a watering system, and looks forward to growing plants that aren't generally grown on the Omaha Reservation. She'll be able to do it all even when the weather isn't optimal.

"The high tunnel is great for rainy, cold days," said Suzi. "We can still manage to get some gardening done and stay warm and dry at the same time."

She is still exploring new options for gardening in the system, and welcomes other families to use the system as a learning tool.

"My hope is to be able to show other Tribal members that it is a benefit to get one of these," she said. "They could grow their own food longer, we can teach our youth to help them get interested in the agricultural fields, and hopefully feed our families with fresh foods most of the year. This is new to the Omaha Reservation, so I look forward to seeing what other benefits the system provides."



In September, participants of a bee learning circle visited Joette Novak's land to talk about a project that connects women beekeepers and landowners for environmental and economic benefits. Beekeeper Kirstin Bailey keeps hives on Novak's land. | Photo by Rhea Landholm

BEE CONNECTION: STICKING WOMEN LANDOWNERS AND BEEKEEPERS TOGETHER

BY RHEA LANDHOLM, RHEAL@CFRA.ORG

This summer, huge green peppers were picked out of Joette Novak's garden – the most she's ever seen. She attributes this success to the bees placed on her land.

Joette, a landowner near Brainard, Nebraska, participates in a Center for Rural Affairs and University of Nebraska at Lincoln project that connects women beekeepers and women landowners for environmental and economic benefit.

Across the nation, small-scale beekeeping and the diversified or speciality crop farming industries are growing. Many beekeepers lack land for their hives, and landowners could benefit from honey bee pollination and pollinator-friendly conservation practices.

With continued high bee colony and habitat loss, pairing the two industries presents a critical opportunity to support the polli-

LEARNING CIRCLES

This project uses the learning circle model to train and connect women who are small-scale beekeepers and/or diversified farmers, addressing plant-pollinator interactions and farming/apiculture practices, network building, and business connections.

In September, participants of the learning circle visited Joette Novak's land, near Brainard, Nebraska, to talk about the project and check out the hive set-up.

By working together, small-scale beekeepers and small, diversified farmers can improve their knowledge, production, and profitability while protecting environment and bee health; the project will assess these changes.

nators we rely on while promoting business sustainability through the co-location, or stacking, of honey bees and diversified or specialty crop farms.

Project organizers paired Joette with beekeeper Kirstin Bailey, a Center for Rural Affairs project associate, who has a bee business on the side.

Kirstin has four hives near her home on one side of Brainard, and now has two hives near Joette's home on the opposite side of the town. This model supports hive health and bolsters the

environmental sustainability of women beekeepers and women farmers.

One of the benefits to landowners is better pollination of speciality crops leading to more fruits and vegetables, which Joette is the most interested in for her garden and fruit trees.

"I want bees on my land for the pollination factor," she said. "Bees are a good thing for that."

The landowner said the bees don't bother her grandkids or the

BROADBAND POLICY LEAVES RURAL AREAS OUT

BY JOHNATHAN HLADIK, JOHNATHANH@CFRA.ORG

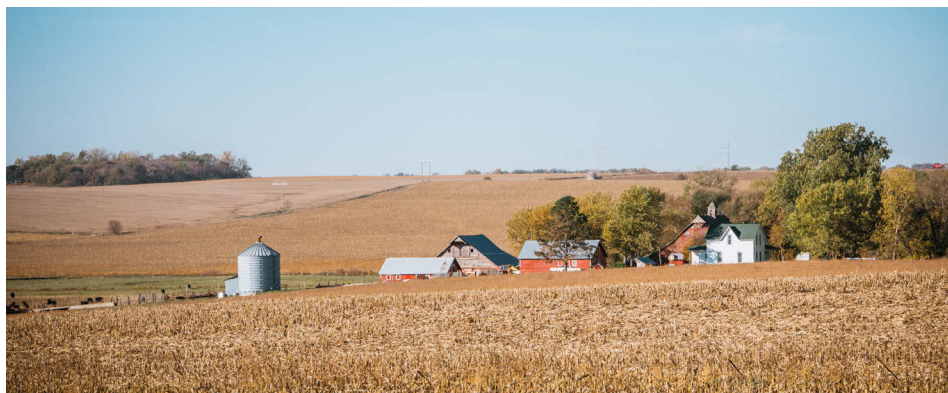
Connectivity is the defining aspect of our 21st century economy. Access to broadband internet offers the best in education, health care, and economic development. Unfortunately for many, the best isn't available.

More than 24 million Americans lack broadband access. This includes 31 percent of households in rural areas, but only 2 percent in urban. 19 million of 25 million households without broadband are in rural areas.

Old fashioned data collection guarantees this will continue.

The Federal Communications Commission collects data on broadband service at the Census block level, of which there are 11,078,297. In rural areas, these blocks can stretch for hundreds of square miles. Nationwide, 3,200 Census blocks are larger than the District of Columbia.

In a Census block, if one household has access, the entire block



More than 24 million Americans lack broadband, including 31 percent of households in rural areas. | Photo by Kylie Kai

is reported as “served.” Providers may report an area as “served” if they could provide access without “an extraordinary commitment of resources.”

This means the number of “served” areas is frequently overstated. States are unable to accurately invest resources in broadband development because they are relying on erroneous data. Improving this process is the most

important step we can take to improve availability in rural areas.

We are in the midst of a digital revolution, and millions of rural Americans are being left behind. A closer look shows the problem isn't always money – it comes back to policy. Now is the time for lawmakers to think innovatively and act swiftly to ensure rural America isn't left out.

BEES, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

cattle that graze on nearby land. And, Kirstin takes care of mowing around the hives.

Kirstin said one of the reasons she wanted a second location was to maximize her radius. While Joette's house isn't quite 2 miles away from her own, she is still giving the bees room to roam. Bees will travel up to 5 miles to find nectar.

In a close proximity, the insects find lots of wildflowers, corn, and soybeans. They even travel across the field to flowers at the town cemetery.

By diversifying forage, Kirstin sees improved colony health and greater honey production as well.

Maintaining a second location has its economic benefits, and it

only takes a visit about once every one or two weeks.

“I've learned to be more intentional and more organized with my tools and time,” she said. “I try to bring everything I need. I can sometimes anticipate what I might need by what was going on the last time I visited, and what time of year it is.”

The project seems to be accomplishing its goal of helping to grow environmental awareness, and Joette is taking notice.

“What's a world without pollinators?” she asked.

This project is made possible by funding from a Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education grant from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.



Center for Rural Affairs Project Associate Kirstin Bailey also has a beekeeping business. She participates in a project that connects women beekeepers and landowners to bolster environmental sustainability. | Photo by Rhea Landholm



Farmers face risks to their production systems when adopting new practices, and often need technical and financial support to counter those risks. This support helps farmers implement conservation techniques, such as improving waterways in corn fields. | Photo by Cody Smith

FARMERS FACE RISK WHEN ADOPTING NEW PRACTICES TO IMPROVE WATER QUALITY

BY KATIE ROCK, [KATIER@CFRA.ORG](mailto:katier@cfra.org)

Water quality is a contentious issue across the country. For example, in Iowa, continued high nitrogen, phosphorous, bacteria, and sediment levels in surface waters threaten public health and outdoor recreation.

In 2012, the state released a strategy to reduce nutrient and sediment loading in surface waters. However, the best plan forward remains uncertain. This lack of clarity leaves farmers feeling frustrated.

Farmers face risks, both real and perceived, to their production systems when adopting a new practice, and often need technical and financial support to counter these risks.

We recently released “Catching Waves: Farmers Gauge Risk to Advance Water Quality In Iowa,” which examines perceived produc-

RESEARCH REPORT

“Catching Waves: Farmers Gauge Risk To Advance Water Quality In Iowa” breaks down data from a 2017 survey by the Center for Rural Affairs that polled Iowa farmers. Responding to the survey were 52 farmers representing 41 of the state’s 90 counties.

To view the report, visit cfra.org/publications/CatchingWaves.

tion and social risks to adopting water quality improvement practices in the state.

Results show a majority of farmers do not feel social pressure to install additional conservation practices to improve water quality. Beyond potential regulation, respondents identified soil health, nutrient retention, and cost savings as top reasons for new practice adoption.

Farmers say weather and shifting climatic patterns are the largest perceived threats to their operations. They also identified agricultural consolidation, fluctuating commodity prices, and

nutrient and soil loss as top concerns.

As Iowa and other states continue to expand their watershed approach to water quality, understanding the needs, risks, and barriers farmers face will be critical.

These findings can help guide water quality efforts by researchers, farmers, watershed organizations, and government officials.

The Center for Rural Affairs is dedicated to facilitating research-based solutions that elevate rural communities and people.

STAFF SPOTLIGHT

GRISELDA, CENTER CAN HELP YOU SUCCEED

BY LIZ DAEHNKE, COMMUNICATIONS CONSULTANT

Selfless. Dedicated. Motivated.

There are few people in this world who possess not one, but all three qualities listed above. Griselda Rendon is one of those people.

A supportive wife, and proud mother of three children, Griselda also works for the Center for Rural Affairs as a Rural Enterprise Assistance Project (REAP) Latino loan specialist. She spends much of her time going from soccer games to gymnastics practice to show choir competitions, all after putting in a full day helping entrepreneurs make their dreams come true.

Griselda provides one-on-one technical and financial assistance to people looking to start a business or grow their existing business. And, she makes sure they're aware of all the free resources available to them.

"I was drawn to the Center because of their mission and vision of assisting those in rural Nebraska, and especially the minority, who always seem to be left out," she said. "REAP is an excellent program – it helps others become successful while instilling a sense of pride in who they are and where they came from."

Griselda's work with minorities



Griselda Rendon

is incredibly rewarding and meaningful to her for personal reasons, too. After coming to the U.S. from Mexico at a very young age, she feels a strong connection to those she assists through her work.

"I live and have lived in rural areas," said Griselda. "I came from a very rural area in Mexico where it is still a challenge to have internet access. I have seen that people in rural America are very hard-working people, and they need to be supported in what they do."

For four years, Griselda has enjoyed her role with the Center, but her experience goes far beyond that. She credits her background in insurance, banking, and working with different ethnic groups as a tremendous help.

"From meeting with clients who need technical assistance to creating and packaging loans, I rely on my education and experience," she said. "I get to help people by making them aware of all the possible ups and downs of being a business owner, while also being there for them, and seeing them give it all they have without quitting. I have the privilege of guiding others to the resources that will make their dream a reality."

Griselda is very passionate about the work she does, so much so that she's striving to make the Center for Rural Affairs' small business program a more well-known program in the area.

"I want people to know that we can help them succeed, and for them to trust the Center," she said. "I'm so grateful to work for such a wonderful organization. I am very proud to say that I work for the Center for Rural Affairs, and I believe we can make a difference in rural America."

Griselda serves central and southeast Nebraska, including Hastings, Crete, Lexington, Gibbon, and Grand Island, where she and her family also make their home.

She can be reached at 308.850.4820 or griseldar@cfra.org.

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for undocumented immigrants to fulfill requirements and become citizens, a more robust process for legal immigration, a new commission to determine a practical number of workers allowed to immigrate annually, and enforcement of wage and labor laws to prevent employers from misclassifying

workers.

The reality is that new immigrants have become an important part of our communities. They are homeowners, entrepreneurs, community leaders, parents, and employees in local small businesses. It is not our new neighbors who have failed to keep up.

It is our own immigration law that has not kept up with our communities and the people who live there – new immigrants and long-time residents alike.

The need to enact immigration law change in Washington is as critical and urgent as it was in 2013.



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FROM THE DESK OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

IMMIGRATION IN FOCUS FOR RURAL AMERICA

BY BRIAN DEPEW, BRIAND@CFRA.ORG

An immigration raid in very rural north central Nebraska put a spotlight on the immigration debate in rural America.

The raid targeted alleged labor practice exploitation by a local employment agency. It also swept up more than 100 community members and employees of local businesses in its net.

The businesses included a tomato greenhouse, potato processing facility, and cattle operation among others. The communities affected ranged in population from 100 residents to 3,600 residents.

To me, the raid highlighted how deeply immigration is reshaping rural America.

When we consider immigration

in rural America, we often think of midsize communities with large meatpackers such as Storm Lake, Iowa. Few of us think of communities of 100 residents in a county of 800 residents. That is increasingly the reality.

In conversation with everyday rural people, I often hear a refrain about undocumented immigration. I'll paraphrase it as, "I don't mind new immigrants moving here, I just wish they would do it legally."

Unfortunately, the reality is that there is no legal pathway for the vast majority of immigrants who come to our communities.

Consider, there are three primary ways to immigrate legally to the United States. This includes employer-based immigration, family reunification, and humani-

tarian protection. Employer-based immigration is limited to certain fields, generally requiring advanced degrees. The fact of the matter is that this pathway is unavailable for most immigrants.

For individuals who do have a legal pathway under the current system, the waiting line can stretch into the millions. Resulting wait times to apply for a visa for some applicants stretch upward of 20 years.

This is untenable for immigrants in our communities today.

That is why the Center for Rural Affairs first called on Congress to enact comprehensive immigration reform in 2013. We called for creating an opportunity

—SEE IMMIGRATION ON PAGE 7