



CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

Your rural news 50+ years | Lyons, Nebraska | Pop. 851 | May & June 2025

Center calls on lawmakers to uphold federal obligations

By Brian Depew, briand@cfra.org

Actions by the new administration in Washington are creating far-reaching consequences for rural people and rural places.

For instance, within days of taking office, the new administration froze a vast swath of federal grants and contracts. These actions jeopardized the financial stability of farms, businesses, organizations, and projects that serve rural communities across the country.

Since the initial freeze, the administration has gone on to terminate some contracts and restore others, while still others remain frozen. The Center itself has navigated both frozen and terminated contracts. Several of its peer organizations have faced even greater obstacles with funds that remained frozen much longer than the Center experienced. Even where funds have been restored, temporary freezes created considerable uncertainty about the future of federally obligated contracts.

The Center's \$62 million Solar for All award was frozen for



USDA field staff in Rural Development, Farm Services, and Natural Resources Conservation Services all have experienced significant staffing cuts in rural communities. | Photo by Rhea Landholm

four weeks, and two other awards totaling \$16 million in funding remain caught in a court case over an agency termination action. The Center was a subrecipient of another award that was terminated. Two awards for which the Center had been selected, but for which it had not yet signed a contract, were also paused. In addition, we have seen upcoming annual grant cycles for federal programs paused or canceled, creating further uncertainty about the future of federal funding.

Many federal agencies have also experienced significant staffing cuts. For example, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) field staff in Rural Development, Farm Services, and Natural Resources Conservation Services all saw deep cuts to local staffing. These individuals provide valuable services to their communities. Cuts to USDA staff mean local constituents will face delays in accessing important services or not receive essential services at all.

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Honor-system farm stand sells locally sourced products, provides community gathering space

By Liz Stewart

Ali and Scotty Yahnke have farmed for the past decade, and although each season has been different from the last, they wouldn't change a thing.

In 2020, they moved to the Ponca Hills area north of Omaha,

where they started The Perennial Homestead. This honor-system farm stand features rotating seasonal goods. Their online shopping platform is an extension of the farm stand, highlighting goods sourced directly from local and

—See Honor-system farm stand on page 3

Editor's note

By Rhea Landholm, rheal@cfra.org

Board of Directors meetings are inspiring. Each March, June, September, and December, Board members and staff get an opportunity to reflect on and celebrate our work. Two meetings out of the year are held in person, which provides us with unique ways to showcase our work.

In March, our board and staff came together in Columbus, Nebraska. We started with tours at two small businesses that have benefited from Center loans.

El Buen Sabor, a bakery, is owned by three sisters. They purchased an existing bakery business and have added lunch and dinner options. I couldn't resist buying two delicious pastries.

My 15 City, a Quinceanera dress shop, was two doors down.

The owner, Alma Sagastume, not only has a store full of beautiful dresses for purchase, but she also provides party decorations.

We then ate at El Tapatio, where we met with Venemex Productions, a video and photography company—both Center loan recipients. Venemex showed us breathtaking photos and talked about their business growth, sharing behind-the-scenes stories.

Additionally, we heard from Neighborworks Northeast Nebraska, who received a loan from us to support the construction of 15 housing units in Columbus.

The next day, Centro Hispano joined our regular meeting alongside Nina Lanuza, senior community organizing associate, to talk about efforts supporting community members in the Columbus



area. For example, we partner together for a Thanksgiving Food Drive where last year we helped provide Thanksgiving dinners to 250 families. That's a lot of food!

Of course, we held our regular board meeting where the board made encouraging comments and asked invigorating questions.

The event was a whirlwind two days where we witnessed great things the Center has accomplished. I look forward to the next one!

Federal funding, continued from page 1

The agency-level firings at USDA are subject to a lawsuit that may reverse them.

Zooming out, cuts to agency staff and grant-making budgets across the federal government threaten to impact rural people and rural places in additional ways. Cuts to Social Security staffing, university research, medical research, library funding, and other such cuts will all affect rural people across the country.

It is crucial that Congress, which holds the authority over federal appropriations, take affirmative action to uphold federal funding obligations passed into law. To date, congressional response has been limited. In the face of actions

by the administration and lack of action by Congress, the courts have stepped in in some cases and ordered restoration of funding or rehiring of fired agency staff. Court action is limited and has not addressed the full scope of the challenge.

The Center believes the federal government must honor its commitments to ensure funds appropriated by law and contractually obligated by agencies reach their intended purpose and support the communities that rely on them. As numerous programs, projects, and agencies face ongoing uncertainty, it is critical that members of Congress hear from the people they represent.

We encourage you to write to and call your representatives about the issues and programs that are important to you. If your elected officials hold town halls in your area, we encourage you to attend. There are some indications that public pressure is having an effect on lawmaker actions in Washington. We urge you to continue to weigh in.

Rural people and rural places benefit from a variety of federal programs. Federal funding—in various forms—plays an essential role for improving the lives of many rural Americans.

Find your representative at [congress.gov/members/find-your-member](https://www.congress.gov/members/find-your-member).

Paper & e-news

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Editing and layout by Rhea Landholm, Kylie Kai, Catharine Huddle, and Liz Stewart.

Printed at Anderson Brothers, Sioux City, IA

Address corrections: Fax the back page to 402.687.2200 or call 402.687.2100.

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Honor-system farm stand, continued from page 1



Ali and Scotty Yahnke, owners of The Perennial Homestead north of Omaha, run an honor-system farm stand and online store. Ali applied for a Business Builder Grant and was paired with the Center for business plan assistance. | Photos by Rhea Landholm

regional farmers and artisans.

Today, the farm stand generates about one-third of the income that supports the family of four. The rest comes from their wholesale sales and online store.

"When we moved to our current farm, we were looking to grow our family and wanted more flexibility," said Ali. "The farm stand was mostly a hobby at the time, but it quickly grew popular in our community and has since become the cornerstone of our business in the summer months."

Each season, they revisit their plan, choosing crops that make sense for their customer base, are durable on a farm stand, and allow them to make value-added products to market year-round.

"We love the honor system, and so far, have had very little theft, if any," said Ali. "By operating on the honor system, we've been able to have the flexibility to spend time with family and friends and travel during the summertime without forfeiting income."

Last year, Ali began researching the Business Builder Grant Program through the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Part of the grant application encouraged applicants to seek technical assis-

tance. Ali applied, and was paired with Kjersten Hyberger, local foods associate with the Center for Rural Affairs. Through this project, Ali improved her business plan, thinking strategically and accessing valuable resources available in her community.

"Every time I talk with Kjersten, it feels like new opportunities present themselves," Ali said. "The Center has so many community connections and resources that even when we have a small agenda, I leave feeling inspired and motivated to continue working on improving our business."

Most recently, Kjersten paired Ali with a Center business specialist who is going to help refine her business plan and prepare financial goals for the years to come.

Because they have limited space for growing, the couple has been strategic about what they grow on a total of 1 acre. Their main annual plot is at their neighbor's place about a mile away. The land at their rented homestead is much more shaded, where they have gradually established more perennial crops and herbs. Though their space is limited, they make the best use of it, including caring for the land to produce better crops.

"It's important to us to create little waste, and to us, that looks like composting our food scraps from our home and value-added production, incorporating cover crops, and capturing the abundance of horse manure from our neighborhood to improve the soil fertility," said Ali. "The perennial areas along the borders of our fields create a habitat for beneficial species. We reduce water use by using drip irrigation and mulching with spent straw and hay from nearby farms."

In 2022, the farm stand stayed so busy that, for the first time, Ali and Scotty were unable to keep it stocked with products solely from their farm. Instead of scaling up their production, which was already at their comfort limit, the couple sourced from local farmers.

"Over the years, we have refined what we source from whom, and last season, we even had one grower contract grow several crops for us that we struggle to grow in abundance in our gardens due to environmental factors," Ali said.

The Perennial Homestead farm stand is open from mid-April through December, weather permitting, and their online shop is open year-round.



This spring and summer, the Center is presenting six awards to rural champions in two states. | Photo by Kylie Kai

Rural advocates honored by Center for Rural Affairs

By Rhea Landholm, rheal@cfra.org

The Center will recognize outstanding people and entities in two states.

“Each year, we honor the rural champions who help us accomplish so much for rural America,” said Brian Depew, executive director. “This group of award winners has gone above and beyond to lay the foundation for a better rural future.”

Seventh Generation Award:

Jan and Cornelia (Neal) Flora, Ames, Iowa, rural sociologists whose research addresses alternative strategies of community development and community-based natural resource management in light of changing socio-technical regimes and climate change. One of their numerous publications, “Rural Communities: Legacy and Change,” is now in its fifth edition.

The Seventh Generation Award is a lifetime service award presented to an individual or individuals who have made major contributions to improving rural life and protecting our land and water.

George Norris Policymaker

Award: Tony Vargas, Omaha, former state senator in Nebraska’s 7th district, who worked with the Center to introduce and pass food truck legislation that helped simplify the bureaucracy around operating food trucks in Nebraska.

The George Norris Policymaker Award is given to a policymaker who employs bipartisanship, compromise, and consensus to

improve policy outcomes for family farms and rural communities.

Citizenship Award: Jessi Chandler Mason, owner of The Market and Mill, a small independent grocery store in Anselmo, Nebraska, who testified in support of Nebraska Legislative Bill (LB) 1116 in spring 2024 and worked with the Center on advocacy for the bill.

The Citizenship Award is given to an individual or individuals who actively participate in the civic process of creating public policy and who work closely with the Center to advance public policies that strengthen family farms, ranches, and rural communities.

Rural Community Champion

Award: Danelle Myer, owner and operator of One Farm and One Farm Market, Logan, Iowa. Danelle is a champion for rural health, rural entrepreneurship, and women in business and leadership, and she cares deeply about the health and well-being of her community. She supports, inspires, and helps promote other local businesses through One Farm Market, including an emphasis on women-owned businesses.

The Rural Community Champion Award is bestowed to a person or persons who work with the Center and make extraordinary contributions to building community engagement within their communities. People who receive this award provide a model for innovation, stewardship, or community

development.

Entrepreneur Award: Sabino and Maria Hernandez, owners of Corn Taco, in Schuyler, Nebraska, run a food truck and soon a restaurant. They have hosted Center staff and partners on food-based business tours in addition to participating in and recommending the Center’s services.

The Entrepreneur Award recognizes entrepreneurs who have received Center services and achieved remarkable success in business while demonstrating the values of innovation, community leadership, and social responsibility.

Entrepreneur Partner Award:

Nebraska Business Development Center (NBDC), Omaha, which provides free services for small business owners across the state.

The Entrepreneur Partner Award is presented to an individual or organization that best exemplifies the entrepreneurial spirit that is so crucial to the future prosperity of Nebraska’s rural communities. This person or organization has demonstrated outstanding support for the Center and exceptional dedication to small business development through technical assistance, business training, lending, and networking across rural Nebraska.

Awards will be presented to each recipient during the months ahead.

Running a home-based business helps entrepreneur engage with her community

By Liz Stewart and Carlos Barcenas

When most people think about sushi, they picture the traditional Japanese dish made with rice and raw seafood, wrapped in seaweed. When Wendy Urquidez mentions it, she means Mexican sushi.

For the past few years, Wendy has been working to introduce this type of food to people in northeast Nebraska.

Owner of Sushis Wendy in West Point, Nebraska, Wendy was first struck with the idea of opening a business after missing the popular dish from home. She began re-searching how to start a business and found no one else was selling Mexican sushi in her area.

“I was craving Mexican sushi, which is usually found in Sinaloa, Mexico,” said Wendy. “They are very common there, but we couldn’t find them anywhere here at that time. I always had the idea that one day I was going to teach myself how to make them and sell them. I started making them, doing tests at home, sharing them with family, and I would take them to parties—that’s how my customers started to get to know me.”

Mexican sushi is filled with meats like chicken, beef, pork, crab, or shrimp, as well as cream cheese and avocado, all wrapped in seaweed. Unlike Japanese sushi, this dish is fully cooked, fried, and breaded. Wendy also offers oven-baked sushi rolls.

She opened her first restaurant in 2017, then closed it five months later after she discovered that running an entire restaurant by herself was too much. She then looked into opening a business out of her home. With the help of staff from the Center for Rural Affairs and the West Point Chamber of Commerce, Wendy got the infor-



Wendy Urquidez, a food truck owner in West Point, Nebraska, specializes in Mexican sushi—a dish that is fully cooked, fried, and breaded, containing meats like chicken, beef, pork, crab, and shrimp, along with cream cheese and avocado, all wrapped in seaweed. | Photo by Kylie Kai

mation and permits necessary to open Sushis Wendy in June 2021.

“I realized that having a big business and spending seven days a week in it is not functional or profitable for me,” she said.

Wendy added a separate kitchen to operate according to code. After saving money for a year, she bought a food truck to use for events.

Wendy has turned to the Center for educational resources, including on the Center’s social media pages, online and in-person training workshops, and attending the Center’s Women Entrepreneur Conference.

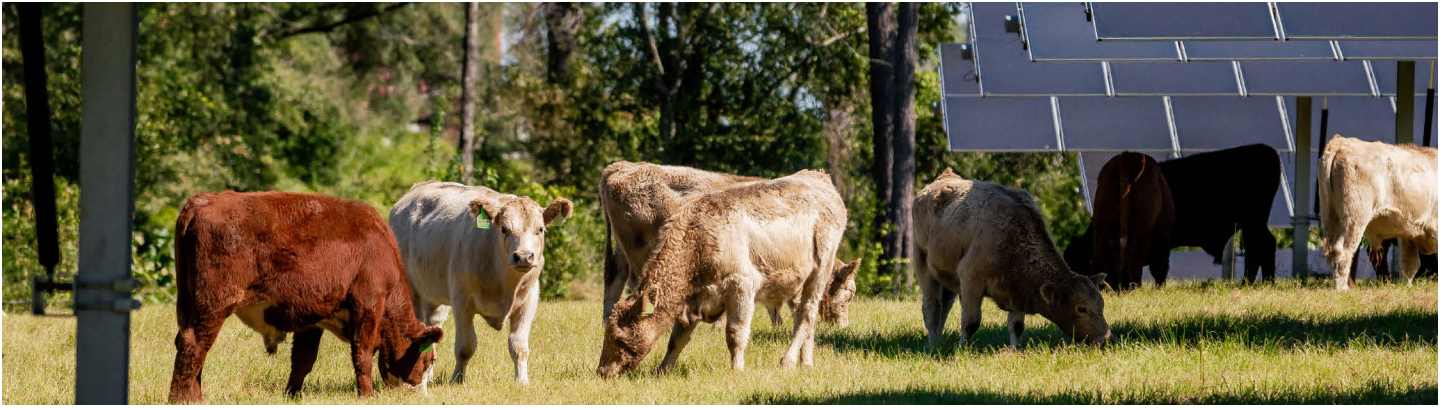
In early 2024, she applied for a loan through the Center. Last July, she received funds and was able to make upgrades to her food truck, including adding refrigerators.

One of the biggest challenges for Wendy, who speaks Spanish, has been finding ways to navigate the language barrier.

“At first I was embarrassed when sometimes I struggled to communicate, but I’ve lost a little bit of shyness,” she said. “Now, I can say that I speak ‘kitchen’ English, and I’ve learned how to say the names of what I sell in English.”

In the future, Wendy hopes to expand her business to a fully equipped restaurant where customers can dine in and be comfortable. Until then, she’s happy to keep sharing her food with all of her customers, new and old.

“I have a lot of American customers, and when people come here for the first time, they say it’s something they’ve never had in their life,” Wendy said. “They come back and say it’s really good and thank me for introducing them to something they’ve never known about or tried. My favorite part is serving people. I love being in contact with people when they come in, and I like doing what I do.”



A new approach to dual-use solar, called “cattle voltaics,” combines cattle grazing with solar energy generation. Agrivoltaics have already been successfully integrated with crops, pollinator gardens, beekeeping, and sheep grazing. | Photo submitted

Harnessing the power of cattle voltaics: Huwa Enterprises combines solar with cattle grazing

By Mallory Tope, malloryt@cfra.org

Renewable energy is boosting agricultural innovation, with farmers and ranchers finding new ways to integrate solar power into their operations. Huwa Enterprises, based in Keenesburg, Colorado, is taking a unique approach by combining solar panels with cattle grazing.

The new approach to dual-use solar is called “cattle voltaics.” Dual-use solar is the practice of combining agricultural operations with solar energy generation, which has been successfully integrated with crops, pollinator gardens, beekeeping, and sheep grazing.

“There is a lot of talk in the industry about whether you are pro-ag or pro-energy,” said Brent Huwa, owner of Huwa Enterprises. “What’s cool for us is we’re saying, ‘Look, we don’t have to choose, we can do both.’”

Huwa Enterprises operates a 6,000-acre farm with 600 Black Angus cattle. With a history in ranching, reclamation, and renewable energy, they wanted to find a way to merge each aspect.

“We got tired of talking about [cattle with solar] and going to conferences and listening to peo-

ple tell us all the reasons why it wouldn’t work,” said Josh Bennett, agrimation executive at Huwa Enterprises.

To demonstrate the viability of cattle voltaics, Huwa Enterprises set up a test site with solar panels and 100 yearling cattle.

“We ran 2,000-pound bulls [with the solar arrays] for a while just to prove a point that we could actually do it, and they wouldn’t tear it up,” Brent said.

Since their initial test in 2023, Huwa Enterprises has completed three successful utility-scale projects with cattle grazing and is now helping new and existing solar projects integrate livestock.

“We’re working on helping people design new solar array systems that will accommodate cattle,” said Josh. “We are also working on existing projects, going in there and making a few modifications so that we can run the cattle.”

Cattle voltaics allow farmers and ranchers to optimize land use by maintaining livestock operations while hosting renewable energy projects and creating additional income from solar land leases.

The integration of cattle grazing with solar arrays offers numerous benefits to landowners and devel-

opers. The shade from panels reduces cattle heat stress, improving weight gain, milk production, and livestock health. Grazing enhances soil health and forage quality while promoting long-term land restoration.

For energy developers, cattle voltaics lower vegetation maintenance costs and enable more active on-site monitoring.

Huwa Enterprises collaborates with solar developers, landowners, and vegetation maintenance teams to design grazing plans that align with energy production. By tailoring each project to site-specific factors—such as soil, seed mix, and cattle type—they help reduce challenges before construction.

“Early involvement [from all parties] and recognizing that it is a partnership are the core elements to be successful,” Josh said.

For agricultural landowners looking to diversify income while maintaining production, combining cattle grazing with solar energy offers a unique opportunity. By addressing site-specific challenges and collaborating early with energy developers, producers can maximize land use efficiency and enhance soil health and cattle productivity.

On the road with Erin, continued from page 8

as he identified photos and told stories about farmers featured in the pictures.

Another longtime Center friend who puts Pennsylvania on our map is Ruth Tonachel. Ruth grew up in New York City but always felt she had a rural heart. From a young age, she identified with her grandparents' home place, a farm in rural Pennsylvania. She got a degree in agriculture and even ran a farm newspaper before moving to rural Alabama for grad school. When Ruth got the offer to take on the role of public affairs director for the Center for Rural Affairs, she made the big move to small town Nebraska.

Following a death in her family, she returned east sooner than planned but remained inspired by her time with the Center. In fact, within a few years, she and two others with direct experience at the Center were among the founding members of the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Ag (now called Pasa Sustainable Ag).

Over the years, Ruth immersed herself in rural living, writing and advocating for ag and arts and collective farm projects like the subsistence backyard meat chickens she and her neighbors raise together.

On the beautiful fall day we were able to visit in person, we were within earshot of those happy hens and within sight of her grandson and my daughter playing in the backyard sandbox. Ruth and I talked about navigating difficult discussions with our neighbors and of the importance of human connection and creative outlets to stay sane and grounded. Suffice it to say, I left the state feeling a lot more of both.

Gretchen, David, Ruth, and many more in Pennsylvania, whom I hope to connect with on my next trip, may be 1,200 miles from our



Erin Schoenberg, the Center's development manager, visited supporters in Pennsylvania last fall. During one visit, long-time rural advocate and friend of the Center, Gretchen Hall, showed Erin a photo album from her introduction to our organization during the farm credit crisis in the 1980s.

Gretchen worked for an organization which, like ours, advocated and lobbied for family farmers. She connected with our staff and traveled to Nebraska to accompany us on a series of farm tours.

Pictured are photos from the farm tours. Do you recognize anyone? Do you remember these tours? Email or call Erin at erins@cfra.org or 402.499.2781. | Photos submitted

home office, but they know the Center's mission and impact encompass communities far beyond Nebraska and Iowa, Minnesota and South Dakota. We fight for seats at the table for family farmers, small business owners, Native and new Americans, and working and middle class rural people who are out there putting in the work every day, fighting for a better tomorrow.

So get out there, folks, and talk to your neighbors, your friends,

your representatives—heck, even a stranger on the sidewalk. You need someone to talk to, give me a call at 402.499.2781.

Can you help us reach supporters in all 50 states plus D.C. this year? Make sure your state is on our map by making a donation at cfra.org/give or sending a check to P.O. Box 136, Lyons, NE 68038. Last year, we were missing Delaware, Hawaii, Louisiana, Mississippi, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, and South Carolina.



CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

145 Main Street, Po Box 136 | Lyons, NE 68038-0136
cfra.org | info@cfra.org



Rural advocates honored

Read about our 2025 awardees!

On the road with Erin in Pennsylvania

By Erin Schoenberg, erins@cfra.org

You likely saw our 2024 donor list in the last issue, if you're a regular newsletter reader. Did you notice the U.S. map we printed alongside the list? This map indicates that we have donors from 42 states, plus Washington, D.C. This is quite the spread! We don't take for granted that people from around the country want to be part of our grass-roots movement to build a just and prosperous rural future.

Many folks who donate have rural backgrounds. Others don't, and they don't need to. They see the value of our work and understand how rural and urban are intertwined. Our supporters share the belief that everyone deserves the opportunity to participate fully in cultural and economic life, no matter where they live. And our

community embraces our shared responsibility to steward the environment and put in place forward-thinking, community-driven plans that prepare for a changing climate and a changing world.

In my role as development manager with the Center, I'm privileged to get to know many of the thoughtful and action-oriented people who put their states on our supporter map. Last fall, I took the opportunity to visit a few of our dedicated Pennsylvania-based supporters.

Gretchen Hall came across the Center's work during the farm credit crisis in the 1980s. In those years, Gretchen worked for an organization which, like ours, advocated and lobbied for family farmers. She connected with our staff and traveled to Nebraska to accompany us on a series of farm

tours. Her trip marked the beginning of her decades-long enthusiastic support of the Center.

Although physically distant from the Center's home base, Gretchen believes national advocacy is a key way to contribute to our efforts. She lobbies her members of Congress about legislation important to the Center's work.

When I visited Gretchen and her husband, David Sa'adah, we delighted in looking through old photos from Gretchen's time in Nebraska.

On my way out—after enjoying a delicious home-cooked meal, rich conversation about rural housing, and a tour of their community garden—she packed up the photos and sent them with me for our archives. Back in Lyons, Farm and

—See *On the road with Erin* on Page 7