



CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

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Lifelong dedication to enhancing rural life: Al Davis receives Seventh Generation Award

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

From the pastures of western Nebraska to the halls of the Unicameral, Al Davis has been connected to the Center's work for more than 50 years.

A rancher from Hyannis, Nebraska, who also has interest in the arts, Al has made major contributions to improving rural life and protecting our land and water. He has done this both through engagement with the Center and through his personal and professional life and activities.

For this reason, he was presented the Center's 2025 Seventh Generation Award on May 20, 2026, at a reception in Lincoln.



Al Davis receives the Center's Seventh Generation Award from Brian Depew, executive director. Al has been involved with the organization since 1974. He's become more involved in recent years after serving on the Nebraska Legislature and working alongside the Center on climate and solar lending. | Photo by Kylie Kai

Approaching 150 years in Nebraska

Al comes from a ranching family who homesteaded OLO Ranch in 1888.

"My family started out there in the Sandhills like so many people did, in the sodhouse, and made success, and they contributed back to the state of Nebraska in

every way they could," Al said. "That's what we all do and that's what makes Nebraska the great thing that it is."

Al worked on the ranch and ran the community theater for 20 years, meeting his wife along the

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Solar loans: keeping the lights on even after funding was terminated

By Rhea Landholm, rheal@cfra.org

After seven months of diligent work building a program and another seven months of uncertainty, the Center for Rural Affairs was notified that funding for its Nebraska Solar for All program was terminated last year. The \$62.4 million grant would

have lowered energy costs and reduced pollution in underserved communities by installing solar power systems that deployed over 60 megawatts of new residential-serving solar energy. Solar for All was to have reached more than 9,000 households across Nebraska.

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“The Solar for All grant was particularly exciting because it represented a historic shift in how clean energy is deployed,” said Daniel Padilla, the Center’s director of climate lending.

This opportunity would have allowed the Center and its partners to increase the amount of solar energy available in the state by more than 60% over the five-year grant period and transform the residential solar market.

“Solar for All would have been community-led and residential focused,” said Daniel. “The program would have funded fundamental infrastructure and was designed to lower the energy burden for families who spend a disproportionate amount of their income on utilities.”

Timeline of work

In July 2023, Center staff began developing its Nebraska Solar for All proposal. They consulted with more than 50 stakeholders including public utilities, state agencies, municipalities, Tribes, housing developers, housing organizations, solar developers, workforce partners, and community-based organizations.

The three-part application included low-interest loans, grants, and subsidies to support community solar, multifamily affordable housing solar, and rooftop solar.

In May 2024, the EPA announced the Center was a recipient of a \$62.4 million grant under the Solar for All program, and on July 12, 2024, the Center was

formally awarded the grant. Within a month, the Center had assigned four staff to work on Solar for All and issued a contract for support services.

During the year to follow, the Center worked diligently to implement the grant in Nebraska and to meet Environmental Protection Agency’s requirements.

Will they, won't they... they won't

In early 2025, actions by the new administration in Washington were creating far-reaching consequences for rural people and rural places. In January, the administration temporarily froze grantees’ access to Solar for All funding, disrupting work and creating uncertainty.

On Aug. 7, 2025, the Center received a letter of termination from the EPA regarding its Solar for All grant. This action meant that Center staff were forced to suspend work on all projects, creating tremendous uncertainty for all stakeholders.

At the time of termination, the Center was in advanced discussions with multiple communities and housing developers around the state to deploy more than \$20 million in grant funding for solar projects.

While Congress holds the authority over federal appropriations, congressional response to grant funding has been limited.

The Center filed a dispute of termination with the EPA in late August and a petition for reconsideration to the EPA in November.

Although those efforts were not fruitful, the Center continues to believe the termination was improper and is evaluating its options.

Solar lending doesn't stop

Despite the challenges, the Center’s work supporting solar development in Nebraska continues. In designing the new area of solar lending at the Center, leadership carefully built a multi-faceted approach, searching for different sources of funding.

The Center was awarded a \$10 million loan from the Coalition for Green Capital under the National Clean Investment Fund program. The Center is turning around these funds and seeking to make loans to support solar projects up to 10 MW in size.

“The work must keep going,” Daniel said. “While we always wanted to revolve as much of our grant monies as possible, our financial realities have changed. But, our goal of making our communities resilient does not change.”

The Center now offers community and business solar loans as well as personal loans.

“The Center wants to be part of this transformation by helping our cities and families generate their own power and lock in energy savings for decades, making the communities we live in more resilient,” Daniel said.

To learn more, visit cfra.org/SolarLoans.

Paper & e-news

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Al Davis was presented the Seventh Generation Award on May 20, 2026, at a reception in Lincoln. Several longtime Center supporters were in attendance. | Photos by Kylie Kai

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way. He and Dottie were married in 1992.

“My wife was the catalyst for so many things in my life,” he said. “She was such a wonderful person, so intelligent and funny and creative.”

She and Al hosted a number of performers at the ranch who performed for their rural community. Through the years, she assisted with the guests, and took part in calving and taking care of the animals.

From 2013 to 2017, Al served in the Nebraska Legislature. Dottie passed away in 2022.

Working with the Center

Al learned about the Center in 1974. Since, he has been involved with multiple Center programs, notably collaborating on work to strengthen competition in the meat packing industry to ensure fair markets for family farmers and ranchers.

“Al has been a consistent champion for rural people over many decades, working to strengthen competitive markets, create new opportunities in renewable energy,

and conserve our natural resources,” said Chuck Hassebrook, who served as executive director of the Center from 1996 to 2013. “He is a genuinely kind and decent person.”

While serving in the legislature, Al said Center staff brought a lot of bills to his attention.

“You know, we really need an entity like the Center in this country,” Al said. “It’s just a really necessary thing. Yeah, I think it is unique. I don’t know of another entity like this.”

Currently, Al is a participant in the weekly state clean energy table meeting that the Center hosts. When the Center was designing its solar lending program in 2023, Al offered a letter of support through his role as a lobbyist with the Nebraska Chapter of the Sierra Club.

“Nebraska just sits here on the epicenter of this great wind potential and incredible solar potential,” he said. “We have this public power structure which I think can really play into us being a huge exporter of energy. It really goes back right to the farm and gives people another source of income.”

Coming together to support rural life

Through the years, Al has helped move the needle on celebrating and resourcing rural Nebraska.

He was a founding member of the Independent Cattlemen of Nebraska, a group dedicated to restoring fairness to the marketing of beef.

He is a board member of Wachiska Audubon and a member of the Lincoln Continental Barber-shop group.

“I’m extremely honored and humbled by this [award], because the Center has done such great things over the 50 years it’s been in existence,” Al said. “I hope to be around for many more years and see the Center go forward to do greater things than it has already.”

Many Center supporters and those who have worked with Al throughout the years attended the award reception in May.

“It was just a real honor to be among so many friends and so many people that believe in the same things we all believe in,” Al said at the reception. “Onward and upward!”

Farmer chasing record yields, building soil, and sharing knowledge in Nebraska Conservation Mentorship Network

By Nash Leef, nashl@cfra.org

For Greg Keller, the decision to adopt conservation practices on his 1,000-acre farm near Monroe, Nebraska, in central Nebraska, was born out of a pragmatic struggle against erosion.

Faced with persistent loss of soil in the hills of Platte County, where heavy rains frequently washed out hilltops into ditches and forced costly replanting, Greg realized that conventional views of soil management were no longer protecting his bottom line.

So, 26 years ago, he began practicing no-till to reduce disruptions to the soil profile and increase soil aggregate formation. Fifteen years later, cover crops were introduced as another line of defense—keeping living roots in the system year round for the last 11 years.

What began as a solution to keep precious soil out of the ditches has since evolved into a multi-pronged regenerative system that produces 300+ bushels/acre corn yields. Greg's deep commitment to putting soil biology first has made a big impact on the land as well as the economics of his operation.

Greg's success is a testament to the power of shared knowledge, a core value he promotes in his role as a mentor in the Conservation Mentorship Network. As one of 28 experienced farmers and ranchers across Nebraska serving in this role, Greg helps other producers navigate the complexities of regenerative farming.

The Nebraska Conservation Mentorship Network is a no-cost, producer-led initiative designed to meet farmers wherever they are in their journey that offers a flexible “come as you are” approach. Whether a producer is just starting to consider cover crops or is looking to fine-tune a complex



Programs like the Conservation Mentorship Network are vital for highlighting the work of farmers like Greg Keller, of Monroe, Nebraska, and making their hard-earned, practical knowledge accessible to others. Greg has worked on his farm's soil management for 26 years. | Photo by Andrew Tonnies

multi-practice system, the network provides the one-on-one mentorship, farm tours, and small-group discussions needed to succeed. By joining, Nebraska producers gain access to a community of like-minded peers and a platform to exchange ideas, ensuring that no producer has to innovate in isolation.

Greg's soil biology has reached a point where natural processes now allow him to reduce many inputs and forgo others entirely. Greg estimates his fields are home to over 1 million earthworms per acre—a level of macrobiological activity that generates an estimated 100 to 150 tons per acre of nutrient-rich worm castings annually. This influx of natural fertilizer has allowed him to completely eliminate micronutrient inputs, a group of essential plant nutrients

historically naturally present in soils that are now often added via soil amendment. This has saved Greg an estimated \$70 to \$100 per acre in 2026 with the high price of these inputs.

For other producers considering a move toward conservation agriculture, Greg suggests starting small with 40 or 80 acres and committing to the new practice for at least three years to allow the soil biology time to respond. While he acknowledges that the first year is the most challenging, he views the long-term rewards as a “no-brainer” for the next generation of Nebraska farmers.

Greg enjoys hosting other producers on his farm to offer a hands-on look at his custom drills and planters, as well as a chance to discuss the real-world application of regenerative techniques.



During a grocery tour in April, Center for Rural Affairs staff, community members, and grocery store owners came together to visit stores, walk through day-to-day operations, and talk honestly about what it takes to keep these businesses going. At Main Street Market in Milford, Nebraska, a family-owned business, the group got to learn about their mission and offerings. | Photo by Kylie Kai

5 lessons from rural grocery stores

By Carlie Jonas, carliej@cfra.org

Rural grocery store owners do far more than stocking shelves. Running a grocery in a small town is more complex, and more essential, than it often appears.

When a rural grocery store struggles, the impact affects the entire community.

Here are five lessons we learned from working alongside grocery stores:

1. Ownership models matter

In locally owned stores, owners constantly weigh what their community needs against what the business can sustain. That stands in contrast to corporate ownership models, where decisions may be made far from the community. Ownership isn't just a business structure, it directly impacts re-

sponsiveness, risk tolerance, and long-term viability.

2. More than grocery stores

These stores are essential infrastructure. They are employers, gathering spaces, and access points for food.

3. Workforce is important

Hiring is difficult. Retention is harder. And flexibility is non-negotiable. Employees shift constantly between roles, running the register, stocking shelves, and managing deliveries. Even one staffing gap can disrupt the entire operation.

4. Price and distribution are challenges

Distribution shapes what rural grocery stores can offer and at what cost. Constraints can include

delivery schedules, minimum order requirements, rising costs, and limited supplier options.

Stores are getting creative, sourcing products locally when they can. These efforts don't replace larger distribution systems, but they do offer flexibility.

5. Trust is important

Community members have to weigh the reality of their own decisions. Price, convenience, and household budgets matter, but so does supporting local business owners.

Often the stores that make it have a deep connection to their communities, shown in the way customers greet owners, in the conversations at checkout, and in the sense of familiarity with the communities they serve.



Agrivoltaics is being used more across the country. To help understand the economic and environmental benefits, the Center for Rural Affairs has developed a webinar series focused on research, real-world examples, and producer perspectives. | Center file photo

Agrivoltaics is growing interest across the U.S.

By Val Ankeny, valeriea@cfra.org

Across the country, farmers, landowners, and rural communities are taking a closer look at how solar development can work alongside agriculture instead of competing with it.

Agrivoltaics, or dual-use solar, is growing interest as people look for ways to keep land productive, support conservation, and create new opportunities. Agrivoltaics includes beneficial practices such as growing crops beneath panels, grazing livestock on solar sites, and the inclusion of pollinator habitats.

While large solar systems can have a considerable footprint, proven dual-use practices can ensure energy projects and agriculture productively coexist.

To help understand the economic and environmental benefits, the

Center for Rural Affairs has developed a webinar series focused on research, real-world examples, and producer perspectives.

One video features panelists who discuss cattle voltaics, specialty crop production, and emerging agrivoltaics research.

Another introduces the Center's comprehensive set of resources for the public and local decision makers, such as community benefit agreements, siting resources, and model ordinance language.

A third webinar provides a helpful foundation by explaining the basics of agrivoltaics and showing how solar systems can work alongside conservation practices, grazing, and crop and vegetable production on working lands.

These webinars complement a toolkit of other agrivoltaics re-

sources created by the Center, including fact sheets, guides, and research papers aimed at highlighting how agriculture and solar can work together.

As interest in solar continues to grow in rural communities, these resources can help producers and community members better understand what is possible on the ground. Hearing directly from researchers, educators, and practitioners can help move the conversation beyond assumptions and toward practical possibilities.

Farmers, landowners, local officials, and rural residents are encouraged to explore these resources and learn more about how solar and agriculture can work together.

The webinar series can be found at cfra.org/agrivoltaics under siting resources.

Meet Center supporter: Adriana Dungan

By Erin Schoenberg, erins@cfra.org

Center for Rural Affairs donors provide both funding and inspiration to move our work forward.

A native of Mexico, Adriana Dungan has worked with the Center as a business development consultant, and previously as the Center for Rural Affairs' Hispanic Business Center director from 2004 to 2010.

This new series spotlights our supporters like Adriana for whom we are very thankful! ¡Gracias a Adriana!



Adriana Dungan speaks at the Center's small business conference in 2024. | Photo by Kylie Kai

Why do you love rural communities? / ¿Por qué te encantan las comunidades rurales?

In small towns, neighbors know each other, support each other, and step in when someone is in need. At the same time, rural areas often face challenges that go unseen, and that has only strengthened my commitment to be part of the solution and provide support where it is needed most.

En los pueblos pequeños, los vecinos se conocen, se apoyan y están dispuestos a ayudar cuando alguien lo necesita. Al mismo tiempo, las áreas rurales a menudo enfrentan desafíos que pasan desapercibidos, y eso ha fortalecido aún más mi compromiso de ser par-

te de la solución y brindar apoyo donde más se necesite.

What drew you to the Center? / ¿Qué le atrajo del Centro?

What stood out to me most was the Center's mission and approach—intentional, community-driven work is what inspired me to get involved and continues to motivate me every day.

Lo que más me llamó la atención fue la misión y el enfoque del Centro—el trabajo intencional, impulsado por la comunidad, es lo que me inspiró a involucrarme y lo que continúa motivándome cada día.

What's kept you interested in the Center? / ¿Qué ha mantenido su interés en el Centro?

I care deeply about the gaps that affect vulnerable populations in rural areas and being part of efforts that bring resources, awareness, and practical solutions to these communities is very meaningful to me.

Me importan profundamente las brechas que afectan a las poblaciones vulnerables en las áreas rurales y el ser parte de los esfuerzos que brindan recursos, conciencia y soluciones prácticas a estas comunidades es muy significativo para mí.

More competitive livestock markets, continued from page 8

enforcement of anti-competitive laws already on the books, like the Packers and Stockyards Act, passed in 1921.

The Center for Rural Affairs has long fought for fair and competitive livestock markets, including supporting the addition of a Competition Title to the federal farm bill to tackle market consolidation and power imbalances.

The Center is also working to

support small- and medium-sized meat processors in building alternative, more community-based systems by launching a \$15 million loan fund to increase affordable capital access for these important community cornerstones.

More must be done.

It is up to the people who rely on this industry as a cornerstone of our shared economy to think beyond quarterly profits. We must

stand up for the public good and demand our elected representatives prioritize the long-term health of communities and our state.

For more information on the Center's Meat & Poultry Processing loans, see: cfra.org/meatprocessloans. See also cfra.org/rural-resources.



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Look inside: Solar loans

Keeping the lights on after funding was terminated

Lexington's loss is a wake-up call for more competitive livestock markets

By Nick Bergin, nickb@cfra.org

The Tyson Foods beef plant in Lexington is a long, squat building about a mile south of U.S. Highway 30. While the meat processor is physically on the town's far south side, it has been at the heart of central Nebraska's economy since opening on Nov. 8, 1990, under the name IBP.

That plant, which employed about 3,200 people, started closing down on Jan. 20, dealing a devastating blow to the community of 11,000. The resulting economic waves rocking the region and Nebraska cattle producers highlight the need for reasonable regulation of the livestock market and support for growth of competitors to ensure a truly competitive market that benefits producers, workers, and communities.

Nebraska's economy will suffer the loss of \$3.28 billion annually due to direct and multiplier effects related to the Lexington plant closure, according to a Dec. 22 analysis by the University of Nebraska Department of Agricultural Economics. They estimate closure of the Lexington plant will cause the elimination of an additional 3,791 jobs in other sectors for a total labor income loss of \$530.43 million, most of it in Dawson County and neighboring communities. They project annual tax revenue losses at \$23.2 million in state personal income tax, \$10.16 million in state sales tax, and \$2.77 million in local sales tax to Dawson County.

The turmoil now plaguing central Nebraska is a symptom of decades of meatpacking industry consolidation. Four corporations

control about 85% of beef packing in the U.S., according to numerous economic studies, including those by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service.

As a society, we should not make corporate profits the only metric for judging the performance of our industries. We must also consider the long-term health of our communities and the people who produce the food, including cattle feeders and laborers who debone the meat.

Bringing more competition to the meatpacking industry will require significant public and private investment. Overcoming barriers to market entry on a broad scale will require government intervention, including grants, access to affordable loan capital, and

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