



# CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

YOUR RURAL NEWS FOR OVER 40 YEARS | LYONS, NEBRASKA | POPULATION 851 | SEPTEMBER & OCTOBER 2018

## SWANSON BROTHERS FOCUS ON CONSERVATION PRACTICES FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

BY LACIE DOTTERWEICH, LACIED@CFRA.ORG

**T**o Don Swanson, there is no other way to farm but sustainably. This mindset started with his grandfather and was passed down to his father, then to him and his brother, Bill. It has kept the family heritage farm alive for well over a century in Ottumwa, Iowa.

“Each generation has tried to leave the ground better for the next generation, which is our goal,” said Don.

The brothers believe using sustainable practices that keep soil and water healthy is essential to carry on the family farm, like it has been for the past 170 years.

Don uses a wide array of conservation practices to keep soil in his fields, and not in local water sources. He keeps much of his



Don Swanson (right) and his brother, Bill, are general partners of Swanson Farm Partnership, a diversified grain and livestock operation in Wapello and Lucas counties in Iowa. The brothers believe using sustainable practices that keep soil and water healthy is essential to carry on the family farm. | Photo by Lacie Dotterweich

—SEE **BROTHERS** ON PAGE 3

## POLICYMAKERS' FAILED ACTIONS LED TO RAID

BY JORDAN FEYERHERM, JORDANF@CFRA.ORG

**A**t the Center for Rural Affairs, one of our guiding principles is to promote vibrant rural communities and the people who live here. A cornerstone of any community is safety, stability, and trust.

On Aug. 8 in O'Neill, Nebraska, that sense of community was shaken when 133 agricultural workers were taken from their places of employment and transferred to a detention center more

than 100 miles away in Grand Island, leaving their families and children to wonder if their loved ones would ever return.

In 2013, the Center for Rural Affairs Board of Directors called on Congress to act on comprehensive immigration reform. Our call for action was four-part:

(1) An opportunity for undocumented immigrants who fulfill the requirements for obtaining citizenship to remain in the U.S. as

—SEE **FAILED ACTIONS** 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 "Citizen INVOLVEMENT to shape the future."

Throughout this edition, you will read about Iowa brothers who take conservation and water quality to heart; in school officials bringing local foods to lunch trays; in small business owners who are standing up for a farm bill program; in Nebraskans who have successfully placed Medicaid expansion on the November bal-



lot; and in our Chief Administrative Officer Linda Butkus as she returns to her rural roots.

We urge policymakers to get involved in immigration reform to prevent events like the O'Neill raid, where workers were left in insecure and dangerous situations. Following the raid, we saw support pour in from people across the nation from those wanting to help and get involved.

Involvement is also found in our executive director's essay as he tells us about the Center's strategic plan that guides our work during the next five years.

For more, visit [cfra.org](http://cfra.org) or follow us on social media. We're on Facebook, Twitter (@cfra), Instagram (@ruralnerd), and LinkedIn.

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## FAILED ACTIONS, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

citizens.

(2) A more robust process for legal immigration that shortens the timeline and waiting list for legal immigration and creates clear avenues for future immigrants.

(3) Practical and appropriate limits as determined by an independent commission on the number of manually skilled workers allowed to immigrate legally each year.

(4) More effective enforcement of existing wage and labor laws and of the prohibition on hiring undocumented immigrants and falsely classifying them as independent contractors.

Because policymakers have failed to act, too many workers remain trapped in limbo, leaving themselves and their families in

insecure and dangerous situations. These are the preconditions that led to the raid in O'Neill, Nebraska.

A silver lining in this humanitarian emergency is the outpouring of support and love shown to those affected. As soon as people became aware of the raid, the community, as well as state and national organizations, stepped up to provide assistance. O'Neill Public Schools opened their doors to provide counselors to affected children, and school employees opened their homes to children who were separated from their parents. Local churches were quick to provide a safe haven to those who were too scared to return home, and provided those affected with what comfort they

could. Systems were put into place to provide direct aid and advice on how to reconnect with their loved ones.

The Center for Rural Affairs joined several organizations in O'Neill to assist with legal aid, immigration assistance, trauma counseling, logistic support, and any other need that presented itself. Local businesses provided furniture, bedding, basic necessities, hot meals, toys, and even school supplies for the children getting ready to enter the new school year.

Through the actions of the community members rallying together to support their own in a time of need, we can see rural values and love for their neighbors in action.

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## 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](http://cfra.org), or email us at [info@cfra.org](mailto:info@cfra.org).

Editing and layout by Rhea Landholm  
Additional editing by Liz Daehnke

Printed at West Point News, West Point, NE

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## BROTHERS, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

grass mix for cattle to graze, and plants cereal rye cover crops. He also implements terraces and has built half a dozen ponds.

“We were doing conservation practices before it was cool; we’ve been doing no-till and cover crop and rotation and big grass waterways for years,” said Don.

These methods make a difference in keeping soil and nitrates out of the water.

Water quality is a big issue in southeast Iowa. Soils there are subject to heavy erosion which can lead to large amounts of runoff into lakes, rivers, and streams. And, nitrates and phosphates can leach into bodies of water.

Nitrates can come from fertilizers, the soil, and other sources, such as stormwater drainage, and typically migrate with fast-moving water. Phosphorus tends to move with solid substances like manure or soil.

Nutrient runoff from farm fields causes issues when it comes to clean drinking water, marine life, and recreation. Notably, nutrients can rapidly increase the growth of algae in waterways. Upon death, the algae depletes oxygen in the water, which can make it impossible for marine life to flourish.

Don believes we, as Iowans, can do a much better job of reducing nutrient runoff. What sets the Swansons apart is how they care for their farm.

“We take care of our rented ground like we would if we owned it; it costs us more in the short term but is worth it in the long run,” said Don.

The brothers’ views on stewardship influence much of their approach to conservation practices.

Don’s philosophy is all about stopping the water. He uses a multi-step process to curb runoff water from draining into nearby Buckeye Creek. First, his cover crop roots do a good job of retaining the water and nutrients in the



Don Swanson and his brother, Bill, are subjects of this first installation of our water quality profile series, featured on [cfra.org](http://cfra.org). We highlight Iowa farmers and water quality stakeholders to offer a variety of viewpoints and potential solutions. | Photo by Lacie Dotterweich

soil. Any water that does begin to drain is slowed down by seeded grass waterways where it then flows into a low-lying pond that he built. His small pond then drains into a larger neighboring pond with dams in place to contain the water.

These ponds allow sediment, often carrying nitrates and phosphates, to settle out of the water and back into the soil where they were intended to be. Ponds like these are often referred to as water sediment basins and have been proven to significantly reduce nutrient leaching.

Don hopes to do more in-field water testing to benchmark what comes out in the spring, and what

comes out in the fall. This allows the Swansons to evaluate which nutrients are leaching more frequently, and informs them about which practices they can implement to reduce their impact on water quality. This would help indicate if he is causing problems or not.

For farmers wanting to get started on soil and water conservation practices, Don advises starting small and trying different things. He says it is important to stay educated and always look for opportunities to learn more.

“We need to accept that we are all in this together,” he said. “Everyone needs to help.”

## COORDINATED EFFORTS TO IMPROVE WATER QUALITY

Many Iowa farmers, like Don, are trying their best to curb farm runoff. Cover crop acres are growing, and more conservation practices are being installed, but there is still room for improvement. We must all work together to plant more cover crops, restore wetlands, and install other practices on Iowa’s landscape.

Coordinating efforts with one another and electing officials who are serious about improving water quality would put us in much better shape. Creative solutions such as a tax credits for conservation, funding the Natural Resource and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund, or investing in watershed management authorities are needed if real progress is to be made.

# FARM BILL EXPIRES ON SEPT. 30, WHAT'S NEXT?

BY ANNA JOHNSON, ANNAJ@CFRA.ORG

**T**he 2014 farm bill expires on Sept. 30, 2018. What happens if Congress does not pass a new farm bill in time?

Congress can either vote to extend the 2014 farm bill, or they can allow the farm bill to lapse.

In 2013, Congress passed an extension. It was not ideal. Members failed to include any funding for the Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Program, the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program, and other small but mighty programs in the extension. These programs closed their doors until the 2014 farm bill was passed.



Congress can extend the 2014 farm bill or let it lapse. | Photo by Rhea Landholm

But, in 2018, if Congress does not extend the farm bill, even more programs close down. The Conservation Stewardship Program and other conservation programs would shutter until Congress votes

to refund them.

With an expired farm bill, the responsible path for Congress is to pass an extension and continue valuable programs.

The irresponsible path is for Congress to do nothing, causing rural America to miss out on countless opportunities.

When this reaches your mailboxes, it will be time to call your representatives: either to demand they step up and pass a farm bill or an extension, or thank them for doing their duty to rural America.

Rural America needs to know that Congress has their back. Allowing programs you have fought for to come to a halt sends the opposite message.

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## SMALL BUSINESSES BAND TOGETHER TO SUPPORT AT-RISK FARM BILL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

BY CORA FOX, CORAF@CFRA.ORG

**T**he Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Program, an important program in the farm bill, is at risk. Alongside small businesses across the country, we're asking Congress to support and restore funding of the program in the final farm bill.

The Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Program offers access to loan capital through grants to organizations that provide training, technical assistance, or small loans to rural businesses nationwide. Since its creation in 2008, this funding has helped more than

2,100 small businesses in nearly every state create jobs and generate economic returns for their local communities.

According to the U.S. Small Business Administration, small businesses across the country employed nearly 56.8 million individuals in 2013. That same year, businesses that employed five to nine individuals created a surge of 84,020 additional jobs. U.S.'s small businesses are a driving force in the local economy, and it is important that programs supporting small businesses remain funded.

On Sept. 30, funding for small businesses through the program will expire if lawmakers do not take action. Neither the House or Senate versions of the 2018 farm bill have provided mandatory funding for the program, meaning the program will cease to function as a resource for small businesses.

A modest investment in this program pays dividends for years to come on the main streets of small town USA. Now is the time to let Congress know small business programs, like the Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Program, are vital to our rural communities.



At Wayne Community Schools, in Wayne, Nebraska, cafeteria workers make all of their bread from scratch. The school celebrates “Nebraska Thursdays” offering local food on the first Thursday of every month. | Photo by Kylie Kai

## INITIATIVE PLACES LOCAL FOOD ON SCHOOL LUNCH TRAYS

BY SANDRA RENNER, SANDRAR@CFRA.ORG

**E**ngaged communities and connections with farmers are helping make school lunches even better in rural communities. Our kids are reaping the benefits and heading back to school with local foods on their plates through a new initiative from the Center for Rural Affairs and Nebraska Department of Education-Nutrition Services.

“Nebraska Thursdays” rolls out statewide in the 2018-19 school year. The initiative urges participating schools to serve a locally-sourced meal in their cafeterias on the first Thursday of each month. Sourcing local products encourages fresh and healthy meals in the school cafeteria; educates students about agriculture; and boosts the area’s economy.

The project began with five very different school districts piloting the program in the 2017-18 school year. Lunchroom staff in these schools helped devel-

### NEBRASKA THURSDAYS PILOT SCHOOLS

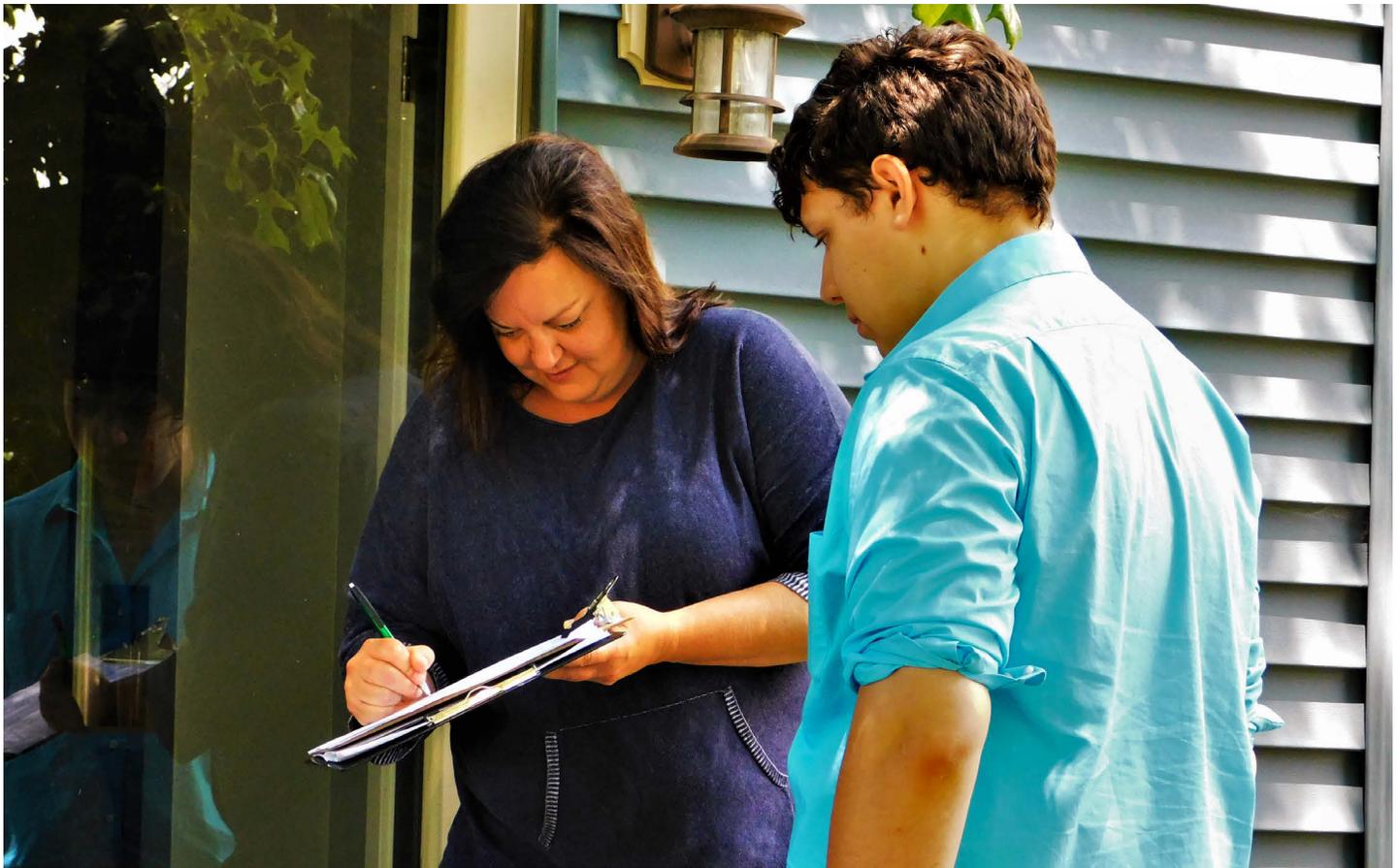
- Wayne Community Schools purchases melons from an area farmer and bakes all of their bread from scratch.
- Overton Public Schools started its local food program by approaching a local farmer.
- In Litchfield, a local fertilizer company built and managed a greenhouse for vegetable production to supply the school. The school also began serving local pork and beef to their students.
- Thayer Central works together with their local cattlemen’s association to bring local beef to lunch trays.
- In Omaha, the state’s largest school district, officials work directly with farmers and distributors.

op menus and other resources, which are now available to other participating schools. Each of the pilot schools were already implementing various types of local foods into their menus. Nebraska’s approach to Farm to School is about meeting schools where they are at, and building programs one local food menu at a time.

Efforts of the pilot schools impacted 42,000 students and resulted in thousands of food

dollars staying in the state. With 95 percent of Nebraska’s annual food dollars typically going out of state, one small change makes a difference.

October is National Farm to School Month, so now is the time to connect with local schools and learn about their plans to promote healthy eating and locally-produced foods. You can also learn how to support a school’s events or how to sell foods to cafeterias on our website at [cfra.org/f2s](http://cfra.org/f2s).



Nebraska resident Nicole Crabtree signs a petition to get Medicaid expansion onto the ballot. Corbin Delgado, Center for Rural Affairs policy assistant, helped collect the 105,000 signatures necessary for the ballot initiative. | Photo by Cody Smith

# RURAL VOTERS HELP CARRY MEDICAID EXPANSION TO THE BALLOT

BY JORDAN RASMUSSEN, [JORDANR@CFRA.ORG](mailto:JORDANR@CFRA.ORG)

Nebraska is set to be the fourth state in the nation where Medicaid expansion will appear on the November ballot. This comes following months of signature collection and validation, and the dismissal of a lawsuit against the initiative. The state joins Idaho, Utah, and Montana (where expansion will sunset) in allowing voters to decide on the future of health care coverage access for thousands of their neighbors. If passed in all four states, an estimated half-million low income residents would gain coverage.

Initiative 427, as it will appear on the ballot in Nebraska, would extend health care coverage to nearly 90,000 hard-working residents, who earn less than \$17,000 annually. This means that they earn too little to qualify for coverage from the insurance marketplace and too much to be eligible for Medicaid. In these same rural counties, access to health care coverage through an employer is at its least and expansion could have a profound impact in helping keep rural hospitals and clinics open.

Center for Rural Affairs staff, board members, and volunteers played a significant role in the collection of signatures necessary for the ballot initiative, assisting with the qualification of four counties. All told, nearly 105,000 valid signatures were collected and at least 5 percent of registered voters in 47 of Nebraska's 93 counties signed the petition. A simple majority vote in November will enact Medicaid expansion into law in Nebraska, joining the 33 other states that have done so already.

## STAFF SPOTLIGHT

## LINDA CONNECTS WITH HER RURAL ROOTS

BY LIZ DAEHNKE, COMMUNICATIONS CONSULTANT

Chief administrative officer for the Center for Rural Affairs, Linda Butkus is no stranger to rural life.

Though she grew up in the city, she's spent many years taking hunting trips to Knox County, Nebraska, where her family owned a one-room schoolhouse. Her family also goes on camping trips in Wyoming, Montana, Colorado, and South Dakota. Linda says the rural lifestyle has always held a special place in her heart.

"I have always felt that rural America is the fabric and backbone for all that we are, no matter where you live," she said. "Rural America is where we all find our roots, and we should not forget that. There is so much beauty to be found in these areas if we all stop and see, smell, hear, and experience it."

Connecting with her rural roots drew Linda to the Center. She hopes to become acquainted with those in small communities to gain experiences that will help her grow in her work.

"I have a great love for small towns, the great outdoors, open spaces, and farmers," she said. "The scope and breadth that the Center for Rural Affairs reaches has impact in all of these areas, and very much interests me."

In her role, Linda contributes in many ways, including assisting



Linda Butkus, our Chief Administrative Officer, stepped into a newly-created position this summer. | Photo by Kylie Kai

with strategic planning; maintaining the Center's operating manual and employee handbook; addressing human resources issues; managing grant writing activities; and coordinating organization-wide events.

"My goal is to use my skills and talents to be a support to all staff in their work, and to learn from them at the same time," she said. "I hope to leave my imprint on the Center for future leaders, providing them with a path to continue moving the organization forward."

Though she faces a long list of responsibilities, and has ambitious goals for herself, Linda comes to the Center well-prepared, with 32

years of experience in the nonprofit world.

"With a growing staff and growing budget, I am really excited for the capacity that adding a chief administrative officer to the team will bring," said Brian Depew, executive director of the Center for Rural Affairs. "Linda brings seasoned expertise in operations, program, and executive leadership to the Center. This investment in our backbone capacity is ultimately an investment in all of the work we do on the ground in Nebraska and across the nation."

Linda says she's excited to get in touch with the people of rural America, and see where her new role takes her.

"I have so much to gain by working for the Center," she said. "This work offers an opportunity for me to grow and be enriched by not only great people, but great places in our rural communities. I look forward to building relationships, learning about new programs, and seeing impactful work in action."

Linda and her husband live on seven acres outside of Blair, Nebraska, and love their space outside the city.

She can be reached at the Center's main office in Lyons at 402.687.2100 ext. 1013 or [lindab@cfra.org](mailto:lindab@cfra.org).

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## STRATEGIC PLAN, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

includes a diverse clientele and addresses inequality, equity, and diversity in our communities.

**(6) Strengthening our internal infrastructure.** The success of our work depends on a strong

and well-resourced organization, an engaged staff and board, and a strong base of supporters.

With the board's vote, we commit ourselves to this plan. While the new plan provides high-level

direction for the Center, how we achieve each goal will be developed and reviewed annually.

Do you have input and ideas? Please get in touch. I'd love to hear from you.



# CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

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## Conservation for the next generation

Inside: Brothers focus on soil and water quality

FROM THE DESK OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

# STRATEGIC PLAN GUIDES OUR WORK

BY BRIAN DEPEW, BRIAND@CFRA.ORG

**A**t their most recent meeting, the Board of Directors of the Center for Rural Affairs adopted a new five-year strategic plan.

Before adopting the new plan, the board reviewed Center accomplishments and changes over the last 15 years. The new strategic plan builds on past wins, leverages the growing reach of the Center, and provides guidance for the next five years.

Key elements of the plan are:

**(1) Continue to serve as a national rural leader.** The Center has a track record of producing original, nonpartisan and rigorous research. This work is grounded by our staff and board who hail from and have a deep understand-

ing of the places and people we serve. In the next five years, we seek to continue this tradition, while expanding our reach and impact geographically.

**(2) Expand and deepen our engagement with you.** Central to the makeup of the Center is our relationship with grassroots community leaders across the country. In the coming years, we will find new ways to engage with each of you to champion change in your communities, in the media, and with policymakers.

**(3) Protect natural resources.** From water quality to climate change, our work to steward natural resources for the next generation has never been more critical. In the next five years, we will work

with you to protect and advance policy as well as take farm- and community-level action to protect natural resources.

**(4) Create opportunity through rural entrepreneurship.** Our commitment to ownership and opportunity drive our investment in rural small business. In the next five years, we seek to expand the number of rural entrepreneurs we are able to assist with credit, support, and coaching services.

**(5) Apply a social justice framework.** Since our founding 45 years ago, the Center's approach has been rooted in fairness. In the coming years, we seek to ensure that our work is responsive to and

—SEE STRATEGIC PLAN ON PAGE 7