



# CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

YOUR RURAL NEWS FOR MORE THAN 45 YEARS | LYONS, NEBRASKA | POPULATION 851 | JANUARY AND FEBRUARY 2021

## INVESTMENT IN CLEAN ENERGY PAYING OFF FOR NEBRASKA COMMUNITY



Renewable energy is on the rise in northeast Nebraska with wind energy boosting the economy. Norfolk Mayor Josh Moenning (center) is now leading an effort to install an 8.5 megawatt community solar project to go online by the end of 2021. | Photo submitted

BY LU NELSEN, LUCASN@CFRA.ORG

As the industry continues to grow, many rural communities across the U.S. have reaped the benefits of clean energy development. Among the hotbeds is the Norfolk, Nebraska, area, which is in the midst of pursuing a community solar project. Mayor Josh Moenning said the region has already benefited greatly.

“Hundreds of wind energy-related construction workers are staying in the area and contributing to our economy, and our sales tax receipts have hit record highs,” Josh said. “Those workers during the construction phase stay in hotels, eat at restaurants, shop at stores.”

Josh found the development has spurred additional opportunities.

—SEE **CLEAN ENERGY** ON PAGE 3

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## WHAT THE 2020 ELECTION MEANS FOR THE NEXT FARM BILL

BY ANNA JOHNSON, ANNAJ@CFRA.ORG

With the dust settling from the 2020 election, questions about how the results will impact farm policy and the next farm bill have surfaced.

One of the biggest changes is that formal leadership on agricultural policy in Congress is shift-

ing. For the first time in decades, three of the four Congressional seats of leadership—the two heads of the House and Senate agriculture committees—are changing.

In the House of Representatives, Chairman Collin Peterson (D-MN) lost his reelection bid, and ranking

—SEE **FARM BILL** ON PAGE 2

# EDITOR'S NOTE

BY RHEA LANDHOLM, RHEAL@CFRA.ORG

**H**ope you're hanging in there. In this edition of our newsletter, we are looking forward to starting 2021 off on the right foot.

In this issue, we chose stories to highlight our core value of "Citizen INVOLVEMENT and action to shape the future." You are doing quite a bit to shape the future of our rural communities and we share a couple of opportunities to get involved even further.

For starters, the 2020 election is over and with the retirement and unsuccessful reelection bids of lawmakers, members of the House and Senate agricultural



committees will be different heading into the 2023 farm bill. We give a preview into what that may look like.

We highlight one mayor of a

rural community who has gotten involved with a new solar project and is working with other leaders to ensure its success.

We haven't forgotten about 2020, and the leadership skills we need to accept differences within our communities. Early this year, the Center will offer Civity trainings for those who are interested.

And, finally, our friends in Nebraska will be excited to see the 2021 legislative priorities of the Nebraska Food Council. For those of you in other states, these are some items that you can take to your own food councils or talk with your lawmakers about.

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## FARM BILL, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

member Mike Conaway (R-TX) did not seek reelection. Their replacements are not finalized, but their Minnesota and Texas perspectives will not be replaced.

In the Senate, Sen. Pat Roberts (R-KS) also did not seek reelection, and his chairmanship is likely to pass to Sen. John Boozman (R-AR). His Democratic counterpart, Sen. Debbie Stabenow (MI), is the only member of the current Congressional agricultural leadership who remains.

The changes mean there will be a shift away from a strong Midwest commodity and livestock perspective, particularly as Sen. Roberts and Rep. Peterson step down. However, Nebraska, Iowa, and neighboring states currently have healthy representation on both the Senate and House agriculture committees, and they will surely

work to shape upcoming farm bill proposals.

In short, work is still needed to ensure the new leadership and all Congressional agriculture committee members understand the challenges and policy needs of small family farms in the 2023 farm bill.

The Biden administration will also have several immediate issues to tackle in 2021, which will have implications for the next farm bill.

One of these will be how to move forward with the precedent set by the Trump administration of using Commodity Credit Corporation funds to make ad hoc payments to farmers, which was done as part of the Market Facilitation Program in 2018 and 2019, and the two rounds of Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP) in 2020. Headlines that 36 percent of 2020 farm income is coming

from government payments are turning heads in Washington, and most farmers are not happy about increased reliance on government payments to handle cash flow challenges.

In addition, with the exception of the most recent CFAP 2 payments, smaller and more diversified farmers were generally not eligible for the ad hoc payment programs. The flow of payments has unfortunately served to widen the split between large and small operations.

With every election and change in federal leadership, there are new opportunities for lifting up and advancing agricultural policy to support farmers and rural communities. What are you most concerned about? Let us know, at [annaj@cfra.org](mailto:annaj@cfra.org).

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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).

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The community solar project in Norfolk, Nebraska, will be the first of its kind in terms of scale and will be tied to battery storage. This 1.55 megawatt community solar project went online in Fremont, Nebraska, in 2018, selling out in six weeks, and prompting the city to build a second system. | Photo by Rhea Landholm

## CLEAN ENERGY, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

“New tax revenue created by projects can also provide a tremendous boost to local governments in need of funds for infrastructure and school improvements,” he said.

The mayor indicated additional revenue can have the effect of alleviating the tax burden on local property owners.

Additionally, Josh noted that Northeast Community College in Norfolk has become a pipeline for employment opportunities at these sites, providing a pathway for students to stay in the area.

“Previously, these students would have to go to other states like Iowa, but now they can stay closer to home,” he said.

As renewable energy development was on the rise in the Norfolk area, city officials started having conversations about directly investing in clean energy to meet the needs of residents.

“Knowing that there were citizens interested in using renewable energy was one consideration,” Josh said.

Another was the business and economic case.

Given the cost and competitiveness of clean energy, local renewables like a community solar

“UTILIZING RENEWABLES CAN BENEFIT ANYONE, ANYWHERE. CITIES AND COUNTIES SHOULDN'T BE AFRAID TO LOOK AT THE VARYING OPTIONS THEY HAVE TO PROVIDE AFFORDABLE, CLEAN ENERGY TO CITIZENS.” —JOSH MOENNING, MAYOR OF NORFOLK, NEBRASKA

project offer cities the opportunity to provide local and affordable energy, which may also assist in the recruitment of new businesses to an area.

The cost to install solar nationwide has fallen more than 70 percent in the last decade, with costs hitting an all-time low by the end of 2019. In Nebraska, the cost to install solar has fallen by 36 percent in the last five years alone. According to the Solar Energy Industries Association, this trend of declining costs has been ongoing for the last decade.

Those factors led city officials to explore the possibility of a community solar project. Working with Nebraska Public Power District (NPPD), the City of Norfolk proceeded with identifying a site and determining the size of project that would fit best. Ultimately, the proposed project was set to be 8.5 megawatts (MW)—the limit for local generation allowed by the

city’s contract with NPPD—with up to 1.5 MW of storage connected to the system. The system is set to be put into service by the end of 2021.

“I’m excited that this project would be the first of its kind in terms of scale, and the fact that it would be tied to battery storage,” Josh said.

He noted the main takeaway from the experience is that it’s something any community in Nebraska could do.

“Utilizing renewables can benefit anyone, anywhere,” he said. “Cities and counties shouldn’t be afraid to look at the varying options they have to provide affordable, clean energy to citizens. We’re in a new period when Nebraska has an opportunity to be a leading energy producer in the country, and that opportunity is vastly underestimated. Cities that realize that opportunity will be ahead of the game.”

# ORGANIZING FOR FOOD POLICY: NEBRASKA FOOD COUNCIL'S 2021 PRIORITIES

BY JUSTIN CARTER, JUSTING@CFRA.ORG

Since its founding by the Center for Rural Affairs in 2017, the Nebraska Food Council has worked toward its mission to strengthen Nebraska's economy and environment while fostering food security for all Nebraskans through broad collaboration.

The council's growing membership base led to previous endorsements of a new state cottage foods law, the expansion of Double Up Food Bucks, as well as federal legislation to make local food more available in schools.

With the COVID-19 pandemic exposing more gaps in our food system, the Nebraska Food Council knows 2021 will be an even more important year. In November, council leaders gathered to determine policy priorities for the next year.

**Farm to School** continues to be a major motivator. Nebraska's Farm to School network is growing under Nebraska Food Council leadership. In late 2020, council members began discussing a farm to school interim study with state Sen. Tom Brandt, with the hope of researching and finding farm to school opportunities. As of now, that interim study is underway with the intention of yield state legislation. This legislation will be the first the Nebraska Food Council has assisted in forming.

The pandemic brought to light opportunities for the **small meat processing industry**. With heavy volumes of livestock being pushed to our local butcher shops, processors need resources to expand and meet inspection requirements. In October, the Nebraska Food Council endorsed the federal Strengthening Local Process-



Katie Jantzen, operator of West End Farm near Plymouth, Nebraska, is a member of the Nebraska Food Council. In 2019, she took part in the council's first legislation efforts by testifying for the cottage foods bill, which was passed into law. | Photo submitted

ing Act introduced by Rep. Jeff Fortenberry. We hope to see similar legislation at the state level.

In early 2020, members gathered at the state capitol to endorse legislation to expand **Double Up Food Bucks**. The council looks forward to continuing this push and working directly with the program at University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension.

Nebraska Food Council members recognize the inequity present in agriculture and our food system. Beginning farmers face tremendous barriers to entry into the industry, with farmers of color

facing additional obstacles. The council views **land access** as key to this large issue. We are eager to work with partners and engage new members to listen and learn more about this issue and find solutions.

The pandemic has brought tragedy to so many and exposed weaknesses in systems we've traditionally relied on. However, it has also shown us that there is opportunity to build a more resilient and just food system. The Nebraska Food Council aims to begin this process in 2021.



# RURAL COMMUNITIES WELL-POSITIONED TO COMBINE CLEAN ENERGY, CONSERVATION

BY TERESA HOFFMAN, TERESA.H@CFRA.ORG AND RHEA LANDHOLM, RHEAL@CFRA.ORG

**W**ith states across the Midwest continuing to embrace the economic potential of renewable energy, project developers and landowners have the ability to work together to explore opportunities for investments in conservation, according to three new reports released by the Center for Rural Affairs.

The reports in the “Amplifying Clean Energy” series, authored by Cody Smith, outline steps project developers, utilities, and other stakeholders should take to plan for, install, and manage native vegetation on solar, wind energy, and transmission development sites.

Steps for selecting native seed mixes and recommendations for constructing, designing, and budgeting are also included.

In addition, policy considerations for both public officials and private parties are explored, including requiring the practice within county-level renewable energy ordinances and the adoption of statewide initiatives.

The first in the series, “Amplifying Clean Energy with Conservation Part One: Pollinator-Friendly Solar,” identifies opportunities to invest in native vegetation on solar sites.

“In addition to providing much-needed habitat for a variety of at-risk pollinators and wildlife, pollinator-friendly solar projects can cut operations and maintenance costs for project developers by three times when compared to traditional turfgrass management,” Cody said. “When solar developers adopt this commonsense practice, they’re amplifying the value of the clean energy they produce with



Wind energy, solar energy, and transmission projects all provide opportunities for pollinator-friendly habitat and other types of conservation, according to a three-part report series released late last year. Check them out at [cfra.org/publications](http://cfra.org/publications). | Photo by Cody Smith

investments in conservation while also cutting costs—ensuring the greatest possible return on investment for all stakeholders.”

The second, “Amplifying Clean Energy With Conservation Part Two: Leveraging Electric Transmission Lines for Stewardship,” explores how utilities, policymakers, and landowners can couple rights-of-way for energy infrastructure with investments in pollinator and wildlife habitat to benefit ratepayers.

“Electric transmission lines play a crucial role in any plans to expand renewable energy; fortunately, they can also double as habitat for vulnerable wildlife and pollinators, like monarch butterflies,” Cody said. “As the clean energy economy continues to expand, electric transmission lines will inevitably expand, offering up hundreds of thousands of miles for investments in natural resources conservation.”

Many electric transmission lines run through private farmland. Changes in the 2018 farm bill have allowed farmers and landowners to enroll land within these easements into farm conservation programs, like the Conservation Reserve Program. This could result

in additional payments to farmers while protecting vulnerable species of wildlife and pollinators.

The final report, “Amplifying Clean Energy With Conservation Part Three: Exploring Wind Energy and Stewardship,” looks at opportunities for coupling investments in water quality improvement and pollinator habitat on wind project sites.

“With the impacts of climate change bearing down on rural communities, working together to leverage the rapidly-expanding wind energy industry to invest in conservation helps build resiliency,” Cody said. “In an effort to transition to a clean energy economy, rural communities are uniquely positioned to host new wind projects, as well as bring together all stakeholders to ensure the greatest return on investment for their communities.”

Wind turbines often occupy limited areas of land which allows for other unrestricted uses on project sites, including both farming and conservation.

“If project developers, landowners, and public officials want to amplify the value of each of these sites, conservation could help get them to that point,” Cody said.

# CONVERSATIONS FROM THE FIELD: NEW GUIDE EXPLAINS ORGANIC CROP INSURANCE OPTIONS

BY KATE HANSEN, KATEH@CFRA.ORG

**A**cross rural America, we have eased into new norms and routines. Each of us is attending to the impacts of COVID-19 on our friends, families, and communities as we reflect on these unprecedented times.

All farmers and ranchers manage risk to sustain their operations. For many, crop insurance is an important tool in doing so. But, for organic farmers in particular, the options available to insure their crops may not always be clear.

Over the past few months, I have been diving into the details of organic crop insurance, and am proud to announce a new guide designed to answer farmers' questions on the topic.

Organic options for crop insurance have changed considerably in the past decade. For example, more than 80 certified organic crops can now be insured at organic prices. But, while federal programs have grown and improved, a sizable percentage of organic crops still go uninsured. Through conversations with dozens of organic farmers and industry experts, we found one way we could help address this was by creating educational materials.

Throughout this process, I have had the pleasure of interviewing 14 knowledgeable individuals—seven organic farmers and seven crop insurance agents. From an Iowa crop insurance agent who focuses on organic, to a veteran organic farmer in Nebraska who is also a crop adjuster, each person I spoke with had a unique insight on the topic.

I am excited to share our findings in a new downloadable guide,



This month, the Center for Rural Affairs releases a guide on organic options for crop insurance addressing questions answered by both farmers and agents, including Carmen Fernholz, above, a farmer in southwest Minnesota, and Megan Vaith, below, a crop insurance agent based in southeast South Dakota. | Photos submitted

which details helpful information about the crop insurance process, as shared by farmers and agents.

“Conversations from the Field: Crop Insurance for Organic Operations” addresses a range of questions, from “How do I find an agent?” to “How can I insure my crops at contract prices?”

Numerous valuable points are made in this resource, but the most important thing is the information gets in the hands of those who would benefit from it—and as many as possible.

If you are interested in learning more about organic insurance, getting your hands on a copy of the guide, or simply sharing your thoughts about crop insurance, please reach out to me at [kateh@cfra.org](mailto:kateh@cfra.org) or 515.215.1294. Similarly, if you know any farmers who would be interested in learning more about insuring organic crops, please send them my infor-



mation.

For most crops in the Midwest, the deadline to sign up for crop insurance is March 15. My hope is that well before this year's deadline, we can get this information in as many hands as possible, and continue the conversation about organic crop insurance.



# LEARNING ACROSS DIFFERENCES MAKE US STRONG

BY JORDAN FEYERHERM, JORDANF@CFRA.ORG

2020 was a difficult year for everyone, for a multitude of reasons. Of the many challenges that came to national attention throughout the year, perhaps the most apparent was the lack of civil discourse among those with different identities, beliefs, and political affiliations.

At the Center for Rural Affairs, we have always believed our differences make us strong, but only when we can engage with those differences civilly and with our best intentions.

While this can be a challenge, we believe it is well worth the effort, and for this reason, the Center will host free “Civility” workshops to practice intentional, genuine, and respectful conversation across difference.

Civility is the idea of purposefully engaging in relationships of respect and empathy with others who are different. This helps community leaders transform the dialogue in their towns to understand and celebrate differences—across race, class, culture, and politics.

The goal of Civility, as it grows, is to transition from a “we/they” mindset to a “we all belong” mind-



Yard signs similar to this one have been seen in rural communities across the country. | Photo by Rhea Landholm

set.

Using the Civility Method, we explore engaging in deeper conversation across difference with civility and genuine curiosity. When people have the sense that we are in this together—when they feel confident reaching out to and connecting with others—differences become springboards rather than barriers.

Civility training deepens the ability of community leaders to leverage their passions and visions in their professional and personal

lives by developing strategic relationship-building skills centered on connecting with people who are different.

- Practice reaching out to people different from themselves.
- Acknowledge and take on the risk of telling their own story.
- Create listening spaces to invite and truly hear the stories others have to share.
- Discover the power of small “wise interventions” to make everyday interactions count.

The Civility Train the Leaders Workshop prepares participants to facilitate relationship-building experiences for others, and gives participants the ability to use the Civility Method themselves.

The Center will lead the trainings. Topics include how to deepen conversations, storytelling and story-listening, putting differences on the table, and folding in conversation across difference in community gatherings.

Join us online on one, or all, of the following dates to participate: Jan. 26, Feb. 23, and March 30. Sessions will run from 10 a.m. to noon CST.

Learn more and register at [cfra.org/events](https://cfra.org/events).

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## RESILIENT FUTURE, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

integrated and highly industrialized industry model proved to be fragile.

Meatpacking workers fell ill at alarming rates. Packing plants slowed down and prices for remaining independent producers slumped.

Almost overnight, small local meat processors were overwhelmed with business. Reports of local lockers running seven days a week and booked for more than a year out were common.

We discovered that smaller businesses, closer to home, and controlled by people in our community were, in fact, more resilient than multinational corporations.

In this fragility, we see an opportunity to build a more resilient future.

This is the basis, for instance, of the federal Strengthening Local Processing Act, developed with supporters and allies, and backed by the Center. The bill would support the establishment and expansion

of small, independent meat lockers in our communities.

This is one example of how we can shift our thinking. The same is true for where we get our groceries, for the banking and financial sector, for how we protect low-income workers, and for the climate.

The pandemic highlighted the fragility and inequities of our current systems. Now, we have an opportunity to build a more resilient future. Will you join us in the hard work ahead?



# CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

145 MAIN STREET, PO BOX 136 | LYONS, NE 68038-0136  
CFRA.ORG | INFO@CFRA.ORG

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## Inside: Farm bill + 2020 election

Congressional agricultural leadership is changing

FROM THE DESK OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

# AN OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD A MORE RESILIENT FUTURE

BY BRIAN DEPEW, BRIAND@CFRA.ORG

**W**e are deep in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic. At this point, keeping track of the challenges we've faced is difficult.

Everyone knows someone who has been ill with COVID-19. Too many know someone who has died.

At the same time, there is hope on the horizon. Vaccines that appear both safe and effective are coming online.

Still, it can be difficult to see what the future holds. We stand at a crossroads, trying to make

sense of where we are, how we got here, and what comes next. At this crossroads, one thing is clear. The pandemic has exposed the fault lines of inequity more starkly than ever before.

The challenges we face have been building for a long time. The pandemic has brought clarity to what we must consider as we rebuild. We have an opportunity to build a better and more resilient future.

Now is the time to consider more localized and regional solutions, to reduce our reliance on

multinational corporations, and build communities that work for everyone.

The Center has long proposed many of these strategies. For instance, we first warned of the fragility of vertically integrated meat production in 1974, issuing the report, "Who Will Sit Up With the Corporate Sow?"

For decades, farmers and rural communities struggled with the consequences of vertical integration in the livestock sector. When the pandemic hit, the vertically