



# CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

Your rural news 50+ years | Lyons, Nebraska | Pop. 851 | July & August 2025

## Rural sociologists honored with Seventh Generation Award

By Rhea Landholm, rheal@cfra.org

**J**an and Cornelia (Neal) Flora, of Ames, Iowa, were honored by the Center for Rural Affairs this spring for their dedication to rural communities across the U.S., namely for their contributions in rural development and sustainable agriculture.

The Floras are the 2024 recipients of the Center’s Seventh Generation Award, a lifetime service award presented to individuals who have made major contributions in improving rural life and protecting our land and water.

Neal and Jan have a shared legacy as 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.

Neal and Jan’s work has influenced thousands of students, rural communities, and policy-makers. They have each authored hundreds of articles, books, and book chapters that have shaped modern conversations and understanding on diverse rural issues



Neal and Jan Flora with Center staff member, Anna Johnson. Anna is a graduate of the sustainable ag graduate program that the Floras helped build at Iowa State University. | Photo taken by Rhea Landholm at the Flora residence on March 21, 2025.

ranging from sustainable agriculture and farmer welfare to community development and social justice to feminism in Latin America and immigration policy.

*Note: Sadly, Neal passed away on April 30, a couple of weeks after this interview was conducted. The Seventh Generation Award presentation was held following Neal’s memorial service on May 18 in Ames, Iowa, where numerous family and friends uplifted Jan and family and remembered Neal.*

### Community Capitals Framework

One of Neal and Jan’s most well-known and influential contributions to rural sociology and sustainable community development is the Community Capitals Framework.

While researching on the ground in towns like Oberlin, Kansas, Jan and Neal found existing economists’ focus on land, labor, and capital lacked the social and

cultural aspects they found to be essential in discussions of sustainable community development.

They developed a system that went beyond considerations of financial capital and addressed how various systems intertwined. They looked at natural, cultural, social, physical, built, and political capitals.

“If you ignore one, you will eventually have problems in your community and probably in your business,” Neal said.

Center Executive Director Brian Depew said the framework helped shape the organization’s approach to rural community development.

“Their findings resonated with the Center’s experience and their articulation of the framework helped to drive a common understanding of how and why we go about community change work,” he said.

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# Editor's note

By Rhea Landholm, rheal@cfra.org

**Y**ou will see a change in the frequency of this newsletter in the upcoming months. We will arrive in your mailboxes quarterly beginning Oct. 1.

Don't worry, you will still see the same quality in-depth articles

that cover all areas of our work.

If you miss us, make sure you are signed up for our emailed newsletter which arrives in your inbox every other Wednesday. To sign up, visit [cfra.org/signup](http://cfra.org/signup), email [outreach@cfra.org](mailto:outreach@cfra.org), or call 402.687.1000.



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## Updated Nebraska Farm & Food Economy report is out

By Carlie Jonas, [carliej@cfra.org](mailto:carliej@cfra.org), and Kjersten Hyberger, [kjh@cfra.org](mailto:kjh@cfra.org)

**N**ebraskans spend more than \$5 billion per year buying food that is sourced from outside of the state. A report released this spring indicates this loss of economic potential is driving a growing interest in locally produced food.

This and other findings are highlighted in the “Nebraska Farm & Food Economy” report, released by the Center for Rural Affairs and Heartland Regional Food Business Center. The study was written by Ken Meter, Crossroads Resource Center.

The report provides a snapshot of the agricultural economy in Nebraska, including statistics about farm sizes, commodity production and sales, and how residents spend their money on food.

“These facts can provide a starting point for conversations about strengthening our local food systems,” said Kjersten Hyberger, local foods associate with the Center. “Despite being the fourth largest farm state in the country, only a small amount of what farmers raise feeds Nebraskans.”

Key findings include:

- Net cash income for farmers has a history of volatility, with annual farm income falling below zero nine times since 1969, most recently in 2017.
- An average annual combined total of farm subsidies equaled \$1.1 billion between 1989 to 2022.
- An average annual combined total of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program receipts equaled \$201 million per year between 1989 to 2022.
- Subsidies received by farms mostly support production of crops that do not directly feed Nebraskans while food insecurity is rising in the state.
- The number of farms and farmed land in Nebraska has steadily declined. Between 2017 and 2022, Nebraska lost nearly 2,000 farms and 1 million acres of farmland.
- U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that net farm incomes nationally have fallen 37% since 2020.
- While the average age of farmers is steadily rising, 26% are new and beginning farmers.

• Farmers sold at least \$16.6 million of food directly to households in 2022, an 84% rise from 2017 sales.

“Investment in developing and strengthening local food systems has multifaceted benefits, but has not received as much attention in the state compared to others,” Kjersten said. “If each Nebraska resident purchased \$5 of food each week directly from farms within the state, this would generate \$512 million of new farm income.”

To view the “Nebraska Farm and Food Economy” report, visit [cfra.org/Nebraska-food-farm-economy-report](http://cfra.org/Nebraska-food-farm-economy-report). The report is also available in Spanish.

The report compiles data from the U.S. Census of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, Bureau for Economic Analysis, and other publicly available data.

It is an update of the Nebraska Farm and Food Economy report commissioned in 2010 by No More Empty Pots in Omaha.

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## Paper & e-news

This newsletter is available both electronically and in print. To receive it online, visit [cfra.org/sign-up](http://cfra.org/sign-up) or email [outreach@cfra.org](mailto:outreach@cfra.org).

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Jan Flora speaks to a room full of loved ones on May 18 at a recognition ceremony for the Seventh Generation Award. | Photo by Rhea Landholm

## Rural sociologists, continued from page 1

### Rural was meant to be

Now settled in Iowa, Neal and Jan had childhoods thousands of miles apart. Jan grew up in Kansas while Neal grew up in the desert of California on a Navy base.

Jan went to Kansas State as an undergraduate, spending two years there. At the end of those two years, he traveled to Mexico for a summer program with the American Friends Service Committee which changed his views. When he returned to Kansas, he then pursued Latin American studies at the University of Kansas. In 1964, he started graduate school at Cornell University.

Meanwhile, Neal attended the University of California, Berkeley, enjoying their one rural sociology class. She, too, decided on graduate school at Cornell University.

When Neal arrived, the two met in Ithaca, New York, in the rural sociology department.

### Global careers

Their first jobs out of graduate school took the couple to Kansas State University. Both joined the sociology department, with Neal as the director of the population research laboratory and Jan as an assistant professor.

They were then recruited by the Ford Foundation as program advisors for Agricultural and Rural Development for the Andean Region,

based in Bogota, Colombia.

Next, they were again recruited, this time by Virginia Tech. Neal served as the head of the Department of Sociology while Jan was a professor in agriculture economics for five years.

In 1994, the Floras began work at Iowa State University. Neal was the director of the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development for 15 years and helped create the sustainable agriculture graduate program.

Jan served as a sociology professor and participated in the University's Extension to Communities program. He even linked teaching with extension by creating a graduate course where students would spend their spring breaks in a rural Iowa community. The goal was to learn as much as they could, then report to local leaders what they had found.

### Center's approach to rural

The Floras have been connected with the Center for Rural Affairs for more than 40 years. They started making contributions in the 1980s, after being drawn to the organization by its grassroots approach during the farm crisis.

"I think, to me, that's one of the keys to the success of the Center for Rural Affairs," Jan said. "They always relied on the knowledge of local people."

Erin Schoenberg, the Center's development manager, called the Floras in January about the award.

"We were pretty excited, and

we looked at who had gotten the award before and that made me even more excited to be among those people," Jan said. "The community development work that we've done and the sustainable agriculture work has really interdigitated. The Community Capitals Framework is a good way to explain that. Of course, the Center for Rural Affairs is all about the same things, so we're really honored to receive the award."

### Enjoying what they created

During our visit with the Floras for this story, we sat in their living room keeping an eye on the dog walkers who strolled past their picture windows. You could tell this was a daily habit. On the walls, on shelves, and even on the floor were images and keepsakes from Colombia, Peru, Haiti, Botswana, Ecuador, China, Brazil, and the U.S.—in particular, Kansas, New Mexico, and Virginia.

Both have been involved in the Farmers Union and their church, where Neal served on the social justice committee. Neal was conducting important rural research up to the time of her death. And, Jan continues to enjoy helping immigrants.

"Jan and Neal Flora are exemplary Seventh Generation Award winners," Brian said. "Through their professional and personal endeavors they have made major contributions to rural life, as well as endless engagement to create a better world. They are an inspiration to all of us."

# Solar energy putting sheep to work in Minnesota

By Cora Hoffer, corah@cfra.org

Using livestock such as goats and sheep to graze under solar arrays is quickly becoming a popular vegetation management practice at solar sites. It provides opportunities for local graziers to access land, generate income, and use livestock as a land management tool.

Based out of Northfield, Minnesota, Arlo Hark and Josie Trople started Cannon Valley Graziers (CVG) in 2018. They began with the mission of using livestock to create a tangible, positive impact on the soil health, water quality, and biodiversity of their region.

Solar grazing is a type of “agrivoltaics” or “dual-use solar” that uses the same land for both agriculture and solar energy production. According to the Innovative Solar Practices Integrated with Rural Economies and Ecosystems project, 593 agrivoltaics sites are in the U.S., with 259, or 44%, of those in Minnesota.

CVG began working in prairie and forest ecosystems to perform disturbance management. They quickly recognized an opportunity to expand their services to solar developers who were interested in implementing environmentally beneficial land practices at solar sites.

When CVG started, solar grazing was a relatively new concept. Only a small number of shepherds were grazing on solar sites, and the solar industry was hesitant to bring on livestock as part of the vegetation management strategy.

Over the past several years, CVG has watched the industry change and, with that, their business. CVG has grown from managing a flock of 20 sheep to managing over 2,200 head of sheep and goats. In 2024, they grazed just under 2,000 acres of solar projects throughout the Upper Midwest. While solar grazing makes up a majority of their work, they also



Arlo Hark and Josie Trople created Cannon Valley Graziers to use livestock, such as goats and sheep, to graze under solar arrays. This practice is a type of agrivoltaics. | Photo by Liam James

graze goats in forest ecosystems and offer sheep grazing for ecological disturbance management on public and private land in Minnesota.

“Our focus is to use the principles of targeted grazing to support native ecosystem function on these sites, promote soil health and water quality, while also meeting the vegetation management requirements of the solar industry,” said Arlo.

According to the American Solar Grazing Association, 100,000 acres of solar sites are grazed in the U.S. by more than 80,000 sheep. CVG predicts that number will double in the next two to three years, noting it as a key opportunity for the sheep industry.

By integrating targeted grazing into traditional land management, CVG produces lamb and wool while providing a helpful service. Rather than relying solely on commodity markets, graziers can be compensated for the ecological benefits they deliver: vegetation management, soil health improvement, biodiversity enhancement, and carbon sequestration.

The model also improves land access opportunities. This benefit provides additional pasture area without the purchase or rent of new land, expanding the grazing operation and granting access to a new source of forage.

CVG says that solar grazing presents the chance to shift the paradigm within the sheep industry from being primarily a product-based industry—focused on the production of lamb and wool—to a service-based industry. Solar grazing challenges graziers to think beyond extraction and instead recognize the value that livestock bring as land management tools.

“I think what’s most exciting to me about solar grazing is that it is a non-discretionary solution,” said Arlo. “It solves problems across a multitude of disciplines and exists at the nexus of many different seemingly distinct industries. What do renewable energy, ranching, and ecology all have in common? Ask a solar grazer and you will find out.”



Heather Blackmore, owner of Corner Hardware and More Orchard Fudge & Candy Shop, in Orchard, Nebraska, sells a variety of items catering to her rural community. Fudge is the main draw, alongside Nebraska-made items, home decor, and an expanded hardware selection to accommodate the needs of farmers. | Photo by Kylie Kai

## Business owner creates legacy while honoring history

By Liz Stewart

**B**uilt in 1910, a 100-year-old building in Orchard, Nebraska, has housed a cafe, a liquor store, a Gambles retail store, and many things in between. Most of its life, it's been a general/hardware store of some kind

With some help from friends, the previous owners, and the Center for Rural Affairs, Heather Blackmore opened Corner Hardware and More Orchard Fudge & Candy Shop in October 2022.

### Becoming a first-time business owner

When Heather found herself unemployed, she approached the owners of a local hardware store to ask if they would be interested in selling. A few years before, the couple had stepped in to buy the store to keep it open after the earlier owner of 50 years experienced health problems. They initially told Heather no, but a few weeks later they changed their minds.

Heather reached out to Lori Schrader, senior loan specialist with the Center, who was happy to offer her expertise and guidance.

"Working with Heather was great; her mind is always going a mile a minute to come up with new ideas," Lori said. "She wanted to

make sure she was doing everything correctly and was always asking questions and looking for suggestions. Heather knew very little about running a hardware store but worked closely with the previous owners to help educate herself."

With Lori's assistance, Heather applied for and received a loan through the Center to cover the cost of the business, minus a down payment.

"The loan was everything I needed to be able to pursue this purchase, which included the building, inventory, all of it," Heather said. "Being able to get the funds needed all in one place was so helpful. The continued service after the loan was done has been a huge help; the Center's guidance and support is so appreciated."

### Making the store stand out

Heather is creating her own legacy. With an unofficial motto of "if we don't have it, you don't need it," she goes above and beyond to provide for her customers and the community.

"You can find everything you need and didn't know you needed," she said. "And if we don't have it, we'll order it for you."

Beyond exceptional customer service, Heather says the unique variety of items available to her customers makes the store stand out.

"When a person can shop locally for hand tools, home maintenance and garden items, birthday gifts, sweet treats, office supplies, or home decor, you know you're in a special store," Heather said.

She also makes a point to showcase and sell items from local makers and artisans, including candles, pottery, wooden signs, and more.

### Continued support

Looking back to the beginning of her journey, Heather says the loan process wasn't easy, but having resources and guidance from the Center made it much simpler.

"Working with Lori and the others at the Center has been wonderful; everyone is so nice," she said. "Knowing you have a whole support team behind you that wants to see you succeed just as much as you want to means so much. Buying a business is scary, especially when it's just been me in this endeavor. They helped me feel like I wasn't alone."



Katie Jantzen, owner of West End Farm near Plymouth, Nebraska, was selling vegetables and fruits to a local school through the Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The program was cancelled this spring. | Photo submitted

## Local farms, local losses: USDA cuts are hurting communities

By Val Ankeny, [valeriea@cfra.org](mailto:valeriea@cfra.org)

The recent termination of the Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) and Local Food for Schools (LFS) Cooperative Agreement Programs by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has significantly impacted local farmers, schools, and food banks. These programs were established to connect local producers with educational and charitable food institutions, enhancing access to fresh, locally sourced food.

The programs have been part of the USDA's effort to support regional food systems and build resilience in local economies. By providing funds to schools and nonprofits to make purchases from local farms, the programs created a win-win for producers and communities: healthy, fresh food for students and families, and reliable markets for small and mid-sized farms.

For Katie Jantzen, owner of West End Farm near Plymouth, Nebraska, the cancellation of the LFS program was surprising. She had been selling vegetables to the school she once attended.

Katie's diversified farm grows more than 50 types of vegetables and fruits and sells mainly through Community Supported

Agriculture (CSA) and local farmers markets. The LFS Program, though not a major source of income for her operation, represented an important connection to the community.

"The funding went directly to schools, allowing them to buy more from me and other local producers," said Katie. "It worked."

That feeling of uncertainty is echoed across the state. In Omaha, City Sprouts scaled up production this year to meet new demand from the Food Bank of the Heartland—funded in part by LFPA dollars. While those sales will continue through the 2024 rollover, they're bracing for a shortfall next growing season due to the termination of 2025 LFPA funds.

More troubling, City Sprouts is also affected by the pause of the Resilient Food System Infrastructure (RFSI) and Business Builder programs, critical grants totaling \$250,000 that were intended to support infrastructure like a pack-wash station.

The sudden termination doesn't just disrupt operations. It threatens broader goals of food security, economic development, and education.

"I would have thought funding a program that supports local farms

and gets food into school would be nonpartisan," Katie said. "It's a win-win-win. Win for farmers looking for local markets. It's a win for schools looking to support the local economy and their district. It's a win for students who actually get exposed to local healthy food."

She worries about the long-term consequences of these cuts: fewer local food options in schools, fewer markets for farmers, and lost opportunities for education and economic growth.

"When you cut this kind of funding, it has a ripple effect," said Katie. "It hurts the schools, the food systems, the people in need—and the farms that provide it. Farming isn't something you can just pivot overnight."

As federal support stalls, Katie urges consumers to take action.

"This is the time to find your local farmers market," she said. "Join a CSA. Buy directly from local producers. Because without these programs, it's up to the community to keep the system alive."

She's also calling on federal legislators to recognize the real-world consequences of their decisions.

"This isn't just a line item," Katie said. "These are real farms, real people, and real communities being affected."

# Grocery store celebrates five years of community ownership

By Kelsey Willardson, [kelseyw@cfra.org](mailto:kelseyw@cfra.org)

**F**ive years ago, a community in rural Iowa came together to save a vital part of their small town: the grocery store.

With a population of approximately 900 people, Gowrie's vibrancy was threatened when the only grocery store, Jamboree, started to struggle. Its closure was imminent.

The loss of a local grocery store can devastate a small town. Residents unable to travel frequently, including the elderly, disabled, and those with limited incomes or without reliable transportation, are hit the hardest. When locals are forced to travel farther for essentials, they spend their money elsewhere instead of investing it back into their community. Furthermore, decreased access to healthy food options can negatively affect overall community health.

For Gowrie, Jamboree going out of business posed a risk to the well-being of the town. Community members took action.

Locals organized a committee to determine how to prevent the store's closure and rally the town. They raised the funds needed to purchase the store in just 10 days.

A permanent group was selected to move the venture forward, forming a limited liability corporation (LLC) and selling shares to community members. The board of directors clearly stated that investors may never see a return on their money, as this was not a money-making opportunity.

"It's hard to say what would have happened to our community, but I hate to think what the result would have been if [our store] had shut down," said Kathy Carlson, a board member. "It can be so easy to take having a local grocery store for granted."

Jamboree closed its doors in March 2020 and reopened under its new ownership as Market on



Marsha Farnham, Kathy Carlson, and Stacey Rasmussen showcase the point-of-sale system at Market on Market grocery store in Gowrie, Iowa. This community owned grocery store serves their small town of 900 people. | Photo by Cynthia Farmer

Market on April 25, 2020. While the lapse was short, the grocery store opened to a different world as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded. Navigating restrictions and shutdowns presented unique challenges. Nonetheless, the store has remained open and continues to serve the community.

Now, Market on Market faces typical small rural business difficulties, like maintaining long-term staff and coping with surprise expenses. Its building is nearly a century old, and with that comes significant maintenance expenses. Through the aid of grants and community support, the committee has replaced the roof, furnace, and point-of-sale system. However, unexpected costs still occur.

The challenges Gowrie's store has encountered are common for the rural groceries that serve as vital social hubs and points of food access for their local communities. To support vibrant small towns and the grocery stores essential to them, the Center for Rural Affairs continues to advocate for legis-

lation at the Iowa Statehouse to provide grants for grocery stores in rural communities.

Kathy and the Gowrie Grocery, LLC board have compiled a long list of future project ideas to update their grocery store and better serve their community.

"The needs are always changing and we're trying to meet those," Kathy said.

Five years after converting to its community-supported operating model, the store continues to add to the liveliness of Gowrie. With increased enthusiasm, the community has further invested in itself through the creation of new walking and bike trails and the expansion of local events. The rural town's strength lies with its citizens who seek to preserve and improve it.

"While the board has many ambitions for Market on Market, our ultimate goal is to stay open and meet the needs of the community," Kathy said.



# CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

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07/25



## Rural sociologists honored with award

Read about Neal and Jan Flora's dedication to rural communities

## How can I make a planned gift?

By Erin Schoenberg, [erins@cfra.org](mailto:erins@cfra.org)

**P**lanned gifts are an important source of funding for the Center for Rural Affairs' work. By including the Center in your giving plans, you can make a difference and establish a legacy that reflects your values and priorities even after you're gone.

The two most common types of planned giving are bequests and beneficiary designations.

With a bequest, you'll name the Center in your will or trust. You can make a specific bequest of a stated dollar amount or asset, a percentage bequest to leave us a percentage of your estate, a residential bequest to take care of others first and leave the remainder to our organization, or a contingent bequest which only takes

effect if one of your beneficiaries predeceases you. We have sample language for all these options at [cfra.org/planned-giving](http://cfra.org/planned-giving).

With a beneficiary designation, you'll designate the Center as the beneficiary—or one of the beneficiaries—of your life insurance policy or a retirement, investment, or bank account. After your death, the funds in your account or insurance policy will be distributed according to the beneficiary designation.

Both bequests and beneficiary designations are simple, straight-forward giving methods that can have monumental impact. At the same time, they can reduce future tax burdens on your family, giving you and yours priceless peace of mind.

As you get started on your legacy giving planning, I have two other suggested steps to take. First, sit down with shared decision makers and loved ones to discuss your values, ideas, and plans. Then, get with a trusted professional, such as a financial or legal advisor, to help you learn more about specific options and narrow down your preferred giving methods.

Thank you for considering the Center for Rural Affairs in your legacy giving plans. Your foresight and care will strengthen rural America far into the future.

For more information on these types of giving and more, give us a call and visit our Ways to Give page at [cfra.org/ways-to-give](http://cfra.org/ways-to-give).

You can reach me directly at 402.499.2781 and [erins@cfra.org](mailto:erins@cfra.org).