



Flood gates, berms and flood walls are visible on both sides of the Cedar River near the 16th Avenue Bridge (foreground). (Nick Rohlman/The Gazette)

The Flood

15 YEARS LATER

Beyond walls and levees, cities will keep residents safe in future floods with steps not so easily seen.

Section D

The Gazette



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\$4.00

Who owns Iowa farmland?



Helen Gunderson, of Ames, poses in a pollinator garden she established on family land she owns in Pocahontas County. (Submitted photo)

Iowa school librarians wait for guidance

New law that will ban certain materials set to begin July 1

By Grace King and Erin Murphy, The Gazette

The Iowa Library Association is cautioning school librarians to wait for guidance from the state education department before removing books from school libraries to comply with state law.

The law, Senate File 496, signed by Gov. Kim Reynolds May 26, bars from school libraries books that depict or describe sexual acts. Schools also are required to have a policy that allows someone to request removal of any classroom materials.

The law also requires schools to put their library catalog online and allow parents to review certain instructional materials, a practice many schools already have in place. The Iowa City district, for example, has had an electronic catalog — that is accessible to the public — of all school library collections “for decades,” said Kristin Pedersen, Iowa City schools spokeswoman.

Without guidance from the state, librarians are left trying to interpret the law, which is not their role, said Michelle Kruse, director for the Iowa Library Association and past president of the Iowa Association of School Librarians.

“The beautiful thing about a library is that if you find a book that doesn’t speak to you — maybe it doesn’t align with

Out-of-state investors buying up more acres, but shell companies makes it hard to track

By Erin Jordan, The Gazette

DEWITT — Fewer than half the people at a recent farm auction in Clinton County were actual bidders. The rest came for the cookies, conversation and to see who would walk away with 150 acres of Iowa dirt.

Would it be the men in suits sitting in folding chairs by the wall?

What about the old-timer in overalls?

Or would an online buyer swoop in with the highest bid?

“Folks, you don’t want to be driving past the farm and saying ‘I wish I would have

bought it’ later down the road,” said Jesse Meyer, an auctioneer for the Peoples Company. “It’ll be another 50, 60, 70 years before this farm comes back on the open market.”

The sense that Iowa’s agricultural land is both scarce and gaining in value has driven the average price

to a record-setting \$11,400 per acre last year. Now Iowa farmers are bidding not only against neighbors, but out-of-state investors including professional athletes, well-known billionaires and the Mormon Church.

The Gazette spent four

► **FARMLAND, PAGE 8A**

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Farmland/Mormon church buys in

► FROM PAGE 1A

months searching county assessor records in all 99 counties, looking at maps and talking with land agents, farmers and investor owners to get a sense of who owns Iowa farmland. Here are some of our findings:

- An investing arm of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, known to many Iowans as the Mormon Church, owns at least 22,000 acres of Iowa farmland. At the average per-acre price, that land is worth more than \$250 million.
- Lee County land prices have shot up as developers and investors compete for land around the Iowa Fertilizer Co. “All these big investment groups want to jump on the bandwagon,” one Lee County farmer said.
- A Tennessee family has bought at least 5,000 acres of land in northwest Iowa using at least 10 different names.
- Iowa is one of only 21 states in the country that prohibits foreign land ownership, but still had nearly 600,000 acres of agricultural land in 2020 owned by people from other countries.
- Some investor owners, such as Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates, make land and water conservation a priority, while others are not involved in how their land is managed.

Despite Iowa’s farming heritage, more than half of Iowa farmland is owned by someone who doesn’t farm, according to the 2022 Farmland Tenure and Ownership survey by Iowa State University.

Nearly one-quarter of Iowa farmland owners in 2022 bought the acres as a long-term investment, ISU reported. High commodity prices have pushed up average cash rents, which further improves the investment potential.

“Iowa farmland is regarded very highly among the investors because those are the assets that don’t depreciate much,” said Wendong Zhang, an assistant professor at Cornell University who, until recently, was the lead researcher of ISU’s farmland ownership survey.

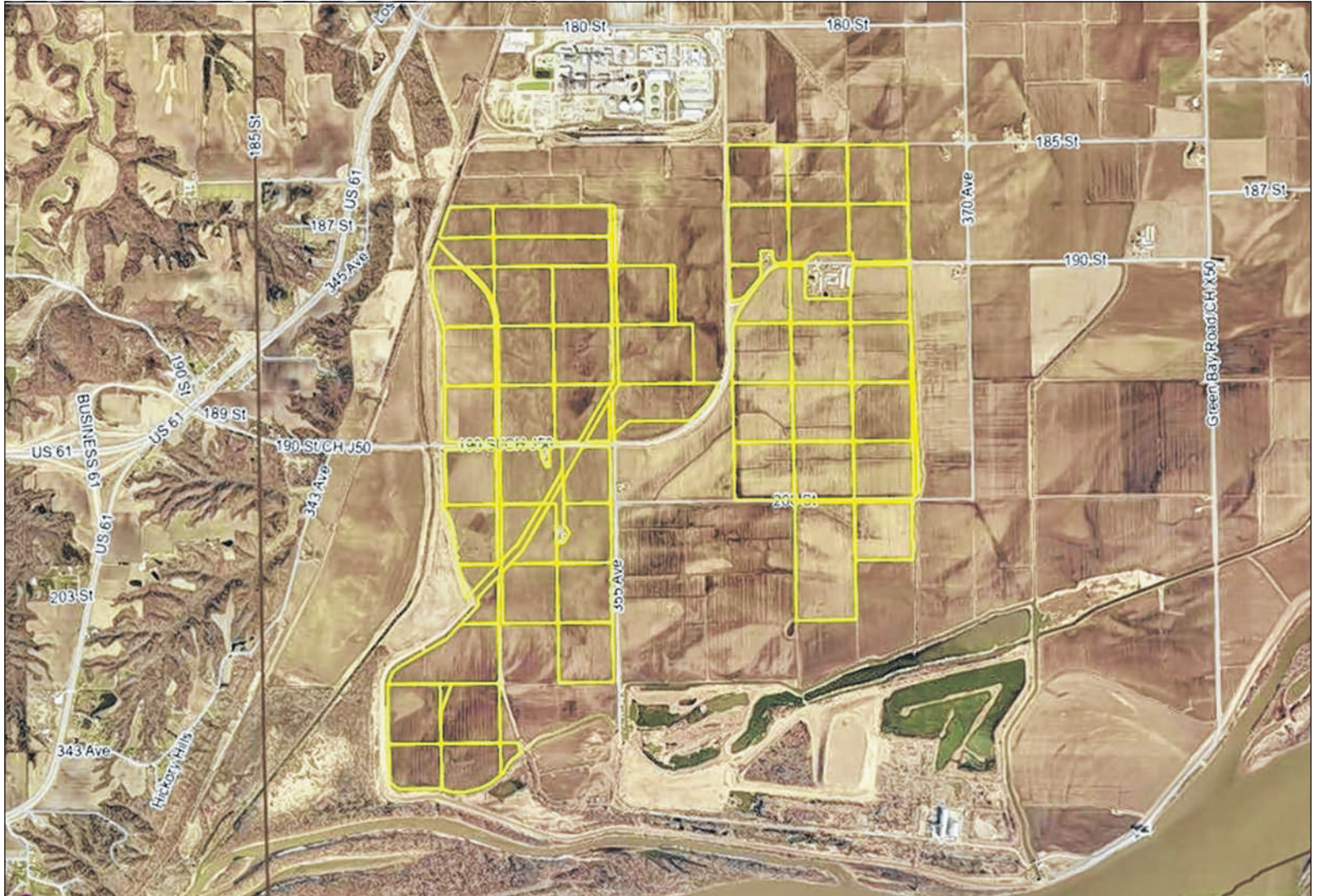
Because of these surveys, we know about Iowa landowners in general, but not by name. There’s no state database showing, for example, the top 10 largest Iowa landowners. People or companies that want to collect this information cobble together incomplete reports from county assessors, commercial websites and other sources.

“We hear about major transactions via landowners themselves, their representatives, from brokers and appraisers, and, more recently, via online county tax records,” said Eric O’Keefe, editor of The Land Report, which chronicles major land transactions and compiles an annual list of the country’s largest individual landowners.

What makes tracking land ownership even harder is some buyers don’t use their real names, instead buying under subsidiaries or shell companies. This secrecy hinders landowners from contacting neighbors and public officials struggle to make sure land isn’t being purchased illegally.

MORMON CHURCH BUYS GO BACK TO 1980S

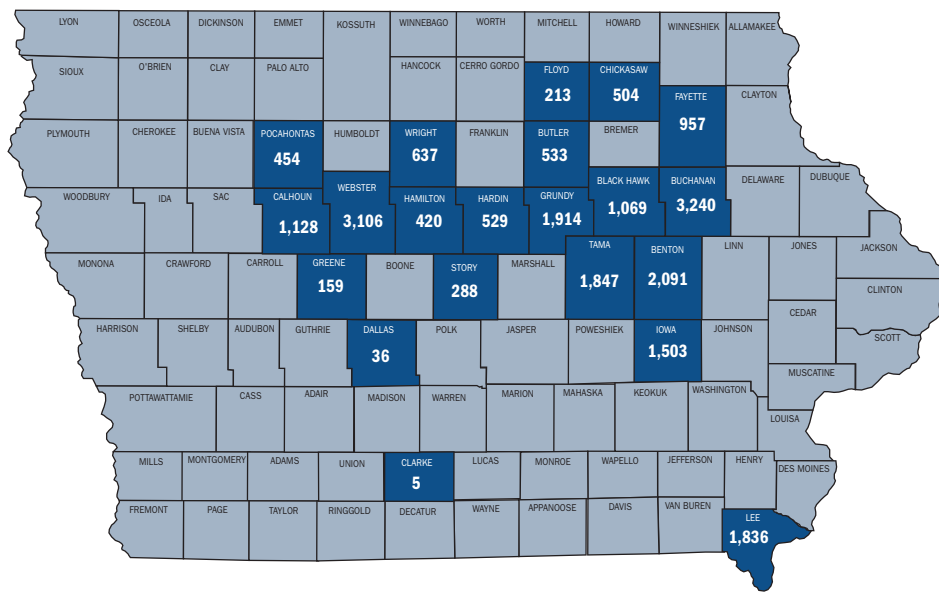
The Deseret Trust, an auxiliary of the Church



This screenshot shows parcels of Lee County land owned by the Deseret Trust. Above the yellow squares is the Iowa Fertilizer Co. (Beacon Schneider website/Lee County Assessor)

Iowa land owned by Mormon church trust

The Deseret Trust Company, the investing arm of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, owns more than 22,000 acres of agricultural land in 21 Iowa counties, making it one of the largest landowners in the state. This map shows where in Iowa the church owns land and how many acres, rounded to the nearest acre.



Source: County assessor websites Gazette map

of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, has owned Iowa farmland since at least 1982, a Gazette review shows. Since then, the trust has purchased at least 22,450 acres of Iowa farmland in 21 Iowa counties.

Buchanan County has the largest amount of land owned by the trust at 3,240 acres, followed by Webster at 3,106 and Benton at 2,091. The most recent sale tracked by The Gazette was on Feb. 15, when the trust bought about 160 acres in Tama County for \$2.1 million, an average price of more than \$13,000 per acre.

The Utah-based church owned at least 1.7 million acres of land valued at nearly \$16 billion across the United States in 2020, according to an analysis by the Truth & Transparency Foundation, a now-defunct non-profit newsroom focused on religious accountability.

This land includes church grounds, apartment buildings, shopping complexes and agricultural land, according to a 2022 article in the Salt Lake Tribune. These holdings make the church one of the nation’s top private landowners, the Tribune reports.

One reason the church is able to buy so much land is an expectation members give 10 percent of their income to the church. After paying church bills, there is significant income left

for investments, according to a former senior portfolio manager for Ensign Peak Advisors, another investment arm of the LDS church, who recently was interviewed by 60 Minutes.

The Deseret Trust declined The Gazette’s request for an interview about its agricultural land buys in Iowa, but provided a statement:

“We see farmland as a stable long-term investment,” Dale K. Bills, a spokesman for the trust, said in an email. “The land owned in Iowa is leased to and worked by local farmers. Because we want our farmland to be just as productive a hundred years from now as it is today, we encourage our tenants to employ sustainable best practices in tillage and nutrient management to maintain productivity and protect water resources.”

LEE COUNTY LAND PRICES SKYROCKET

The Deseret Trust spent \$23 million last November to buy about 1,800 acres of Lee County farmland. The church bought about 50 parcels near Wever, just south of the Iowa Fertilizer Co., a \$3 billion fertilizer plant that employs 265 people full time and is owned by multinational firm OCI NV.

Steve Menke, who farms nearby, said he and other neighbors didn’t have an option to buy the land because it

was sold without a public auction.

“You don’t get a chance,” he said.

“That farm is all big fields, a half-section, quarter section,” Menke added. “The farmers that lease it from the Mormon church come in there with two 36-row corn planters and plant it in two or three days and then they are gone. Investors want big contiguous tracts of land.”

About 1,100 of those acres sold for an average price of about \$11,800 per acre — above the state average and several thousand dollars per acre higher than the same parcels sold for in 2017.

“Have we seen a lot of large increases in the price of ag ground? Absolutely,” said Stacie Dickens, chief deputy assessor for Lee County.

Menke said he recently was offered \$40,000 an acre for 80 acres near the fertilizer plant. He doesn’t want to sell that land because it’s the family farm where he worked with his father and grandfather. But he’s considering selling another parcel to a developer who wants to build a hydrogen plant. Hydrogen is a primary ingredient in fertilizer.

Alliant Energy also is building a 150-watt solar farm north of the fertilizer plant.

PRO ATHLETES, TECH GIANTS

In January, there



Jesse Meyer auctions a tract of land during a farmland auction May 11 at the DeWitt Community Center in DeWitt. (Nick Rohlman/The Gazette)

was big news about the purchase of a relatively small Iowa farm.

Cincinnati Bengals quarterback Joe Burrow and about 20 other professional athletes bought a 104-acre farm in an undisclosed northern Iowa county. The land was purchased from a \$5 million fund for agricultural investments, according to Patricof Co., a private investment platform that facilitated the buy, Front Office Sports reported.

When The Gazette emailed Patricof to find out whether the athletes would be involved in decision making on their farm, Megan Hackworth, of public relations firm BerlinRosen, emailed back: “The athletes aren’t involved in the day-to-day operations of the farm, so unfortunately I don’t think we’d be able to provide much context on the conservation practices.”

If Patricof hadn’t announced the purchase, the public likely would never have known about it. The Gazette searched county assessor records for “Patricof” as well as a half dozen professional athlete names included in news reports, but none showed up, indicating they used an LLC or another name.

Investment firms linked to Bill and Melinda Gates own more than 552 acres of Iowa farmland, according to a 2021 profile in The Land Report. That’s just a sliver of the 242,000 acres of farmland the Gaseses or their subsidiaries own across the country, O’Keefe reported.

Cascade Investments LLC, one entity that owns the Gaseses’ land, has joined Leading Harvest, a group that wants to set a sustainability standard for American farm and ranch lands, O’Keefe reported.

TENN. INVESTORS BUY UNDER MULTIPLE NAMES

How did a Tennessee family that owns citrus farms in Florida, vineyards in California and a whole town in Arkansas come to start buying northwest Iowa farmland a few years ago?

That’s what Helen Gunderson wondered.

“Our family story has been a lot about accumulating land since the late 1800s,” Gunderson, 78, of Ames, told The Gazette.

Gunderson and her five siblings each inherited farmland in Pocahontas County. She rents land to an organic farmer who limits tilling to reduce topsoil loss and fertilizer runoff. Gunderson, a retired teacher and sports administrator, heard last year about the Lawrence Group buying land in Pocahontas County.

Gaylon Lawrence Jr.’s holdings in 2016 included “more than 165,000 acres of farmland in Illinois, Missouri, Arkansas and Mississippi; five banks; the world’s largest privately owned air conditioning distributor, USAir Conditioning Distributor; and a major citrus operation in Florida,” according to the New York Times.

Lawrence in 2010 bought one of the largest agricultural tracts in the delta cotton country of Arkansas, the Times reported. Along with that land came the town of Wilson, population 900 in 2016. The Lawrence Group has turned the town into a destination of Tudor-style homes, farm-to-table dining and unique businesses, such as White’s Mercantile, owned by Holly Williams, Hank Williams’s granddaughter.

Lawrence-linked LLCs have purchased in recent

► FARMLAND, PAGE 9A



Farmland is seen May 11 in Clinton County. The nearest fields make up some of the land sold at auction in DeWitt earlier the same day. (Nick Rohlman photos/The Gazette)

Farmland/Ownership can be murky

► FROM PAGE 8A

years at least 5,000 agricultural acres in eight Iowa counties, according to The Gazette's review of Gunderson's records.

Gunderson found at least 10 entities, most containing the word "Delta," that had the same address in Wilson. That address, 1 Park Ave., is owned by Wilson City Partners, whose parent company is the Lawrence Group, according to an online recruitment profile for a new CEO.

The Gazette called the Lawrence Group last month and asked whether the family had any plans for Iowa similar to what they did in Wilson.

"It's kind of just been looked at more of a farmland investment at the moment," a representative said. He said he would leave a message for the Lawrences, who work in the Wilson office every week, but The Gazette did not get a return call.

Like some other out-of-state investors, the Lawrence Group has an Iowa tie. Lawrence's father, Gaylon Lawrence Sr., graduated from Iowa State University in 1955 with a degree in agriculture and economics, according to his 2012 obituary.

'A NATIONAL SECURITY ISSUE'

Iowa law prohibits foreign people, businesses or governments from acquiring agricultural land. But for the same reasons it's hard to track land buys by Bill Gates or Joe Burrow, foreign land ownership also can go under the radar.

Iowa had about 600,000 acres of agricultural land under foreign ownership in 2020, according to an analysis performed for the Iowa Farm Bureau. Some or all of these acres could be owned legally under exemptions to the law that include:

- Ownership before 1980
- Used for agricultural research
- Inherited or acquired through legal proceeding, will be divested within two years

Land found to be owned by non-residents can be reclaimed by the state. The Secretary of State's Office did not reply to Gazette requests to know whether this had happened in recent years.

More than half of U.S. states have no law prohibiting foreign land ownership and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, charged with documenting foreign ownership, said U.S. Rep. Ashley Hinson, a Republican from Marion.



Bob Guy and Doug Bear await an answer from a phone bidder during a farmland auction on May 11 at the DeWitt Community Center in DeWitt.



"We need to be doing everything we can to prevent our adversaries, like the CCP (Chinese Communist Party), from buying another acre of American farm land. This is a national security issue."

U.S. Rep Ashley Hinson, R-Iowa

"We learned, for instance the USDA wasn't assessing penalties for foreign entities that were buying ag land," Hinson told The Gazette. "We need to be doing everything we can to prevent our adversaries, like the CCP (Chinese Communist Party), from buy-

ing another acre of American farm land. This is a national security issue."

Hinson has supported three bills to prevent some countries from buying any U.S. land and to strengthen oversight of foreign land purchases overall. She also thinks more states



ABOVE: People's Company Realtor Alan McNeil (left) talks with Richard Skiff (right) and Eric Skiff of Clinton County following a farmland auction May 11 in DeWitt. The Skiffs, who are father and son, purchased both tracts of land sold at the auction.

LEFT: Iowa Republican U.S. Rep. Ashley Hinson, of Marion, looks on during an event May 13 at the Kirkwood Hotel in Cedar Rapids. Hinson has supported three bills that would prevent some countries from buying any U.S. land and strengthen oversight of foreign land purchases.

should adopt laws like Iowa's.

HOME ON THE RANGE

When the final gavel fell at the land auction in DeWitt, the winning bidders weren't out-of-state investors. They were a local father and son, who accepted congratulatory handshakes from their neighbors.

Richard Skiff, 70, of rural

Clinton County, bought the first tract at \$8,800 an acre and his son, Eric Skiff, 45, bought the second at \$7,650 an acre.

"We've been looking and everything else was too high," Richard Skiff said. He's glad a local got the land. "We know how to farm it."

Comments: (319) 339-3157; erin.jordan@thegazette.com



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Prosecutors worry bill usurps local decisions

By Erin Murphy and Tom Barton, Gazette Des Moines Bureau

DES MOINES — The Iowa attorney general's authority to take action in criminal proceedings — regardless of the county attorney's decision — would be enshrined in state law under a provision in Gov. Kim Reynolds' sweeping proposal to reorganize state government.

While the proposed language restates what already exists in Iowa law, some county attorneys are concerned it could open the door to the state attorney general being able to overrule their local decisions and actions.

"It is infringing on our prosecutorial discretion," said Tina Meth-Farrington, the Calhoun County attorney and president of the board of directors of the Iowa County Attorneys Association, describing the process by which county attorneys use their professional judgment to preserve limited government resources necessary to achieve just and fair

► PROSECUTORS, PAGE 7A

Bill takes away local control of parole boards

Critics say it's a step toward privatizing Correctional Services

By Erin Jordan, The Gazette

Taking away local control from boards that oversee probation and parole in Iowa is the first step toward privatizing the system, warn Correctional Services board members from around the state.

More than 80 people, including sheriffs, police chiefs and county supervisors, joined a virtual meeting last week with Iowa Department of Corrections Director Beth Skinner with their concerns over a massive state government overhaul proposed by Gov. Kim Reynolds she says would save tens of millions.

Dozens of people spoke out against Senate Study Bill 1123,

► PAROLE, PAGE 7A

Ag emissions grow unchecked in many states

By Erin Jordan, The Gazette, and Mónica Cordero, Investigate Midwest/Report for America

At Eastern Iowa's Amana Farms, some 2,500 Angus cattle stand at a rail waiting for breakfast. A truck drives slowly down the line, dumping a mix of hay, corn and distillers grains into the troughs.

Manure drops through the slatted floor into a pit that is scraped every hour, shifting manure to a nearby anaerobic digester. The digester, which acts like a 1.6 million-gallon bovine stomach, processes the manure and other food waste into methane, which is captured and turned into electricity.

"We essentially can power all the homes in the colonies and all the small businesses," said Amana Farms General Manager John McGrath about the Amana Colonies, a set of small towns that are a popular tourist destination.

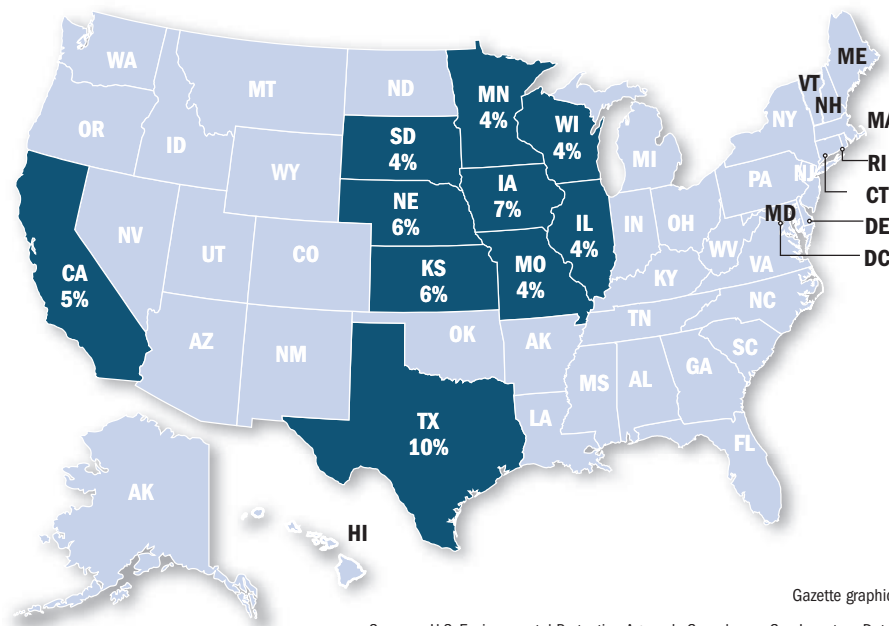
Digesters are one solution to the big challenge of reducing greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture, which make up more than 10 percent of total greenhouse gas emissions in the U.S. as of 2020, the most recent year available.

Agriculture is a major source of planet-warming greenhouse gases, and farming-intensive states like Iowa

► EMISSIONS, PAGE 6A

Top 10 states for agricultural greenhouse gas emissions

Iowa's agriculture industry emits more greenhouse gases than any other Midwest state and any state in the country besides Texas in the agricultural sector. Here is how much each state contributed in 2020.



Gazette graphic

Sources: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Greenhouse Gas Inventory Data



TOP: Steam rises Feb. 1 from treated effluent before being pumped out of an anaerobic digester at the Amana Farms feedlot in Amana. Animal waste from the cattle operation is fed into its 1.6 million gallon anaerobic digester to produce methane, which powers generators that turn it into electricity. LEFT: Cattle stand near a feeding trough Feb. 1 at the Amana Farms feedlot. (Jim Slosiarek photos/The Gazette)

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2023 PHASE 1

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2024 PHASE 2

Adding a Third Vascular and Interventional Radiology (IR) Lab and dedicated heart prep/recovery areas: For imaging and biopsies, repair of aneurysms (ballooning vessels), and revascularization (restoring blood flow to blocked vessels).

2024 PHASE 3

Focusing on Structural Heart and adding a large hybrid operating room (OR) near the Heart and Vascular ORs and ICU: For repairing defects and disorders of the heart structure, as well as catheter-based valve repair and replacement.

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Emissions/No reduction goals in Iowa

► FROM PAGE 1A

— with 13 million acres of corn and seven hogs per person — are oversized contributors, federal data show. Iowa ranks No. 2, behind Texas, for greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture.

While nationwide emissions from sectors like energy production have fallen in recent decades, those from agriculture — especially livestock and corn — have grown.

Half the states in the country have no greenhouse gas reduction goals, which makes it hard to see how the United States is going to reach its economywide target of a 50 percent reduction below 2005 emissions levels by 2030.

“It’s purely a political decision, right?” said Steven Hall, an associate professor in the Department of Ecology, Evolution and Organismal Biology at Iowa State University. “If there’s no political will to advocate for such goals, it’s not going to happen absent market-based approaches or voluntary efforts.”

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has been tracking greenhouse gas emissions since 1990. Over that time, the energy and industrial sectors have slashed their combined emissions by nearly 35 percent, according to an analysis by The Gazette and Investigate Midwest of the EPA’s Greenhouse Gas Inventory Data Explorer.

The agriculture and transportation sectors each went up more than 6 percent between 1990 and 2020, but transportation is poised to plummet as more electric cars hit the roads. Modern agriculture, heavily dependent on fossil fuels and nitrogen fertilizer, doesn’t have a solution on the horizon.

CORN AND MORE CORN

U.S. corn growers have been planting more than 90 million acres a year since 2018, far more than the 60 million acres in the early 1980s, the U.S. Department of Agriculture reported. Nearly half that corn nationwide is used to make ethanol.

The top five greenhouse gas emitters from crop production, according to the EPA’s data since 1990, are, in order, Texas, Iowa, Kansas, Illinois and Nebraska. Producing ethanol also causes emissions, but that carbon dioxide is not counted under agricultural emissions data. Neither are greenhouse gases from fertilizer production.

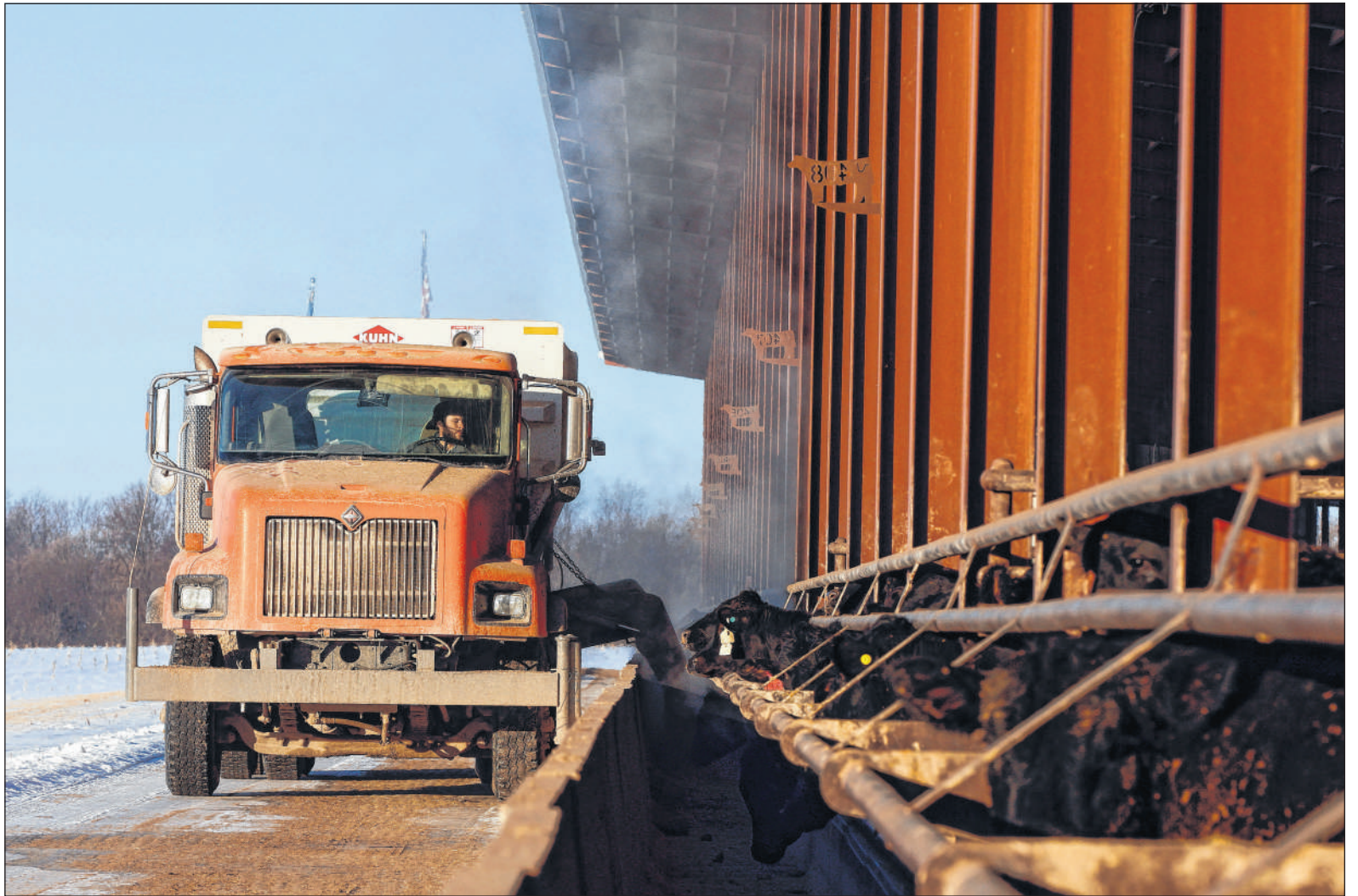
Corn requires nitrogen fertilizer to make amino acids, protein and chlorophyll. But too much fertilizer, or fertilizer applied at the wrong time, can cause nitrogen to run off into waterways or to be released into the air as a greenhouse gas.

Iowa farmers bought 5.27 million metric tons of fertilizer in crop year 2022, up 14 percent from 2021 and up 45 percent from 2020, according to state sales data.

Last year was the first year since at least before 2014 that farmers applied more fertilizer in the fall than in the spring, University of Iowa research scientist Chris Jones tweeted in November. Because there’s no crop in the ground after harvest to absorb nutrients, more go into the air and water.

LIVESTOCK

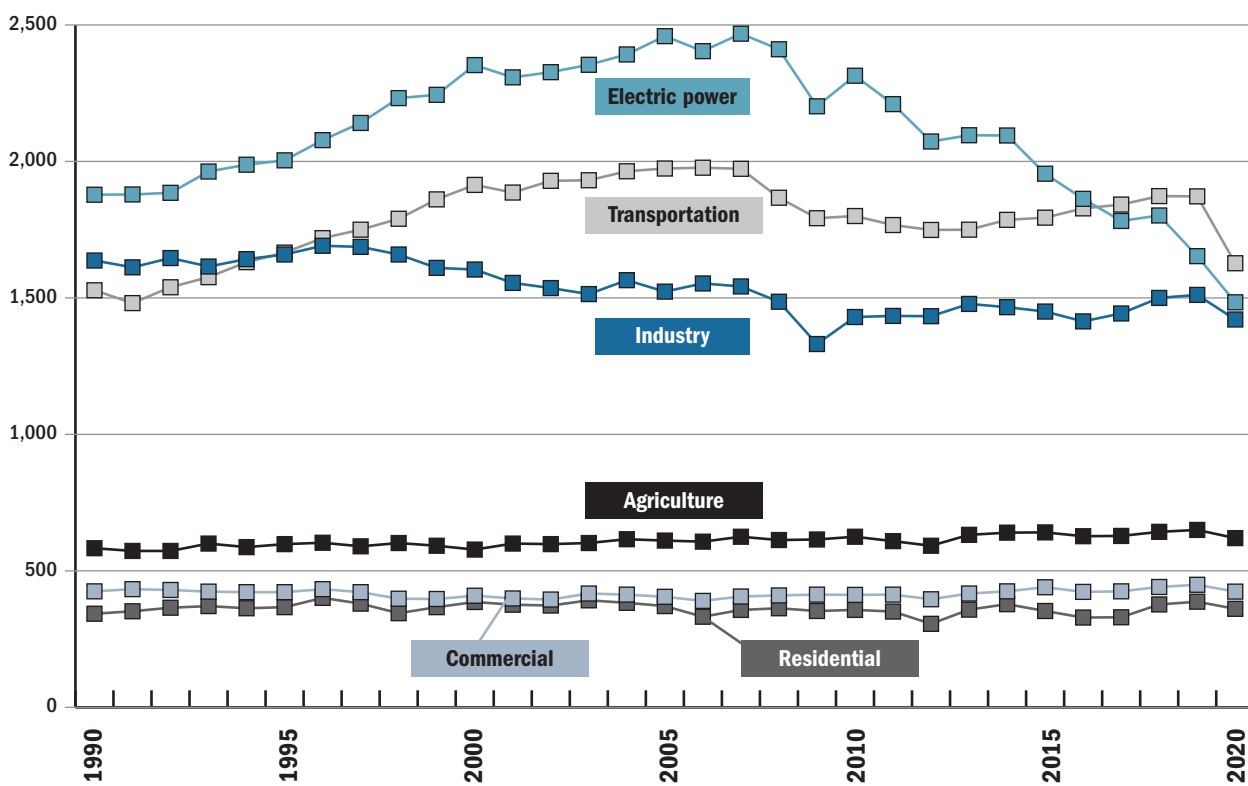
Texas, California, Iowa, Nebraska and Kansas — the top five emitters for livestock, according to the EPA data from 1990 to 2020 — contribute



Jacob Weingardt delivers feed Feb. 1 to cattle at the Amana Farms feedlot in Amana. Animal waste from the cattle operation is fed into an anaerobic digester to produce methane, which is generated into electricity. The farm also uses other regenerative agriculture practices, such as not tilling some acres. (Jim Slosiarek/The Gazette)

U.S. greenhouse gas emissions by industry

The most significant emission cuts have been in the transportation, industrial and electricity sectors, but not agriculture. This data shows emissions for each sector (million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent).



Sources: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Greenhouse Gas Inventory Data

Gazette graphic

more than one-third of the country’s emissions from cattle, swine and other livestock.

Some producers are trying new technologies to reduce emissions from their animals, which produce methane through digestion.

Anaerobic digesters are a costly option at \$1 million to \$5 million. Iowa passed a bill in 2021 that allows livestock farms to exceed maximum animal thresholds by building a digester to process manure, which caused a flurry of new permits at Iowa dairies.

Another approach is breeding cows that eat less while still producing the same amount of beef, McGrath said. Or including seaweed in cattle feed to reduce methane.

LACK OF PROGRESS

Comparing states’ greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture can be like comparing apples to oranges. Or rice to strawberries. Or corn to peanuts. That’s because soil type, climate and crops can influence emissions, but the multipliers used for the calculations are standardized.

“The emission factor for Texas or California is likely to be very different from the emission factor for Iowa, yet the way the emission factor is done doesn’t really take into

account the differences,” ISU’s Hall said.

Looking at a state’s agricultural emissions over time is a good way to see whether there have been changes, Hall said. Among Midwest states, the trend lines bounce up and down, not showing dramatic improvement.

In many states, there are no plans to scale back. Iowa’s annual inventory of greenhouse gas emissions, which uses the trend of inventory numbers back to 1990 to project future emissions, shows emissions from the agricultural sector would increase 83 percent by 2040 if the state stays on the same trajectory as over the past 30 years.

Iowa has no statewide greenhouse gas reduction goals, for agriculture or any other sector, the Iowa Department of Natural Resources confirmed. Iowa Agriculture Secretary Mike Naig, when asked whether he would support Iowa setting emission targets, said his agency doesn’t have that authority.

“We must always balance the need to keep Iowa’s agriculture productive while also protecting our valuable shared natural resources,” he said in an email.

SETTING GOALS

Climate change already is disturbing Mid-

west states with more dangerous storms, loss of animal species and risks of crop loss because of flood or drought. On a global scale, leaders are trying to keep the temperature rise from going above 1.5 degrees Celsius (or 2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) to avoid some of the worst calamities, including inundation of coastal areas and scarcity of food.

A goal for greenhouse gas emissions is like a road map, guiding decisions along the way, said Jerald Schnoor, an engineering professor and co-director of the UI Center for Global & Regional Environmental Research.

Of the 25 states with greenhouse gas reduction targets, 21 have Democratic governors.

“California is the most progressive state when it comes to tackling greenhouse gas emissions,” said Frank Mitloehner, a professor and air quality specialist at the University of California-Davis. “The state has pursued reductions in a smart way, by incentivizing farmers to reduce their emissions.”

California, led by Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom, passed regulations to reduce methane emissions from livestock and dairy by 40 percent below 2013 levels by 2030.

The industry has made progress toward that goal, in part by using anaerobic digesters, Mitloehner said.

Illinois is among states that have committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by at least 26 percent below 2005 levels by 2025. The state passed the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act in 2021, but that legislation focuses on the energy and transportation sectors. Why not agriculture?

“In some cases, the infrastructure isn’t quite in place to be able to do it,” said Don Wuebbles, an emeritus professor in the School of Earth, Society and Environment at the University of Illinois. For example, farm machinery still runs on fossil fuels, he said.

“Part of it is reluctance on the farmer’s part and part of it is reluctance on the entire planet’s part to make things move fast enough to do what we need to be doing.”

Charles Stanier, a UI engineering professor who served on the Iowa Carbon Sequestration Task Force in 2021, said the bulk of the energy subgroup’s conversations were about carbon dioxide capture pipelines and reducing public construction projects to use CO₂-infused concrete. Both practices together would sequester only a

tiny sliver of greenhouse gases, he said.

Stanier suggested Gov. Kim Reynolds or the Iowa Legislature set a target for emission reductions, but task force members weren’t interested, he said.

Iowa’s “direction is to monetize the agricultural reductions we can achieve either by having the consumer pay into the agricultural sector for the reductions, or to have the federal government pay,” Stanier said.

INCENTIVES FOR CHANGE

The Inflation Reduction Act, which President Joe Biden signed into law in August, provides \$19.5 billion for agricultural conservation, including \$8.45 billion more for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, which helps farmers pay for conservation practices such as growing cover crops during the winter or reduced tilling. Keeping roots in the soil stores more carbon dioxide.

Cover crops grow on about 4 percent of agricultural acres in the United States, according to data from the USDA’s 2017 agricultural census. More federal cost-share money could mean more farmers trying cover crops, conservation experts said.

Companies — some to appease customers or their boards of directors — also are making investments in sustainable agriculture.

Cargill, which processes meat, eggs and grains for food companies, is offering contracts for up to \$25 per acre to corn, soybean or wheat farmers in 15 Midwest states to sequester carbon dioxide through regenerative practices, including no till, reduced tillage or cover crops.

Amana Farms earlier this year enrolled 3,300 acres in the program, McGrath said. The Cargill contract will help Amana buy a strip-till machine, which costs about \$350,000.

Since 2013, when Amana Farms stopped tilling 30 percent of its acres, McGrath has seen a half percent increase in organic material in the soil. So even if curbing greenhouse gases ranks lower on the priority list after improving soil health and water quality, McGrath said, it’s “coming along for the ride.”

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NEW KID IN TOWN

Freshman Joe Labas is an unknown at QB for Music City Bowl



Sports, 1B

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Todd Western III and Todd Western IV plant May 13 on the family's land in Black Hawk County. The Western family still owns its original farmland in Mahaska County, but rents it out and now farms east of Waterloo. (Nick Rohlman photos/The Gazette)

'Immense sense of pride'

Mahaska County farm owned by Black family since Civil War era

By Erin Jordan, The Gazette

A 1944 article in the Iowa Farm Register reported Todd Western Sr. was a well-respected Black farmer in Mahaska County, where his grandparents first purchased land in 1864.

One photo shows Betty Lou Western, age 8, pausing while milking a cow to listen to her father, wearing bib overalls and holding a milking pail. In another, Grace Western and her other children, Charlene, 5, Joyce, 3, and Todd Jr., 1, pose with freshly-canned fruit.

There was an element of marvel about this prosperous Black farm family in the 1940s, when only 0.06 percent of Iowa farms were owned by non-white people, according to the Iowa

► FARMERS, PAGE 6A



Todd Western III plants corn on his family's land May 13 in Black Hawk County.

Iowa Dems lose leader after losing elections, caucuses

January selection will pick successor to Ross Wilburn

By Tom Barton, Gazette Des Moines Bureau

Iowa Democratic Party Chairman Ross Wilburn announced Saturday he will step down as leader of the party, after Democrats in the state faced a drubbing in the Nov. 8 midterm elections and a likely vote by national Democrats to strip Iowa of its first-in-the-nation caucus status it's held for half a century.

Wilburn, a state representative from Ames, was elected in January 2021 to lead the party as its first Black chair in facing a challenging midterm election and a battle to retain the Iowa caucuses. Wilburn replaced outgoing chair and former state Rep. Mark Smith, who decided not to seek a second term.

Wilburn, in a statement, said his service to Iowans will continue as a state lawmaker, "but it is time to pass the torch."

"As the leader of the party, I have worked to stem external threats, listened to those who have felt left behind and managed expectations about what we could do with the resources at our disposal," he said. "No one can predict the future. But I have the utmost faith that whoever takes up the mantle next will guide our party with grace through the challenges ahead, as we all continue to work on growing our party and electing Democrats who will fight for the ideas we know are supported by a strong majority of Iowans."

Wilburn called it "an honor of a lifetime to serve as the first African American chair of the Iowa Democratic Party."

"No matter what, I will always put people before



Ross Wilburn Iowa Democratic Party chairman

► WILBURN, PAGE 2A

Costs rise for Hawkeyes, Cyclones hotel tradition

Football teams sequester players before home games

By Vanessa Miller, The Gazette

IOWA CITY — The Hawkeye and Cyclone football teams over the last five years have spent a combined \$2.2 million housing players, coaches and staff in hotels the night before home games to "minimize distractions" and help the team prepare with better security, nutrition and privacy.

The University of Iowa and Iowa State University both have agreements with hotels in the communities where their players and

coaches live to house them on home-game eves — a practice that's spanned decades and is not unique among major university athletic programs.

"Iowa State has done this for at least 40 years, if not longer," said Nick Joos, a Cyclones senior associate athletics director and spokesman. "Living in a dorm or off-campus apartment can get crazy on the weekends, so this affords them the best opportunity

► HOTELS, PAGE 8A



Iowa Hawkeyes players arrive at Kinnick Stadium before the start of a football game in 2021 in Iowa City. (Jim Slosiarek/The Gazette)

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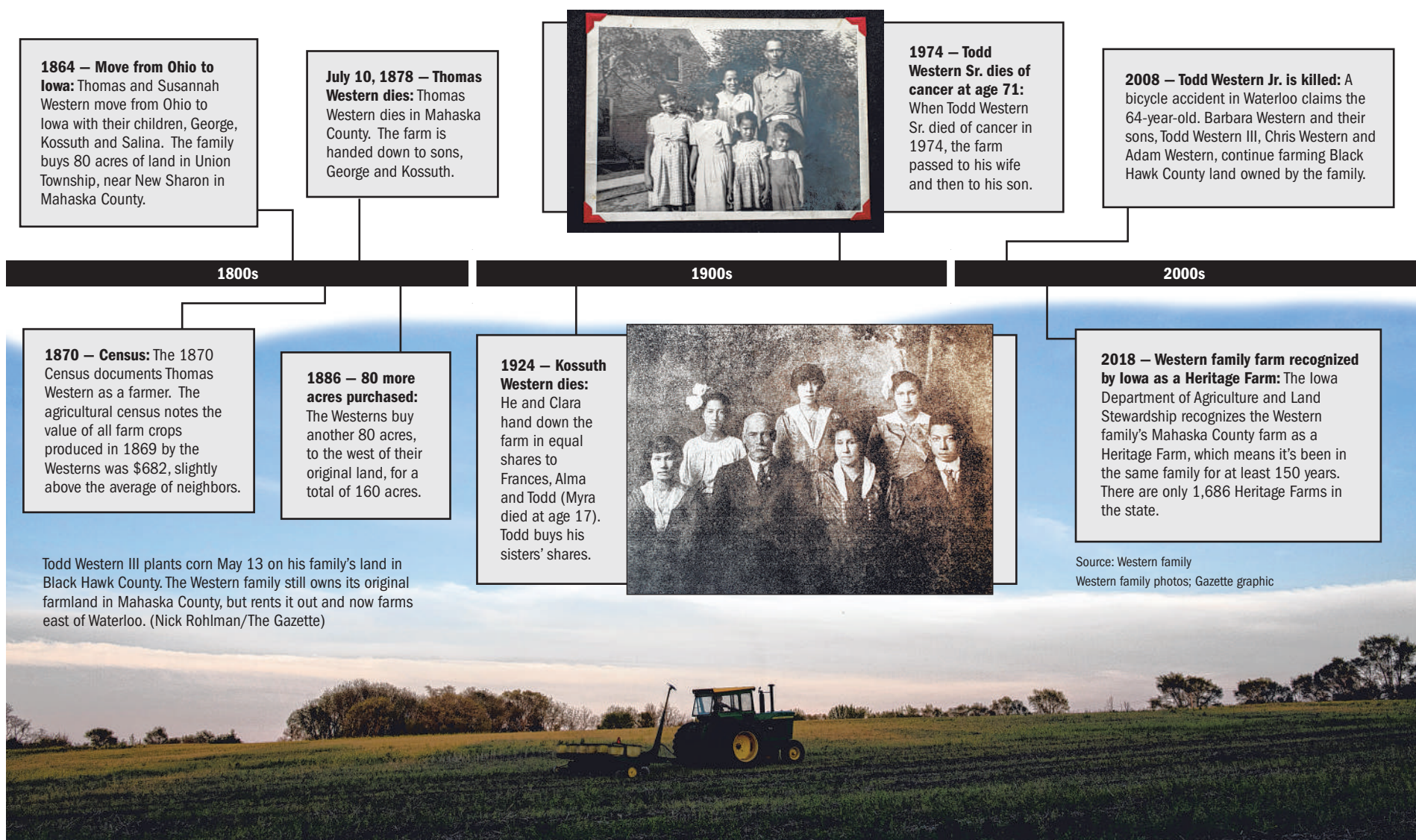
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Western family timeline

The Westerns own one of only about 1,700 Heritage Farms in Iowa and likely the only one owned by a Black family.



Farmers/Family has deep Iowa roots

► FROM PAGE 1A

Agricultural Census. More than 70 years later, in the 2017 ag census, the share of non-white farmers in Iowa is larger — but still less than 1 percent.

The Westerns still own that farm, making it one of only about 1,700 Heritage Farms — 150 years or more — in Iowa, and likely the only one owned by a Black family.

“Pride was something we had,” said Charlene Montgomery, born Charlene Western, 84, of Waterloo. “We were better off than many of the families we went to school with. Mom and Dad always helped us understand who we were. I saw myself on par with whoever I was around, if not a half peg above because my family owned land.”

Since the family no longer lives in New Sharon in Mahaska County, they lease the original farmstead and, instead, grow corn and soybeans on 35 acres east of Waterloo.

These days, the Westerns working the land are brothers Todd Western III, 56, of Maple Grove, Minn.; Christopher Western, 51, of Cedar Falls; and Adam Western, 43, of Bloomington, Minn. Matriarch Barbara Western, a retired music teacher who lives in Waterloo, is the CEO. They harvested corn Nov. 19.

“It was a blessed event,” Todd Western III said Nov. 30. “Mom just sold it yesterday and I think we got 6,000 bushels. We needed more, but it works.”

SETTLING IN IOWA

Thomas Western, born in 1800 in Virginia, moved from Ohio to Iowa in 1864 with his wife, Susannah, and their children. Montgomery believes her great-grandfather bought his family out of slavery with the help of some Quakers.

It was the middle of the Civil War, in which Iowa supported the Union Army by sending food, supplies and 76,000 soldiers — more than any other state in relation to population, Iowa PBS reported.

The Western family bought 80 acres of Iowa farmland near New Sharon, about 30 miles south of Grinnell, adding another 80 acres in 1886. The 1875 Mahaska County plat book shows the name “T. Western” on a quarter section in Union Township.

In the 1870 agricultural census, Western reported he had five horses, two milk cows and a dozen hogs, according to a report compiled in 2012 with help from Mary Bennett of the



The Westerns celebrate Todd III's birthday Oct. 22 at Barbara Western's home in Waterloo.



Charlene Montgomery looks over old family photos and correspondence Feb. 25. Montgomery, born Charlene Western, was born and raised on the Western family's family land near New Sharon. (Nick Rohlman photos/The Gazette)

Iowa Historical Society. Western reported raising 400 bushels of wheat in 1869, along with 800 bushels of Indian corn, 50 bushels of oats, 50 bushels of Irish potatoes and five tons of hay for livestock feed.

“Some indication of the contribution made by the women of the family is evident in the 100 pounds of butter that they had churned in 1869 and they were likely involved in producing the 20 gallons of molasses reported for that year,” the report notes.

“The value of all farm crops was reported by the family as \$682, which was slightly above an average of \$584.60 for 10 of their closest neighbors.”

Thomas Western, who died in 1878, handed down the farm to sons George and Kossuth, who worked the land together, Montgomery said.

Kossuth Western, born in 1855, likely was named after Lajos Kossuth, a Hungarian political reformer who led Hungary's efforts to gain independence from Austria in 1848 and 1849. The Hungarian also inspired the Iowa Legislature to name a county after him in 1851.

“Kossuth's exploits to free his country in 1848-1849 stirred the emotions of the people of the United States and his struggle for freedom was the reason that the Iowa Legislature felt that it would be fitting to name a newly created county in his honor,” the Kossuth County Economic Development Corporation reported on its website.

A Western family photo, likely from the 1910s, shows Kossuth Western and his wife, Clara Moore Lucas



Barbara Western talks April 2 with Todd Western III on their family's land in Black Hawk County.

Western, with their children Frances, Todd, Alma, Myra and Lena Lucas Benning (a daughter from Clara's previous marriage).

RURAL LIFE

Frances, Todd and Alma Western inherited the farm, Montgomery said. Myra died in 1922 at age 17 of pneumonia.

Todd Western Sr. married Grace Jeffers, who was from Buxton, a southeast Iowa mining town unique for its mix of African Americans, Swedes and other Eastern Europeans who lived peacefully in mixed neighborhoods.

By Sept. 17, 1944, the couple were raising 40 head of cattle, 80 hogs, 20 sheep and eight milk cows, the Iowa Farm Register reported.

“The crop plan on the farm this year is 53 acres of corn, 25 acres of oats, 10 acres of soybeans, 30 acres of hay, 22 acres of clover and eight of alfalfa. The first hay crops yielded 28 tons,” the article states.

It was the first year Western Sr. used commercial fertil-

izer, the newspaper noted. He “hasn't tried planting on the contours, but is interested in this” because of the rolling hills on his land.

Daughters Betty Lou, Charlene and Joyce all were born on the farm with the help of a midwife, Montgomery said.

“We teased Todd because he was born in the hospital,” she said.

The girls went to a country school through eighth grade, then switched to Lacey High School, where they all played sports. They would milk cows at 6 a.m., go to school, come home to milk again at 4 p.m. and then return to school for practice, said Joyce Cook, born Joyce Western, 81, of Las Vegas.

The girls did the garden work, growing green beans, melons, sweet potatoes and sweet corn. They raised feeder hogs to earn money for college.

“Betty had the courage to leave first,” Montgomery said. “She went to business school.”

Betty Lou Smith, born Betty Lou Western, 86, of Waverly, was a secretary and then worked for the telephone company for 34 years, first doing customer service and then human resources, before retiring in 1995.

Montgomery and Cook both graduated from William Penn College, in Oskaloosa, and became teachers — one of few professions open to Black women in the 1960s. They had to start at small, rural districts, which struggled to find teachers, because urban districts would not hire them.

Montgomery got a job in the Southeast Warren school district, where the superintendent had delivered newspapers to the Western family and vouched for her. On the first day of school, “my classroom line was clear to the parking lot so everyone could see the new teacher,” Montgomery said.

The sisters both ended up teaching in the Waterloo School District, from which Montgomery retired in 1998. Cook served as a guidance counselor in Las Vegas from 1997 to 2014.

Although the women did not inherit the family farm, their parents paid for them to go to college and instilled in them a love for education.

“We never had to have loans. Our parents would always tell us ‘you have to get an education because they can't take that away from

Farmers/‘It’s an immense sense of pride’

► FROM PAGE 6A

you,’ Cook said. “We passed that on to the next generation.”

HANDING DOWN THE FARM

Todd Western Jr., born in 1943, was the only boy and got the job of driving the tractor, Cook said. He attended North Mahaska High School in New Sharon, where he participated in sports and music. He was also senior class president.

State Sen. Ken Rozenboom, R-Oskaloosa, remembers meeting Todd Western Jr. in the early 1960s when Rozenboom was between 10 and 12 years old and Todd Jr. was 18 or 19. Rozenboom was spending the afternoon visiting the farm of a church friend, who lived down the road from the Westerns.

The boys walked over to say hello.

“In rural Iowa, it was unusual to see a Black man,” Rozenboom said. “That was probably the first time I saw a Black family on an Iowa farm. That’s probably why I remember it.”

Todd Western Jr. went to William Penn and the University of Northern Iowa, where he met Barbara Gordon. They married in 1966, after Todd was done serving in the U.S. Army. They moved to Waterloo in 1968 and Todd Jr. started working as a process engineer at John Deere, his wife said. But he would go back



Todd Western IV, Todd Western III and Christopher Western make adjustments Oct. 22 to a combine in preparation for harvest. (Nick Rohlman/The Gazette)

and help his father on the farm whenever he could. “He was homesick for farming,” Barbara Western said.

When Todd Western Sr. died of cancer in 1974, the farm passed to his wife and then to his son.

For two planting seasons, Todd Western Jr. and Barbara Western loaded up their farming equipment and young sons and drove two hours from Waterloo to Mahaska County. They slept in a mobile home at the farm, driving back to Waterloo each Monday morning so Todd Jr. could shower and return to work at Deere.

Todd Western Jr.’s work ethic also could be seen in his training for and running 17 marathons, often logging miles

after 10 p.m. when work was done. He died July 30, 2008, at age 64, when he was training for his 13th Chicago Marathon.

Police found him in a ditch in Waterloo with his bicycle, which he often rode to the Waterloo West High School track to run late at night. Police said it was a bicycle accident, although Barbara Western still wonders exactly how he died.

CLOSER TO HOME

In the 1970s, the Westerns purchased 35 acres on what was then called Sheep Hill Farm, just east of Waterloo. To this day, when Todd Western III and Christopher Western plant and harvest, they feel close to their father.

“Some people visit

cemeteries to think of their loved ones,” Christopher Western said. “I like to come out here to think of my dad.”

Christopher Western, a city planner, knows how to fix things on the farm — just like his dad — while Todd Western III’s business skills come from their mom. But it’s stressful operating a farm on top of a day job.

Todd Western III, a donor adviser for United Way, balances coaching high school football in Minneapolis with farming in Iowa, which often means staying up late on fall Friday nights, sleeping a few hours and then getting on the road south.

“I’ve had people upset me that have said, ‘Why don’t you just rent

BLACK FARMERS SERIES

The Gazette started reporting a series on Black farmers in Iowa in February, continuing with a story in July about mentoring the next generation of Black farmers. This story about lack of diversity on agricultural boards and the package about the Westerns, a Black Iowa family that has owned a farm in Mahaska County for 158 years, wrap up the formal series, but we’re always looking to get to know more farmers of color. If you’d like to share your story, please email Erin Jordan at erin.jordan@thegazette.com.

this out?” Christopher Western said of the Black Hawk County farm. “That wouldn’t have done him (their father) justice for how hard he worked. I’m sure he’s very proud of us that we came together and kept this going.”

Barbara Western, a Chicago native, said she first “learned to be an Iowa farmer’s wife” and then learned to be the farm “facilitator” after her husband’s death.

Now, she doesn’t hesitate to drive to the grain elevator in Dewar or meet with Iowa State University Extension officers to learn about grants. Barbara had a barn built and bought a new combine this year. She’s also the one to take the family to Red Lobster or buy ribs after a long work day.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

On Oct. 22, the family’s first attempt this fall at harvest, the Westerns all wore matching shirts. Todd Western III and his son, Todd Western IV, did a first pass with the new combine, then made

adjustments because it dropped too many ears of corn.

Todd Western III’s wife, Angela, and their daughter, Addison, 9, drove down the row on a four-wheeler with a bucket to pick up the nubby yellow ears.

Because the moisture levels in the corn kernels were too high, the family decided to wait to harvest until November.

Todd Western IV, 33, works in advertising in the Twin Cities, where he’s trying his hand at urban farming by growing green beans and microgreens in the summer. He thinks more young Black people would pursue farming as a career if they had apprenticeships.

He hopes to keep the family farm going strong for his children, Hadley, 10, and Todd V, six months.

“It’s an immense sense of pride,” he said of the Western Family Heritage Farm. “That’s why we have ‘Legacy’ on the back of our shirts.”

Comments: (319) 339-3157; erin.jordan@thegazette.com

Agriculture boards lack diversity in Iowa, nation

Some Black farmers say their needs not being heard or met

By Erin Jordan, The Gazette

An educational webinar focused on using fungi to improve soil health when Ai Wen joined the board of the Iowa Organic Association.

“Here it sounds like a new technique, but when I grew up in China that was part of our agricultural practice,” said Wen, a University of Northern Iowa assistant professor of biology who grew up in Beijing.

Wen was asked to join the 11-person board to fill a spot set aside for an educator, not because she’s Chinese. But she thinks

her culture and her experiences being different from other board members makes the group stronger.

The Gazette looked at the boards of 10 agricultural groups at the state and national levels and found, by looking at individual and group photographs, nearly all of the members appear to be white and about three-quarters appear to be men.

The imbalance is troubling to some farmers.

“If Blacks are not at the table, how could you know what that community needs? Because this has worked for us, it must work for them?” asked Shaffer Ridgeway, a Black vegetable farmer and Black Hawk County-based district conservationist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service. “You’ve got to have every community at that

table and represented.”

Ridgeway in January will be joining the board of Practical Farmers of Iowa, which, according to its website, now has 14 members, including eight white men and six white women.

Ridgeway doesn’t see any intent to exclude other races when forming agricultural boards. “I really think they just don’t know and most of them don’t talk to anybody who doesn’t look like them,” he said.

BOARDS REFLECT MEMBERSHIP

As of the 2017 U.S. Agricultural Census, 99.6 percent of Iowa farmers were white. The composition of many agriculture boards reflects that, said Craig Floss, chief executive officer of the Iowa Corn Growers Association. The group’s board has 12 members, including 10 white men and two white women.

“Farming today in the state of Iowa has been passed from one generation to the next,” Floss said. “We were settled by white Europeans, so consequently, we don’t have a lot of minority farmers who are growing corn.”

The Corn Growers Association has nine crop-reporting districts and members from each group elect leaders who live in each district to serve on the board, Floss said. He offered to reach out to Black corn growers who might consider joining the association and running for a leadership position.

“Anybody can become a member and you get engaged and you get involved,” he said.

Joby Young, executive vice president of the American Farm Bureau Federation, echoed Floss’s statements. The national organization has 14 board members, including five white

women and nine white men.

“We’re a grassroots organization of 2,800 county farm bureaus,” he said. “At every level of that network, there are members elected to leadership. Voting members elect the leadership at the state level, including the boards. At the American Farm Bureau convention, voting delegates elect our board members.”

The American Farm Bureau last year signed an agreement with the National Society for Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources and Related Sciences with the goal of increasing minority involvement in agriculture. The groups agreed to share written content for each other’s publications, provide leadership training and expertise and cross-promote programs and events, according to a news release.

The American Farm Bureau also tries to amplify the voices of minority farmers, such as Kamal Bell, a North Carolina farmer featured in an August article and video about sustainability.

DEVELOPING POLICY

Groups such as the American Farm Bureau and the Iowa Corn Growers Association are heavy hitters when it comes to developing national agriculture policy. The policies and practices of the U.S. Department of Agriculture haven’t always benefited farmers of color the same way as white farmers.

When Congress passed the 2008 Farm Bill, it included \$100 million for Black farmers who sued the government alleging the USDA discriminated against them in farm loans between 1981 and 1996. The USDA documented racist policies of denying loans, delay-

ing loans and forcing foreclosures.

In 2010, President Barack Obama approved another \$1.15 billion for these claims, the USDA reported.

Payments to Black farmers have been held up in court since 2021 and in October, a class-action lawsuit by Black farmers alleged the U.S. government broke its promise to help Black farmers pay off debts caused by discrimination, the Associated Press reported.

BRINGING BLACK FARMERS TOGETHER

Todd Western III, a Minnesota man who farms 35 acres in Black Hawk County with his mom and brothers, flew to North Carolina in November with his son for Harvest Ball, a gathering of Black farmers from across the country.

“It was so exhilarating to see all those Black farmers,” he said. “It was so awesome to be around each other.”

Darrell Tennie, a Black crop insurance agent in North Carolina, hosted the first annual Harvest Ball through his nonprofit group Farmers Outreach Solutions. More than 200 people came to the Nov. 4-6 event in Raleigh, and Tennie made sure everyone who wanted to speak about themselves and their farming operation got a chance.

Tennie said state and national agricultural boards also need to be listening to these voices.

“We need to introduce to those boards the opportunities that are there with working with socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers,” he said.

Syngenta, a multina-

tional agricultural chemical and seed company, sponsored the Harvest Ball.

“Minorities have contributed greatly to agriculture and it’s beneficial to any company or industry to include minorities,” said Macie O’Shaughnessy, a Syngenta industry relations manager who attended the event.

There, she connected with Western and they realized they both live in the Twin Cities. They since have gotten together there to talk about ways Syngenta could help support a gathering of Black farmers from the Upper Midwest, she said.

Any Black farmers who want to connect with Western may reach him at toddwestern24@gmail.com.

Comments: (319) 339-3157; erin.jordan@thegazette.com



Ai Wen
Assistant professor of biology at UNI



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LOST IN TRANSLATION

How USDA barriers leave immigrant farmers and ranchers behind



Max Chavez, a farmer and immigrant from Mexico, surveys his land as he decides where to plant this year's crops April 25 at his farmland in Carlisle. Chavez, along with many other immigrant non-native English speakers in the agricultural and ranching community, has struggled to receive grants, loans and other funding opportunities. (Geoff Stellfox/The Gazette)

Federal funding is a vital resource, but immigrant producers face language, cultural obstacles to benefiting from it

By **Brittney J. Miller**, The Gazette

With dirt crunching under his feet, Max Chavez trekked across his 10 acres of land, grasping wooden stakes in his hands. They were marked with his handwriting: "Bell pepper" on one,

"green beans" on another. Every few paces, he stuck a stake in the soil — marking where his harvest would sprout months later.

Chavez grew up farming in Mexico. He moved to California at 13 years old, and then to Iowa in 1999. After planting and pruning grapevines around the state, he saved enough

money to rent land, growing tomatoes, zucchini, peppers and more.

When asked what it takes to run his farm in Carlisle, named Sunny Valley Vegetables, 55-year-old Chavez had a quick response: "Money."

► **USDA, PAGE 6A**

EN ESPAÑOL

Para leer este reportaje en español de manera gratuita, descargue el código QR.



Mississippi shipping infrastructure is aging. Who should pay for repairs?

By **Madeline Heim**, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, and **Keely Brewer**, Daily Memphian

Around 175 million tons of freight travels on the Mississippi River each year, and from the river's headwaters to southern Illinois, a series of locks and dams guide barg-

es through the journey.

Traffic is only increasing, but the locks and dams have aged far past their life expectancy. Even functioning properly, they slow barges down, and shippers and commodity groups fear a worse infrastructure breakdown is on the horizon.

"Is it a matter of if you have a failure ... or when you have a failure?" said Mike Steenhoek, executive director of the Soy Transportation Coalition.

Steenhoek likened the system to a fire hydrant

► **SHIPPING, PAGE 8A**

City leaders, tenants rosy on sale of Lindale Mall

Deal includes ex-Collins Road Hy-Vee, other buildings

By **Trish Mehaffey**, The Gazette

CEDAR RAPIDS — The city and tenants of Lindale Mall are optimistic the northeast Cedar Rapids center's new owner will recruit

more businesses and make improvements after two of its longtime anchor tenants closed four years ago and remain empty.

"While transitions like this always cause a bit of chaos and a lot of work for local management, that team

► **LINDALE, PAGE 7A**

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USDA/Immigrant frustration grows

► FROM PAGE 1A

Between record-high farm production expenses and declining farm income, producers are facing higher financial burdens than ever before.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture is there to help. Most farmers receive some sort of support from the USDA — from cash subsidies for commercial farmers to microloans for small-scale farmers, and conservation services to crop insurance. The department shells out billions of dollars a year for such resources.

But, like many other immigrant farmers and ranchers in the United States, it's hard for Chavez to access — or even find out about — those opportunities. He said he's still waiting on funding from the USDA's Coronavirus Food Assistance Program that he was approved for, which would help him purchase needed equipment and materials.

"I don't believe in them anymore," he said of the USDA. "If I don't have that money, how am I going to feed the people?"

The USDA has taken steps toward increasing accessibility for historically underserved producers, including immigrant farmers and ranchers. But producers and advocates say it's not enough. They want more solutions included in the forthcoming Farm Bill to level the playing field.

LANGUAGE BARRIERS

Samuel Patiño, 74, grew up in the Mexican countryside, where his family grew corn, green beans and other produce. He moved to the U.S. in 1973 and started farming 16 years ago. He now owns 21 acres of land in southwestern Missouri, raising livestock, poultry and produce.

Patiño discovered the USDA only around 2014. But he hasn't successfully applied for farm operating loans or funding for a new fence. He said that's due to the language barriers he faces: Patiño can understand basic information in English, but not anything technical related to farming — including how to apply to USDA programs.

Even for producers proficient in English, applying for USDA resources isn't simple. Applicants must decipher what programs they're eligible for and then navigate through a series of steps to be approved. They need to provide the correct paperwork — which could mean years of data to keep track of. Some even hire grant writers for assistance.

Working through the maze grows even more difficult when the forms and their instructions aren't in a producer's native language.

"Sometimes, I feel that we are ignored," Patiño said in Spanish. "We sometimes get stuck because we don't communicate very well."

Language barriers are among the biggest challenges for immigrant producers, said Eleazar Gonzalez, a small sustainable farm state extension specialist at Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri. Since 2011, he has worked with Latino farmers — including Patiño, whom he helped secure funds for a small greenhouse — to improve their agribusiness literacy, profitability and access to USDA programs.



Max Chavez, a farmer and immigrant from Mexico, poses for a portrait on April 25 at Goode Greenhouse in Des Moines. (Geoff Stellfox photos/The Gazette)



Max Chavez holds up remnants of last year's harvest which have begun to reseed themselves on April 25 at his farmland in Carlisle.

Most immigrant producers don't have a college education; many didn't finish high school, Gonzalez said. So their literacy is limited — especially in English. That makes successfully applying to USDA programs difficult: Applicants may not understand the requirements necessary to qualify, such as keeping records of transactions, nor the intensive paperwork.

To add to the difficulty, most USDA applications and materials are available only in English. Translations may be available only upon request to the local USDA service center. As a result, many immigrant producers don't fundamentally understand how USDA programs work.

"They don't have the knowledge and information to access the resources," Gonzalez said.

The language barriers work both ways: English-speaking USDA representatives have trouble building relationships with immigrant producers.

Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern is a senior research associate and associate professor at Syracuse University. While researching for her book — "The New American Farmer," published in 2019 — she met with local USDA offices and staffers in several states around the country. Only one had a Spanish speaker. The other offices acknowledged barriers to communicating with immigrant producers.

"The USDA is limited, especially in terms of funding and outreach to farmers that aren't reaching out to them," Minkoff-Zern said.

Failed efforts leave many immigrant producers discouraged, said Filiberto Villa-Gomez, a research associate at Michigan State University and the Spanish-speaking outreach coordinator for Michigan Food and Farming Systems.

He has worked with hundreds of Latino farmers in Michigan for about

15 years, connecting them with USDA representatives to promote applicable programs and application resources. But even with his help, producers aren't frequently successful.

"When the farmers make their applications, the representative says, 'It's not completed. You need this, this and this.' The people go back to the farm ... and they don't come in again," he said. "The people are frustrated a lot of times."

CULTURAL BARRIERS

Barriers for immigrant producers transcend language: Many still rely on cultural and agricultural habits from their home countries. Some don't trust the government enough to ask for resources; others don't think they need the support.

Those cultural barriers, paired with the lack of successful outreach, mean the USDA may not even be on the radar for immigrant producers. And, in turn, they make it difficult to calculate how many immigrant producers there are in the United States.

"There are a lot of (immigrant) farmers, but we don't know where they are. They may not know what the USDA is," Gonzalez said. "When we go to the community and talk with the farmers, that is one reality. And when you see the census data, that is another reality."

The help that is available may not be accessible to them. Some USDA training opportunities take place during the week — when many immigrant producers are working full-time jobs.

"They don't receive enough money to work full-time at the farm," Villa-Gomez said. "They are hoping to get more money and live better and eat fresh fruits and products. But they must be working on the side because it's not enough."

Joseph Malual is a community and economic development specialist with Illinois Extension at

the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. He originally moved to Iowa as a war refugee from South Sudan, where food and agriculture were vital parts of his upbringing.

Throughout his time in the Midwest, he has worked with Hmong, Latino, refugee and beginning farmers to overcome their barriers to agricultural resources. He said many immigrant producers are socially isolated — from both their neighbors and from local, state and federal resources.

"It's just so hard for immigrants to be able to clearly independently liberate those resources," he said. "They have to find some other allies."

USDA EFFORTS — AND SHORTFALLS

The USDA has taken several steps to help increase access for immigrant producers, said Gloria Montaña Greene.

She is the Deputy Under Secretary for the USDA Farm Production and Conservation mission area that covers the agency's farmer-facing agencies, including the Farm Service Agency, the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Risk Management Agency. It oversees 2,000-plus service centers in the U.S. and its territories.

Montaña Greene said the USDA is working on translating its programs for producers in their native languages. Some of the higher-demand items, like parts of the Inflation Reduction Act and factsheets, already appear in different languages. Some items are translated on a state level.

Last year, the agency had more than 730 documents — including fact sheets, news releases, contracts and forms — translated into 30 languages. But not all USDA materials are translated.

Applications, for instance, are typically offered only in English, except for a few that

have been translated into Spanish or have directions in Spanish. Translated news releases are few and far between.

The USDA also provides free interpretation services for 14 languages, including Spanish, Korean and French Canadian — the most requested, so far. Producers must go to their local USDA service center, where a staffer can make a call to an interpreter for simultaneous translation during the discussion.

As a whole, those services aren't seeing a huge demand yet, Montaña Greene said. Last year, there were 109 interpretation calls made: 86 for the Farm Service Agency, 22 for the Natural Resources Conservation Service and one for the Risk Management Agency.

The USDA is trying to promote them to customers and employees to increase use.

"I know that's not the most perfect solution, but it also does help with a language barrier," Montaña Greene said. "I think we're trying to figure out how to do the language access and then complement it with our outreach and education."

The USDA also is funneling funds to community-based organizations that can serve as trusted connections between the department and immigrant producers.

Universities can receive funding for such work through the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture. Its Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program, for instance, supports beginning producers in the U.S. and allocates at least 5 percent of its funding to projects helping producers that are socially disadvantaged, have limited resources or are farmworkers transitioning to farming. The program helps fund Gonzalez's work with Latino farmers in Missouri.

These steps are just the beginning, Montaña Greene said.

"We have more work

to do," she said. "I think we will always have work to do."

FUTURE STEPS

Maximino Perez knows the barriers for immigrant producers all too well. The 52-year-old grew up on a farm in Mexico. He started his own ranch in southwestern Missouri 10 years ago and now has 20 cattle.

After a drought, he received emergency support from the USDA to buy grass and hay for his livestock. The English-speaking staffer helped Perez through the application process. But when he tried applying for similar disaster relief after an ice storm, he was rejected: He didn't know he had to take photos of the five newborn calves that had died.

"I feel very sad because everything is about money," Perez said in Spanish. He had to wait another year for his cattle to produce more calves.

Community organizations are pushing for USDA improvements in the forthcoming Farm Bill, which is a legislation package that is renewed every five years. It provides funding for various programs, spanning from commodities to conservation and crop insurance to rural development.

The Center for Rural Affairs is asking Congress to release non-English versions of program announcements simultaneously with English versions. It's also asking that educational materials and program sign-up forms be available in other languages. Additionally, the center wants Congress to create a list of reliable interpreters in each state that can help producers maintain a longer-term relationship with USDA service centers.

"We want to make sure that information is baseline accessible," said Kate Hansen, senior policy associate for the Center for Rural Affairs. "So, expanding it more fully ... is actually our end goal here."

Gonzalez said reducing the number of requirements and paperwork for USDA opportunities could make them more accessible to immigrant producers. More in-person agent-to-farmer outreach could encourage more participation, too.

As the number of farms declines while the average age of farmers creeps higher, the future of American agriculture hinges on the success of beginner producers — such as immigrant farmers and ranchers. To get the support they need, producers and advocates alike say USDA accessibility must improve.

"This is one thing for economic reasons, but also socially, we want to see equity in food systems in the country," Malual said. "Why not position immigrants who are U.S. residents and citizens to get that equity?"

This story is a product of the Mississippi River Basin Ag & Water Desk, an editorially independent reporting network based at the University of Missouri School of Journalism in partnership with Report For America and the Society of Environmental Journalists, funded by the Walton Family Foundation.

Brittney J. Miller is the Energy & Environment Reporter for The Gazette and a corps member with Report for America, a national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on under-covered issues.

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The setting sun reflects Tuesday off the water of a 2- to 3-acre settling basin on the 8-acre wetland that farmer Jim O'Connell built on his land in rural Palo. It took O'Connell more than three years to build the wetland, which helps control erosion and filters the water running off his farmland before it goes into a nearby creek. O'Connell frost-seeded the wetland with a grass seed mix designed for wetlands. (Jim Slosiarek photos/The Gazette)

Report: Conservation programs too selective

Group highlights low acceptance rates, but Iowa officials say state in better shape

By Brittney J. Miller, The Gazette

Ruth Rabinowitz started managing her father's farmland in Mitchell, Madison, Clarke and Union counties a decade ago. Since then, she has coated her 550 acres in conservation practices: most tenants do not till, every field has a cover crop, and buffers border the fields.

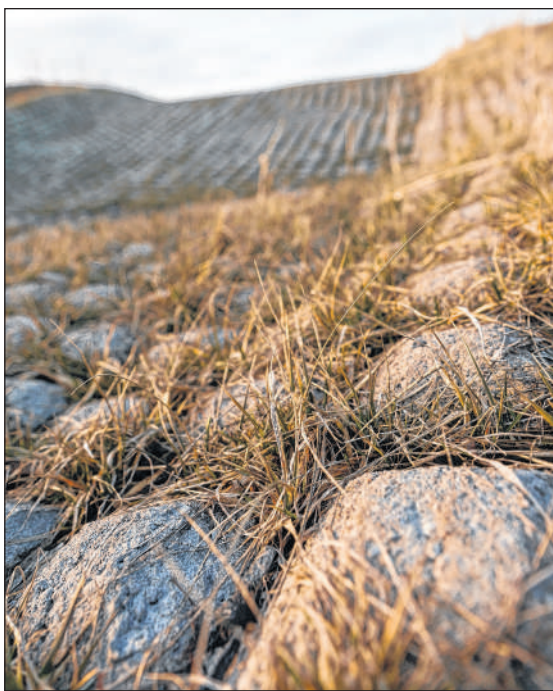
The projects were made possible by state and federal funding for conservation practices — but that funding didn't always come easy, 54-year-old Rabinowitz said.

"I used to apply for cover crops a lot and be turned down, which was just totally bewildering to me," she said. "I just kept applying and applying, and pretty soon, I did get grants."

Most recently, her application for a sediment control basin was rejected. "You just can't take it personally at all," she said. "There's a lot of people out there wanting to do things on their farms, and there's X amount of dollars and X amount of time."

The Conservation Stewardship Program and the Environmental

► CONSERVATION, PAGE 10A



Stones and vegetation help to prevent erosion on farmer Jim O'Connell's land in rural Palo.

\$2.9 million earmarked for Linn, Johnson mental health access centers

Regional board OKs budget after county supervisors pushed for sufficient funding

By Marissa Payne, The Gazette

HIAWATHA — The nine-county regional board that manages mental health funding passed a budget Thursday that allocates \$2.9 million in fiscal 2024 for the Linn and Johnson County access centers.

While the increase was unanimously supported by the regional governing board, discussions continue over how to better cover the costs for the facilities and providers to operate around the clock.

In the revised budget for fiscal 2024 — spanning July 1 to June 30, 2024 — the East Central Mental Health Region's regional governing board voted to boost funding for the Linn and Johnson county centers from the \$2.5 million initially proposed.

The budget approval came after several county supervisors who make up the governing board said at last month's meeting they would oppose passing a budget that underfunded the access centers.

They expressed frustration with the proposed funding, given that the mental health region projects it will have a \$5.5 million surplus by June 30, the end of the current budget year.

County officials and providers raised concerns that funding the facilities below the requested amounts — \$1.875 million for Linn County and \$1.4 million for Johnson County — would result in reduced services or force the facilities to close altogether.

The budget that Regional Chief Executive Officer Mae Hingtgen first proposed set aside only \$1.25 million for each center.

At the regional board's meeting at the Kirkwood

► MENTAL HEALTH, PAGE 10A



Mae Hingtgen
Regional mental health CEO

2 arrested in fatal shooting of teen in February

By Emily Andersen, The Gazette

CEDAR RAPIDS — Two teenagers were arrested Thursday in connection with the fatal shooting of 16-year-old Michael McCune in February in northwest Cedar Rapids.

Dante Irvin, 15, and Tramontez Lockett, 16, face charges of first-degree mur-

der, conspiracy to commit a forcible felony and going armed with intent. Lockett also is charged with aiding and abetting first-degree theft, according to a news release from Cedar Rapids police.

Lockett is being charged in adult court and will have his initial appearance today.

Irvin will be charged in

juvenile court, but Linn County Attorney Nick Maybanks said prosecutors will ask to have his case waived into adult court.

Cedar Rapids police found McCune with several gunshot wounds at the Tan Tara Apartments, 1640 F Ave. NW, shortly after 11:30 a.m. Feb. 18. He died at the scene.

Criminal complaints for

Irvin and Lockett were not available Thursday, but a search warrant affidavit to search Lockett's phone contains additional information about the shooting. Irvin is not mentioned by name in the warrant.

According to the warrant, a gray 2019 Toyota RAV4

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MARCH MANIA

Conservation/Farmer sees program's benefits

► FROM PAGE 1A

Quality Incentives Program — commonly referred to as CSP and EQIP — are two tools in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's arsenal of conservation incentives for landowners. EQIP helps producers develop individual conservation projects for their properties, and CSP integrates more conservation practices into existing plans. Contracts come with resources for accepted participants.

These contracts can be hard to come by, according to a recent report from the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy — a think tank focusing on the intersection of food and economic systems.

According to the report, the USDA rejected three in four farmers who applied to EQIP and CSP last year. The institute is rallying for more federal funding for the programs and more local outreach for potential participants.

"I think more resources would go a long way in meeting this demand," said Michael Happ, the report author and program associate for climate and rural communities at the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. "Even without the additional funding, there just needs to be increased emphasis on (the programs)."

MIXED PROGRESS FOR IOWA

This is the second issue of the report — and it shows some promising growth. Both draw from public USDA data.

The previous report revealed a 31 percent acceptance rate for nationwide EQIP applicants and a 42 percent acceptance rate for CSP applicants between 2010 and 2020.

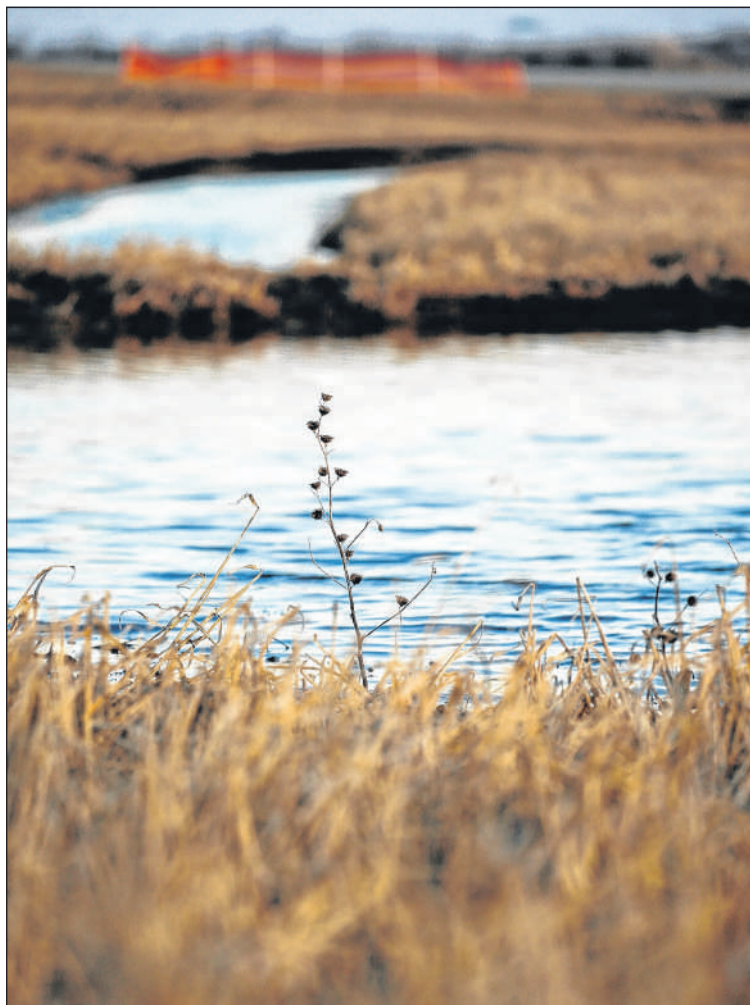
This month's report found that 24.8 percent of CSP applicants were awarded contracts in 2022, which translates to around 3,000 more contracts than in 2020. Nationwide EQIP acceptance rates stayed relatively similar — around 25 percent — though the numbers of awarded contracts and applicants decreased.

"I do think that the funding should follow the demand, as well as making sure that all states have that culture of conservation, that people know about the programs and are going to their local office to ask about them," Happ said.

For Iowa, progress made between the two reports is mixed.

In 2020, only 21 percent of Iowa's 1,442 CSP applications and its 4,623 EQIP applications were awarded contracts — ranking the state's acceptance rates 39th and 42nd in the country, respectively.

By 2022, accepted CSP application rates rose to 30 percent



Vegetation grows along the shoreline of a 2- to 3-acre settling basin on the 8-acre wetland that farmer Jim O'Connell built on his land in rural Palo. It took O'Connell about 3.5 years to build the wetland that helps control erosion and filters the water running off his farmland before it goes into the nearby creek. (Jim Slosiarek photos/The Gazette)

for the state's 1,243 applicants, bumping Iowa's ranking up to 35th nationwide. The average contract size was \$44,041, and a total of \$16.5 million was dispersed.

But for EQIP applicants, the rates and applicants declined slightly: 20 percent of the state's 4,127 applications were awarded contracts. Iowa dropped to 46th in the country. A total of \$31.5 million was distributed, with an average contract size of \$38,359.

"Compared to a lot of other states, that's definitely in the top 10 of number of farmers going out there (applying)," Happ said. "When you have that many applying, and you only have a limited amount of money, your percentage is probably going to get lower."

STATE DATA DIFFERS

While the report paints a more dire picture for EQIP and CSP acceptance rates in Iowa, state representatives of the Natural Resources Conservation Service — a federal agency within USDA — said the numbers don't match what they have on file for 2022.

According to state records, the amount of accepted applications in 2022 is similar to what's documented in the report. But the number of applicants — and thus, the

application rates — are much different.

"We would love to see 1,243 applications, but we're not," said Sam Adams, assistant state conservationist of programs in the Iowa NRCS state office.

The numbers used in the report include every interested landowner who started applications with their NRCS agent, Happ said. A data contact at national NRCS confirmed his interpretation of the data.

"It is possible the Iowa NRCS ... has subtracted applications deemed ineligible or deferred, but I do not subtract those," Happ said about the discrepancy.

Adams called the report's data a little misleading. For example, the numbers regarding Iowa's CSP acceptance rates include both active contracts and new applications. Any contracts canceled by the applicant, ineligible applications and deferred applications are not included in the NRCS data.

Adams estimated that Iowa NRCS funded around 90 percent of its CSP applications and around 50 percent of its EQIP applications.

Iowa is getting so much funding for CSP that excess projects are getting funded, said Iowa NRCS state public af-



Dan Voss stands on family farmland that has a cover crop of rye on it on Monday in rural Palo. In a few weeks, Voss will be planting seeds for a 30-foot prairie strip. Prairie strips reduce soil erosion, improve water quality and provide wildlife habitat via their perennial vegetation.

APPLICATION DO'S AND DON'T'S

Once EQIP and CSP applications are submitted to one of the 100 NRCS field offices in Iowa, it's up to the field staffers to accept or reject applications and design the conservation projects.

According to Jason Johnson and Sam Adams of the Iowa NRCS state office, here are some factors that play into ranking EQIP and CSP applications:

- The location of your land matters. Certain watersheds

are targeted for conservation partnerships, like the Cedar River watershed, Adams said.

- Good applications are diverse — that means they target several different natural resource concerns like pasture conditions, cover cropping and no-till implementation.

- If proposed projects could destroy cultural resources or harm endangered species, that's a no-no for the NRCS.

fairs specialist Jason Johnson.

Last year, the state received about \$16 million for CSP contracts and about \$30 million for EQIP contracts.

Additionally, it will receive nearly \$5 million for CSP and nearly \$3 million for EQIP specifically for climate-smart conservation practices — like cover crops and no till — from the Inflation Reduction Act. And that funding should continue to increase over the next five years.

"The problem really isn't that we're underfunding," Johnson said. "The problem is we're not getting enough applications."

IMPACTS OF PROGRAMS RESONATE WITH FAMILY

Jim O'Connell's family farm in Palo dates back to the 1960s. Conservation practices have blossomed on the 57-year-old O'Connell's 1,000 acres. Every fall, he combines and plants cover crops. He created an 8-acre wetland on his property to catch and clean runoff from surrounding fields, which would flow into a creek that empties into the Cedar River.

It's hard work — but it's worth it, he said. His soil is more fertile; his crop yields are more consistent; he doesn't spend as much money on fertilizer. And without support from EQIP contracts, he said the projects wouldn't have become reality.

"Those programs helped get me started doing this because they covered a lot of the cost," he said. "That extra little bit to help do another practice and on top of it to save soil and conservation, it helps a lot if we can get some funding for it."

At a nearby 600-acre farm in Palo, Dan Voss stopped tilling some of the fields in 1988. A decade ago, he started planting cover crops with the help of EQIP and CSP. Now, at 67 years old, he's working on adding edge-of-field practices — and he said he has witnessed the long-term financial and agricultural benefits of his conservation efforts.

While he said he probably would've planted cover crops without federal support, and he started implementing no-till long ago, Voss said he most likely wouldn't have pursued edge-of-field practices without support from EQIP and CSP.

"Very few (farmers) really want to do things that harm the environment or the land. But, unfortunately, some of the things we do ... have the potential to do it," he said. "I'd rather be part of the solution than part of the problem."

Brittney J. Miller is the Energy & Environment Reporter for The Gazette and a corps member with Report for America, a national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on under-covered issues.

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Mental health/Linn supervisor pleased with decision

► FROM PAGE 1A

Regional Center, the board passed a budget that allocated \$1.45 million each toward the Linn and Johnson centers.

LINN 'ASTERISK'

Hingtgen said Linn County's allocation comes with an asterisk because of uncertainties surrounding the cost of preparedness, also referred to as the "firehouse model" — the ability to reimburse providers for the cost of being ready with staffing and services when beds aren't at full capacity.

County officials have argued that regional funding and low Medicaid reimbursement rates don't cover the cost of services, and for Linn County the resource gap hinders the center's expansion to 24/7 hours.

A committee of regional mental health CEOs across Iowa will discuss developing a formula establishing a uniform cost of that preparedness, Hingtgen said. Because that formula is not yet

"I don't believe that our access centers can be 100 percent self-sustaining until Medicaid agrees to pay for all the services that are in an access center."

Mae Hingtgen, CEO of East Central Mental Health Region

determined, Linn County's allocation is tentative and could increase.

Hingtgen said there are placeholders in the budget for Linn County to cover 24-hour operations and residential crisis stabilization. Before those can be funded, she said, either Medicaid reimbursements or the regional preparedness formula have to address those services.

The region should support the losses these services sustain, Hingtgen said.

"I don't believe that our access centers can be 100 percent self-sustaining until Medicaid agrees to pay for all the services that are in an access center," Hingtgen said.

REGIONAL CENTERS

Since the two access centers receive funding from the region, they are open to individuals from

the region's nine counties: Benton, Bremer, Buchanan, Delaware, Dubuque, Iowa, Johnson, Jones and Linn.

The Linn and Johnson facilities, which both opened in 2021, are the only two state-designated access centers in the region.

The Linn County Mental Health Access Center is at 501 13th St. NW in Cedar Rapids. Johnson County's GuideLink Center, managed by Abbe Mental Health Center, is at 300 Southgate Ave. in Iowa City.

The facilities offer crisis triage, crisis stabilization and sobering services, among others. The centers take walk-ins and referrals from law enforcement — providing a place other than jail or a hospital emergency room to take people who are experiencing a crisis.

Access hubs in

Dubuque and Benton counties, which are not state-designated and offer a smaller scope of services, received \$550,000 and \$100,000, respectively, in the regional budget. Clients who need higher levels of care are typically referred to an access center. Benton's request was fully funded, but Dubuque's was not, pending receipt of grant funding.

Collectively, the two access centers and two access hubs will receive \$3.55 million, more than the \$4.34 million originally sought.

FUNDING AUTHORITY

Linn County Supervisor Ben Rogers, the county's representative on the regional board, placed an item on the agenda to discuss the funding authority that the managing entities — Linn County and Ab-

beHealth — have over the access centers.

The board moved to approve changing contracts with access centers and access hubs to allow the managing entities to draw down unspent dollars for services that were already provided but not previously eligible for reimbursement. That power is contingent upon the regional board's attorney signing off on the spending authority, as members wanted to study whether they had the legal authority to make such a change.

Johnson County Supervisor Rod Sullivan said he'd be furious if regional staff, a year from now, come to the board and say the panel can't spend down its surplus dollars if they're too high.

"I want to spend every damn thing because we're going to have to give it back (to the state) otherwise," Sullivan said.

Hingtgen cautioned against spending too much of the surplus and said some of those funds likely will be needed next year.

But Dubuque County Supervisor Ann McDonough countered: "We have to survive through this year to keep these services intact to be able to get through next year to worry about a budget hole then."

Overall, Rogers said he was pleased with the discussion and decisions made Thursday to ensure communities could access these services in a timely manner.

"It shows a continued commitment to access centers and the creation of access hubs," Rogers said. "The board showed support for expanding services and tried to meet the greater needs that each of our communities are experiencing."

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Ben Rogers
Linn County supervisor



Rod Sullivan
Johnson County supervisor