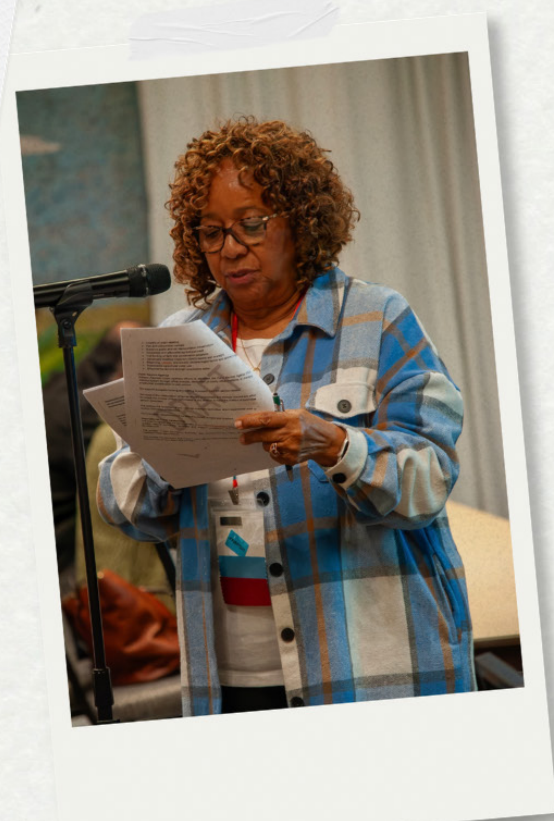




# Kansas Kontakt



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# THE *President's* REPORT

By **DONN TESKE**, KFU President

**"I've always felt that government, and thus, laws, are to enable humans to live together in a society with as little infringement on their personal lives and freedoms as possible."**

I've always felt that government, and thus, laws, are to enable humans to live together in a society with as little infringement on their personal lives and freedoms as possible. Who among us likes it if someone else tells us what we have to do? But it's also necessary to function as a country. The Interstate Road system is pretty cool. Eisenhower had quite a vision with that one. Our national defense, etc.

I've been doing this gig for a long time, and it seems like every year I write a president's report during the legislative session, I share how ashamed I am of the events that shake out at the statehouse as the session moves along. And how

each year I'm more ashamed of our legislators than the previous year.

Well, here we go again. We are now at turn-around, and our legislators haven't done crap except danged stuff that is just forcing their will on the rest of the population, even though most of it affects so few. The bullying, and the arrogance of the bullying, is shameful. When a clergy, whom I respect immensely, gets ushered out of the Senate chambers for publicly shaming the bullies, it's really sad.

All of this junk is going on while it looks to me like they are neglecting the real needs of Kansas.

Our budget, our education system, our county needs, our rapidly declining rural populations, and probably our most important future crisis that needs proactive vision, our potable water resources.

In the Agriculture Committee, we had a classic example of testimony being railroaded through recently: HB 2467. It was introduced one day, and the hearing on it in the Ag Committee was the next. It's a really chickenshit practice to do this, whereas it makes it extremely challenging for opponents to a bill to prepare for the hearing, much less even hear of it. But it has become all too common as our legislative leadership has perfected its bullying. To hell with a fair democratic process.

HB 2467 was presented as a pesticide labeling bill. Everybody who testified in support of it said it was just a labeling bill, that it had nothing to do with liability. We called bull-crap. Kansas Farmers Union policy is opposed to giving pesticide companies exemption from liability issues that they are requesting, so much so that it seems to be the whole gamut of our legal system, the States, the Federal, the Farm Bill, and now in the Judiciary, the Supreme Court. It just seems to me like it's too much of a get-out-of-jail-free card to kill at will. And if that exemption is approved, how widespread through the industry will that ruling spread? Any company can do anything without fear of repercussion??

We had a well-respected agricultural specialist legal-beagle look at the bill, and his analysis was that it was a liability exemption bill.

HB 2467 sailed through the committee and was then rammed through the full House. Now, it's on to the Senate.

In reality, one can argue that it's our word against theirs. That it's ones lawyers' opinion against another lawyer's opinion. That is, until yesterday.

It must have been a decade ago, it was not that long after I was elected National Farmers Union Vice-president, that Crop Life America mistakenly must have thought that I would amount to something and invited me to attend their annual meeting, which was held at the Broadmoor in Colorado Springs. Fancy joint. Waaay above my social comfort level. Anyhow, it was an interesting meeting, but I decided it was a group that I really wasn't very excited to get involved in, and I just pretty much forgot about them. Then, much to my surprise, I received an email a few days ago inviting me to join them for an update on legislative issues in the states. Why me? But I went through the process of registering with them, and I didn't lie about anything. I had to put in my name, the company I was with, and my position in that company. If anyone bothered to read the list, there was Donn Teske, the president of the Kansas Farmers Union. It was a fascinating presentation covering the whole country. When they got to Kansas, I perked up. There were a couple of bills here in Kansas that they addressed, but they really focused on HB 2467. Right there on their powerpoint they had it up there "HB 2467 Pesticide Liability"! It didn't read "pesticide labeling", it read pesticide LIABILITY! Then the staffer reporting on the Kansas bills shared that the three groups working with them in Kansas to get HB 2467 passed are the Modern Ag Alliance (created by Bayer, it says on their website), the Kansas Ag Retailers, and the Kansas Farm Bureau.

On Crop Life America's about page on their website, they share that they are "Building trust through transparency". It just seems to me that if what is being attempted in HB 2467 is honorable, one wouldn't have to hide it in a smokescreen of labeling...

Cooperatively,



# CARRYING ON THE *Tradition*

By **MATTHEW FOWLER**



PHOTO FOWLER SPEAKS DURING 2025 KFU CONVENTION

## Fowler experiences NFU Emerging Leaders and the Legislative Fly-In

I've grown up around the Farmers Union organization for as long as I can remember. From days spent at day camp and teen camp as a kid to attending state meetings and annual conventions, Farmers Union has always been part of my life and my family's story. I've heard countless stories about my grandpa, Raymond Fowler, who proudly attended the National Farmers Union Fly-In years ago and was always a strong advocate for family farms. So, when I received the invitation to attend this year's Emerging Leaders program and Legislative Fly-In in Washington, D.C., I felt both honored and humbled to continue that journey.

The Emerging Leaders event brought together young and beginning Farmers Union members from across the country for several days of learning, connection, and leadership development. We explored the foundation of what makes Farmers

Union unique and had the opportunity to observe a national board meeting, seeing the organization's work in action at the highest level.

For me, this trip can be easily outlined using the three principles of the familiar Farmers Union triangle. The base of the triangle represents education, which has always been the cornerstone of the organization. Education of members and others has long been the foundation of Farmers Union's success. The sides of the triangle represent cooperation and legislation. Cooperation reflects members working together toward common goals and the organization's commitment to cooperative education and business development. Legislation represents Farmers Union's role in policy advocacy, standing up for farmers, ranchers, and rural communities on issues that directly impact our livelihoods and our future.

That final principle of legislation came full circle during the Legislative Fly-In. After a week of learning and preparation, we began visiting lawmakers' offices on Capitol Hill. I remember that morning clearly as a mix of pride and pressure, realizing that what we carried into those meetings wasn't just talking points. It was the collective voice of farmers back home in Kansas and across the country who are facing real challenges. Unpredictable markets, rising input costs, labor shortages, and ongoing uncertainty are daily realities for many family farms.

Sitting across from congressional staffers and elected officials reinforced how important it is to carry yourself with both confidence and humility. Effective advocacy isn't about policy jargon or statistics alone; it's about sharing real stories and helping decision-makers understand the human side of agriculture. We spoke about mental health resources, fair markets, opportunities for the next generation of farmers, and the importance of keeping family agriculture at the center of our national conversation.

That experience reinforced why the Farmers

Union's mission matters so deeply to me. Education prepared me, cooperation gave me support, and legislation allowed me to act, bringing all those values together in a meaningful way.

**"I left Washington, D.C., with a greater appreciation for grassroots advocacy..."**

I left Washington, D.C., with a greater appreciation for the power of grassroots advocacy and for the generations who have stood up for family farmers before us. I'm proud to continue that work and grateful to Farmers Union for providing opportunities for new leaders to grow, connect, and carry the mission forward - from one generation to the next.



# POLICY FROM THE GRASSROOTS

“Our work is practical, serious, and full of comradery.”

By **NICK LEVENDOFSKY**, Executive Director

It was a real honor to serve on the National Farmers Union Policy Committee ten years ago when I was asked to represent KFU at the 2016 NFU Convention in Minneapolis, MN. I remember it being a challenge to get to D.C. with winter storms causing flight delays, and even more challenges at NFU convention surrounding GMO labeling policy.

All in all, though, it was a great experience that introduced me to new friends from across the country and opened my eyes to the vastness and inclusiveness of NFU policy. I certainly did not expect that I would have the same opportunity again, that is, until Donn suggested it last fall when KFU was given a seat on the committee for the second year in a row.

I made my way to D.C. on Sunday, January 10, and while waiting at my gate at KCI Airport, I bumped into Congresswoman Sharice Davids, who serves on the House Agriculture Committee. We had a good visit and made plans to get together for supper while I was in D.C.

The next morning, committee members started filtering into NFU’s D.C. office to begin our work. This year’s policy committee chairman is my friend John Wicks of Montana. John served on the committee last year as Montana Farmers Union’s representative and was recently elected to their board of directors. Other committee members include Alicia Mooney – Arkansas, Braylen Bruns – North Dakota, Rachel LaDrig – Hawai’i, Lora Unruh – Oklahoma, Ivy Jean Reynolds – Rocky Mountain (Colorado), Nate Rudolph – Minnesota, Hans Breitenmoser, Jr. – Wisconsin, and me. I truly believe this group is one of the most representative of Farmers Union members I have seen in a long time.

As we worked our way through the 230+ page policy book, we considered the changes our individual states have made to our own state and national policy documents. Several states presented their proposals to the committee via Zoom and a number of those issues were considered by the committee. We also heard from the minority and majority staff members

of both the House and Senate Agriculture Committees, which was very insightful and helpful to our discussions.

As a committee member, I was able to introduce the following from KFU’s 2026 policy book:

- We endorse a federal or state insurance program protecting any stored and/or priced grain for all state and federally inspected elevators, similar to the federal deposit insurance corporation for banks.
- We urge checkoffs to be more targeted when spending farmers’ money and feels the checkoff’s biggest contribution to the industry should be building regional resilience including public domain genetic improvement, regional processing, and close coordination with the land grant universities on general crop improvement strategies.
- We support federal funding to encourage diversified community-based energy

systems that create jobs in rural areas of the country.

- We support regulating the cryptocurrency industry at the strictest federal banking standards.
- We oppose federal efforts to usurp a state’s authority to conduct elections.
- We support efforts to provide equality of rights enshrined in the U.S. Constitution for all in every aspect of life.

During NFU convention policy debate, delegates are encouraged to voice their opinions with passion, vigor, and respect for all the farmers in our organization in ways that value the diversity of their farms, including their location, their size of operation, and their production methods. Farmers Union policy debate is best when it is pragmatic, jovial, and respectful. Our work is practical, serious, and full of comradery. Policy debate is intended to build our organization by working together and our cooperative spirit is real and at full strength



PHOTO LEVENDOFSKY AND OTHER MEMBERS OF NFU POLICY COMMITTEE

during policy debate.

As one portion of NFU’s Policy Preamble reads, “This document is not a collection of words, but an anthology of the spirit of the hundreds of thousands of family farmers, ranchers, fishers, and their advocates that make up our organization. We dedicate this document, along with our energy and efforts, to bring about long-term meaningful policy that identifies our common thread and utilizes that energy for the common good.”

Cooperatively,

**“This document is not a collection of words, but an anthology of the spirit of the hundreds of thousands of family farmers, ranchers, fishers, and their advocates...”**

**> LEARN MORE ABOUT NATIONAL POLICY AT [nfu.org](http://nfu.org)**

# INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF THE WOMAN FARMER

By **MARY HOWELL**

The United Nations has officially declared 2026 as the International Year of the Woman Farmer. This initiative, led by the U.S., is to enhance the role of women in agriculture globally. This global observance aims to focus on the critical contributions of women to food and agricultural production worldwide. The United States is joined by 123 other nations in the celebration.

Women are responsible for nearly half of the world’s food production. According to the 2022 census of agriculture, the United States had 1.2 million female producers, accounting for 36% of the country’s 3.4 million producers.

This year Kansas Farmers Union is making plans to highlight and celebrate some of the great women farmers of our state. We will be featuring some of them in our newsletter and at our events. We will once again be hosting our great Summer Farm

Tours. Participants love joining in on the tours.

We are asking if you know of someone who would be willing to share their farm and their story with us, please recommend them to us. We also take volunteers. We typically host three tours each summer at 3 to 4 farms each day, in various areas of the state. We highlight all kinds of farming operations in the morning, include a locally sourced lunch, and offer an educational program after lunch. Farm hosts receive a stipend as thanks and also a KFU membership for one year.

If you have requests for tour topics or know of individual farmers who would be willing host a tour of their farm, please let Nick or Mary know.

We hope to visit with you on a tour this summer, where we will focus on some of Kansas’s amazing women farmers!



PHOTO A HIGH TUNNEL AT MCGINN’S GRAPE AND GRAINS, OWNED BY MARK AND FORMER SEN. CAROLYN MCGINN

# Kansas LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

By SEAN GATEWOOD, KFU Contract Lobbyist

**A**s we reach the midpoint of the legislative session, I must admit I was mistaken in expecting a slow year for agricultural and rural policy. Instead, there's been a significant focus on rural health. In the coming weeks, the rural transformation fund programs are set to commence, though it's still unclear which ones will receive final approval. These programs range from home visits by medical assistants to hospital infrastructure projects. With Kansas ranking sixth in funding, the investment is substantial. I hope that the decision-makers will act impartially and wisely.

Senate Bill 328, which allows pharmacists to continue refilling prescriptions and handle some basic prescribing, is especially valuable in rural areas where practitioners are limited, particularly during holidays and weekends. Additionally, the Senate passed reforms on Pharmacy Benefit Managers (PBMs). PBMs negotiate drug costs and approve formularies for patients, but often require the use of mail-order pharmacies and manipulate the rates they pay pharmacies. This puts independent rural pharmacies at a disadvantage. These reforms aim to address this issue, though they face significant challenges in the House.

House Bill 2595 establishes a scholarship program for students at Kansas's two law schools, provided they commit to practicing law in rural Kansas. It passed the House and was included in the budget.

Despite its support, there was some controversy about using government funds for a high-paying profession, which may create obstacles in the Senate.

SB 465 amends Kansas law governing agricultural corporations to include limited liability partnerships among the business entities subject to restrictions on owning or leasing agricultural land and that must obtain county approval before establishing a dairy or swine production facility. The bill adds a new definition of "limited liability partnership" to the act, referencing the definition found in existing Kansas partnership law. It passed out of the Senate Ag committee, but was not exempt, so as of this writing, it is dead.

SB386 and HB2468 are both tax credit/scholarship bills for private schools, also known as school vouchers. These bills make two significant changes to the Kansas education funding law related to scholarship-granting organizations. First, the state of Kansas formally elects to participate in the federal tax credit program established under section 25F of the Internal Revenue Code for individual contributions to scholarship-granting organizations, applicable to all taxable years beginning after December 31, 2026. Under this provision, the state treasurer is required to annually provide the U.S. Treasury Secretary with necessary information, including a list of qualifying scholarship-granting organizations located in Kansas that meet federal requirements.

Second, the act substantially increases the aggregate tax credit limit for Kansas's existing low-income students scholarship program from \$10 million to \$20 million per year beginning in tax year 2026. The legislation maintains existing tax credits against corporate income tax, privilege tax, and premium tax liabilities equal to 75% of contributions made to authorized scholarship-granting organizations for tax years commencing after December 31, 2022. Individual taxpayer contributions remain capped at \$500,000 per tax year, and taxpayers may carry over unused credits to subsequent years until fully utilized.

The bill introduces a new automatic escalation mechanism for the aggregate credit limit beginning in tax years after December 31, 2026. If the secretary determines that total claimed credits exceed 75% of the aggregate limit in any given year, the limit automatically increases by 25% for the following year, though it cannot exceed a maximum cap of \$30 million. The allocation of tax credits among scholarship-granting organizations must be determined through consultation between each organization and the Secretary before issuance of credits. The Secretary of Revenue retains authority to adopt rules and regulations regarding documentation requirements for claiming these credits.

**"I hope that decision-makers will act impartially and wisely."**

HB2476 addresses pesticide labeling requirements by establishing federal compliance as sufficient for state purposes. The act provides that any pesticide registered under Kansas law or federal law that displays a label meeting federal Environmental Protection Agency standards shall automatically satisfy all state warning and labeling requirements related to health and safety.

Specifically, pesticides are deemed compliant if their labels align with either the most recent EPA human health assessment or the EPA's carcinogenicity classification. This provision applies not only to statutory requirements under Kansas's agricultural chemical act but also to any common law duties to warn or label. The bill passed the House with less than a veto-proof majority, so it may be subject to a veto and override attempt.

SB317 amends the state's water technical assistance fund and water projects grant fund to establish

more comprehensive criteria for their operation and management.

The bill requires municipalities applying for grants related to water distribution or supply to demonstrate they have at least a 25-year water supply available, unless the application is specifically for a new water supply source that would extend their supply beyond 25 years. Notably, the legislation prohibits the use of grant funds to address issues related to water rights impaired by another water right.

The bill establishes a detailed prioritization system for evaluating applications based on seven key criteria, each scored from 0 to 5: public health impacts, responsible management of existing resources, long-term population trends, additional funding sources, economic impact, regional cooperation, and extreme weather resiliency. Applications must be submitted annually by September 15, and the Kansas Water Office will publish scores for all applications after announcing awards.

For municipalities with populations under 8,000, the bill requires that at least 50% of the annual technical assistance fund be awarded to them when sufficient applications exist. Larger municipalities with more than 50,000 residents must demonstrate either a threat to public health or a disproportionate burden on low-income populations to be eligible. The legislation also includes provisions allowing grants to be revoked under certain circumstances, including failure to accept the award within 45 days, lack of substantial performance, or evidence of fraud, with revoked grants requiring repayment to the Kansas Water Office. The bill passed the Senate unanimously.

 **LEARN MORE ABOUT THE 2026 KS LEGISLATIVE SESSION AT [kslegislature.gov](http://kslegislature.gov)**



PHOTO KANSAS SENATE CHAMBER ON THE FIRST DAY OF THE LEGISLATIVE SESSION / EVERT NELSON, THE CAPITAL-JOURNAL

# FARMERS UNION MEMBERS TO GATHER IN THE

## “Big Easy”

By **TOM GIESSEL**

The annual convention of the National Farmers Union will run March 7-9 this year in New Orleans, Louisiana. Farmers and ranchers from across the nation will gather to share their concerns, tell their stories, and formulate policy, with a focus on both short- and long-term concerns and issues.

This convention will mark the third time in our 124-year history that members will assemble in New Orleans. The first time, in 1976, our nation celebrated its bicentennial. Kansas Farmers Union was well represented with over 100 members in attendance. Without a doubt, this ranks as the largest post-World War II participation of KFU. This was due to the fact that KFU experienced a large surge in membership two years earlier after a herculean effort to regain our charter from NFU [at that time, 5,000 members was the threshold for a state charter]. One notable occurrence was a ceremony announcing the issuance of the third in a series of Bicentennial Era special USPS stamps, which recognized the American Farmer. One other draw for KFU members to attend this convention was a very attractive travel package offered by KFU. Round-trip airfare out of Wichita, five nights lodging, and convention registration were all included with a price tag of \$250.00!

Eight years later, in 1984, New Orleans again was the site of the NFU annual convention. At this convention, John Carlin, Kansas governor, was the keynote speaker. He gave a great speech and made

the Kansans in attendance very proud. The 1980's were tough times in rural America. Commodity prices had fallen through the floor, and farm bankruptcies were commonplace. In Washington, D.C., there was an attack on both traditional farm programs, as well as food and fiber policies in general. Farmers Union was, once again, on the frontlines of the battle.

March 7-9 finds us in New Orleans for our 124th NFU annual convention – exactly 50 years from the initial trek to the ‘Big Easy’. The long list of challenges we face is, indeed, “big.” And, on the political front, they are not “easy.” We gather in a national convention, and we connect with our fellow farmers and ranchers from across the nation, with the eternal pursuit: “to establish Justice, secure Equity and apply the Golden Rule”. \* By pursuing our goals with this long-standing sense of purpose, along with a common beating heart, collectively, this represents something larger than our individuality.

*\*As stated in the Preamble of our original constitution.*





# A GATHERING OF *Friends*

KFU members gathered at state convention to elect leadership, celebrate family farm supporters, and advance policy

PHOTO KFU MEMBERS TOM GIESSEL, KATE GIESSEL, SHERYL GIESSEL, AND DONNA PEARSON MCCLISH EMBRACE AT STATE CONVENTION

## POLICY

Kansas Farmers Union (KFU) has a rich history of working to protect and promote the interests of family farmers and ranchers by taking a leadership role in advocating for farming, ranching, and agricultural interests across the state.

Through grassroots policy and local involvement, KFU members and staff play a key role in bringing concerns, issues, and needs to the attention of local, state, and national decision makers. KFU's 2026 policy document was proposed, discussed, and ratified at the recent state convention held in Wichita November 18-19.

"Policy drafting went very well, with all delegates having the opportunities to contribute to our truly grass-roots policy, which gives our staff and members direction," KFU President Donn Teske said.

KFU members renewed their support of Public Law 480 Food for Peace and added significant language under a new section titled International People-to-People Solidarity and Aid.

Language was also added supporting the reinstatement, expansion, full funding, and promotion of farm-to-school and farm-to-institution programs as well as proportionate and adequate funding of the Kansas Center for Sustainable Agriculture & Alternative Crops (KCSAAC).

Under State & Federal Commodity Checkoffs, Kansas Farmers Union feels that checkoffs can be a viable tool to build markets for their products but should be a voluntary contribution. KFU urges checkoffs to be more targeted when spending farmers' money and feels the checkoff's biggest contribution to the industry should be building regional resilience including public domain genetic improvement, regional processing, and close coordination with the land grant universities on general crop improvement strategies.

### KFU Policy now supports:

- The elimination of Daylight Savings Time
- The establishment of a minimum 25% corporate income tax
- Expediting specialty crop insurance development through the Risk Management Agency (RMA)
- All cryptocurrency industries be regulated to the strictest federal banking standards

### KFU Policy now opposes:

- Private equity firms investing in agricultural real estate
- The use of state and federal taxes to fund the detention and deportation of individuals without due process
- Ethanol pipelines
- The transfer of surface or ground water and water rights from one watershed to another, including the transfer of water from the Missouri River
- Data centers being built on Kansas farmland
- The exorbitant filing fee on H-1B visa applications as it relates to specialty occupations including scientists and technology experts
- Fee-based subscription technology in farm equipment

KFU members voted to encourage state and federal governments, private and public companies, and others to promote and provide a living wage as an essential aspect of work to ensure all workers, families, and communities can live in dignity.

**"The core of who we are comes from the hearts and minds of our members."**

Policy now strongly urges that all water allocation practices, including irrigation, and future development, including Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs), conform to strict conservation principles to assure the wisest use

of water to minimize the possibilities for adverse environmental and economic impact on affected communities.

Under the Voting & Democracy section, KFU strongly opposes federal efforts to usurp the state's authority to conduct elections as they see fit. The policy supports protecting and strengthening voting rights, expanding ways to make voting easier, including mail-in ballots. Members also renewed support for making elections democratically representative by ending partisan gerrymandering.

KFU members also strongly support the rights enshrined in the U.S. Constitution and Amendments to equally protect all persons in the United States. This includes strong protections for the First, Fourth, and Fourteenth Amendments.

“The core of who we are comes from the hearts and minds of our members,” said KFU member Tom Giessel, Larned. “Providing a ‘sense of place’ for members to express their thoughts and beliefs is foundational to our purpose and success.”

**KFU's Special Orders of Business for 2026 include:**

- Opposition to Medicare Advantage
- Priorities for the Next Farm Bill
- United States Postal Service
- Protecting Civilization in a Climate Crisis

New policy priorities added to the Next Farm Bill Special Order include re-establishing a strong nutrition title that supports the food and nutrition security of communities and that increases opportunities for local and regional procurement.

Additional farm bill policy calls for a policy of parity for farmers and ranchers and supports the re-establishment and full funding of the Grain Inspection, Packers and Stockyards Administration (GIPSA), and the critical services provided to our nation's farmers, ranchers, and consumers.



**PHOTO** NORTH DISTRICT DIRECTOR AMANDA LINDAHL SPEAKS DURING POLICY SESSION

## LEADERSHIP AND AWARDEES

### Leadership

Kansas Farmers Union Vice President Matt Ubel, Wheaton, was re-elected to a two-year term. Ubel is a generational farmer who raises row crops, cattle, and kids with his wife, Leah, near Wheaton, KS. Along with his brother, Matt owns and operates a custom application business. He is also active in local government at the county level.

KFU board members Jill Elmers, Lawrence, and Donna Pearson McClish, Wichita, were re-elected to three-year terms representing the North and South Districts, respectively. Elmers has owned and operated Moon on the Meadow farm near Lawrence since 2003 and raises 30-40 different kinds of certified organic vegetables, small fruits, herbs and flowers on her farm's three acres and the 30-acre Common Harvest Farms she owns with partners. Pearson McClish is a multi-generation urban farmer; owner, and operator of Common Ground Producers and Growers, Inc., a unique mobile food hub that serves both urban and rural families.

Delegates elected to represent KFU at the National Farmers Union (NFU) Convention in New Orleans, LA March 7-9, 2026 include James Bowden, Gypsum; Donna Pearson McClish, Wichita; Sheila

Kjellberg, Salina; Amanda Lindahl, Chapman; Jazelle Thomas, Wichita; and Scott Kohl, St. George. KFU Executive Director Nick Levendofsky, Courtland, will represent KFU on the National Farmers Union Policy Committee at the national convention.

“I am honored to serve in this role to represent KFU members and their grassroots policy at the national level,” said Levendofsky, “I look forward to working with other Farmers Union members from across the country to present and advance policies that benefit family farmers and ranchers and their communities.”

### Awardees

Recipients of the 2025 Ruth Hirsh Friend of the Family Farmer Award included Senator Mary Ware, Wichita and former Kansas State Farm Service Agency (FSA) Executive Director Dennis McKinney, Greensburg.

Senator Ware was elected to her first term in the Kansas Senate in 2018 where she represented parts of Wichita in Sedgwick County until her recent resignation. Senator Ware served as the ranking member of the Senate Agriculture Committee and championed many issues on behalf of Kansas family farmers during her time in the Senate.

Dennis McKinney was appointed by the Biden Administration to serve as the State Executive Director of the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) in Kansas in February 2022. McKinney is a Kansas farmer and cattle producer in southern Kiowa and northern Comanche counties and served as a Kansas State Representative and Kansas State Treasurer.

Wes Jackson is the recipient of the 2025 Linda Hessman Lifetime Achievement

Award for Service to Rural Kansas. Jackson is a prominent environmentalist and plant geneticist known for co-founding The Land Institute, near Salina, KS. “It was a pleasure and honor to have the opportunity to present the legendary Wes Jackson with our beloved Linda Hessman Lifetime Achievement Award,” President Teske said.

Tom Giessel, Larned, was honored for participating in his 50th consecutive Kansas Farmers Union Convention. Giessel, who recently retired from farming, serves as the amateur historian for National Farmers Union and is a regular presenter on Farmers Union history at national and state conventions. Giessel was presented with a framed, pewter Farmers Union medallion that was once part of the late NFU President Tony Dechant's personal collection.

Jeff Downing, General Manager of Farmers Union Midwest Agency (FUMA) was the recipient of FUMA Insurance Agent of the Year. Downing has been part of the Farmers Union Insurance family for 21 years and will be retiring March 2026.

President Teske informed convention participants that he also intends to step aside at the end of his two-year term in 2026, “so the dynamic young leaders and board members who make up the organization can step up.”



**PHOTO** FORMER KANSAS SEN. MARY WARE ACCEPTS 2025 RUTH HIRSCH FRIEND OF THE FAMILY FARMER AWARD

# SPEAKERS

Speakers explored how climate, policy, mental health, mentorship, and more are shaping the Kansas agricultural industry and its people.

## Policy

### Kansas Appleseed and Harvesters Updates

In 2023, 14% of Kansans experienced food insecurity, according to Feeding America. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) helps alleviate that food insecurity for nearly 188,000 Kansans every month. Haley Kottler of Kansas Appleseed and Karen Siebert of Harvesters explored how changes to SNAP could affect Kansans.

For every single meal distributed by a food bank, SNAP delivers nine more. That means that if SNAP were to lose just 10% of funding, food banks would need to double their capacity to bridge the gaps.

While SNAP has secured funding for the next fiscal year, new caveats may affect the program's viability. In Kansas, HR1 (the "One Big Beautiful Bill Act") will shift roughly \$40 million in costs onto the state and add \$15–20 million in administrative expenses.

### Kansas Legislative Update

Sean Gatewood, KFU contract lobbyist, shared his predictions for the 2026 Kansas Legislative Session. He anticipates a fast-paced session with special attention paid to budget considerations, bills still in play from last year due to the biennium, and various health and food issues.

"I do not anticipate significant policy changes during this session, particularly in agriculture. However, food policy may see some interesting developments due to the current state of SNAP," Gatewood said. "Although this session is expected to be brief, there is a goal to cut \$200 million from the state budget."

The federal government's shifting of \$50–60 million in SNAP expenses onto the state, as well as other

funding issues, underscores the need for careful budget management. While Gatewood doesn't foresee the Legislature cutting SNAP, substantial program costs will warrant extensive attention.

Other topics likely up for discussion include the Trump administration's call for redistricting, the Kansas Supreme Court's ruling allowing driver's license gender marker changes for transgender individuals, and HR1 plans to reform rural healthcare. Gatewood also expects sports gambling contracts and contract nurse staffing at state hospitals to be discussed.

### NFU Washington Update

Layla Soberanis, National Farmers Union (NFU) government relations representative, and Charlie Decker, NFU advocacy coordinator, updated attendees on the organization's legislative successes and 2026 policy priorities.

NFU hosted its annual legislative fly-in under the theme "For Farmers' Sake." Key advocacy topics included Farm Bill 2.0, congressional oversight on tariffs and trade policy, a reformed agricultural workforce that supports farmers and H-2A workers, biofuel usage, and USDA funding.

While the existing farm bill now extends until Sept. 30, 2026, NFU remains steadfast in its advocacy for the passage of a modernized Farm Bill 2.0. Key desired reforms include a strengthened farm safety net, improved disaster protections, policies ensuring competitive markets, enhanced farmer-friendly conservation programs, and food and nutrition security for all Americans.

## Health & Community

### Weathering the Storm in Agriculture: Cultivating Resiliency and a Productive Mindset

According to the Rural Health Association, farmers are 3.5 times more likely to die by suicide than the general population. K-State Research and Extension (KSRE) agents Rachael Clews and Sharon Erickson-Fryback explored the effects of farm stress and ways individuals and communities can combat it.

Market performance, land payments, and

generational succession— the list of stressors unique to farming is long. Often, signs of stress are overlooked or ignored, which can lead to poor mental and physical health. Isolation, perceived stigma, and a lack of mental health resources in many rural areas often mean these issues go unaddressed for farmers.

Clews and Erickson-Fryback emphasized the importance of remaining vigilant for signs that someone is struggling. If you or someone you know is struggling, call or text 988.

### Farmer Mentorship

For certified organic farmer Jack Geiger, mentorship has become a tool for shaping more resilient rural communities.

Geiger began mentoring through his farm's YouTube channel in the 2010s. Now serving as a mentor through the USDA's Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP), he has built a system of networking opportunities and digital resources available to producers.

Geiger has worked with over 20 mentees, many of

whom are veterans. His goal is to equip mentees with the tools and relationships they need to build profitable operations that align with their personal ethics and goals. The true value Geiger sees in farmer mentorship is the community it builds.

"Farmer mentorship is a key part of the solution to declining rural populations," Geiger said. "We're helping farmers build successful operations in rural areas by providing technical assistance, hands-on training, and most importantly, a community of supportive peers."

Organic farmer Jake Koehn, one of Geiger's mentees, has seen the value of farmer mentorship in his own operation. Learning from experienced producers has helped Koehn make informed decisions and think creatively.

For Koehn, the lessons he's learned from mentorship can be summed up succinctly: "The hardest ground to farm is the ground between your ears."



PHOTO HALEY KOTTLER, KANSAS APPLESEED, AND KAREN SIEBERT, HARVESTERS, COVER RECENT SNAP CHANGES

**“The hardest ground to farm is the ground between your ears.”**

**Visioning the Heartland Food Hub and Strengthening the Kansas Food System**

Led by the Kansas Wesleyan University Community Resilience Hub (KWU-CRH), the Heartland Food Hub Feasibility Study explored the viability of a Salina-based food hub that would connect local producers with nearby institutions. Stephanie Pearl, owner of Adaptive Roots Consulting, and Sheila Kjellberg, KWU-CRH coordinator, shared preliminary findings from the study.

Preliminary findings indicate that a food hub of this scale would not be financially feasible. Rather than the end, Kjellberg and Pearl view the study as the beginning of a larger conversation about the value of regional food hubs in Kansas.

“Exploring the feasibility of a food hub was a very important part of informing the future food systems work of the Community Resilience Hub,” Kjellberg said. “Collecting farmer-led information and support allowed us to not only put numbers into valuable spreadsheets but make sure the heartbeat of this report was powered by the same folks who are growing our food.”

**Kansas Rural Justice Initiative**

In 99 of Kansas’ 100 rural counties, the attorney-to-resident ratio is two or fewer per 1,000 residents. This critical shortage means rural Kansans have extremely limited access to legal services, and accessing them often brings additional time, travel, and financial burdens.

Established in 2022 by the Kansas Supreme Court, the Kansas Rural Justice Initiative explored the causes of this

crisis and made recommendations to help address it. Attorney Laurel Klein Searles, an initiative committee member, shared about the program’s December 2024 findings and the progress made since then.

The initiative developed several key recommendations for the rural attorney crisis, including the establishment of a rural attorney training program, a loan repayment program, and the formation of a professional rural attorney organization. Since the 2024 findings, the committee has worked to encourage current law students to consider practicing in rural areas and to build interest in rural practice among younger students.

**Climate Kansas Climate**

Chip Redmond, Kansas Mesonet manager for the K-State Department of Agronomy, shared about his work collecting weather data, sources for accurate weather information, and overall changes in the Kansas climate.

The Kansas Mesonet uses weather stations across the state to collect extensive weather and climate data. The team is careful to anticipate and quickly



PHOTO STEPHANIE PEARL, ADAPTIVE ROOTS CONSULTING, COVERS THE HEARTLAND FOOD HUB FEASIBILITY STUDY



PHOTO SARAH GREEN READS FROM HER PUBLISHED ZINE, MOVEABLE MONUMENT

mitigate any factors that may inaccurately skew data, such as equipment failures or animal activity. This data is then used to inform open-access weather and climate reports.

While Redmond encourages producers to use climate and weather data to help inform their decision-making, he stressed the importance of using data from reliable sources. It’s easy to draw different conclusions from the same data, depending on how it’s portrayed and who is providing the information. As a general rule, Redmond says those with professional meteorology training are a good place to start.

**History**

**Rooted in Resilience: The Story of the Kansas Farmers Union**

For Tom and daughter Kate Giessel, navigating current challenges in agriculture starts with a deep understanding of the history that brought us to this moment. Their presentation explored how the Kansas Farmers Union (KFU) has grown as an organization while staying true to its core values.

Since 1907, KFU has operated at the crossroads of agriculture, advocacy, and community. Legislative fly-ins and farmer-led policy development have ensured farmer voices are heard in the highest offices. The grassroots activism and policy that

defined KFU’s early years are still active and thriving today.

Through the many challenges and changes American agriculture has faced over the last century, KFU has maintained a special sense of dedication and support among members. The community spirit and desire for positive change that drove farmers to join KFU in the early 1900s still inspire farmers today.

**Moveable Monument: The Story of the Ladies’ Columbian Corn Fountain**

Sarah Green, author of the zine Moveable Monument, shared the story of the Ladies’ Columbian Corn Fountain, which her publication explores. Initially built for the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, the fountain has survived abandonment, severe disrepair, and fluctuating public approval. Today, the 10-foot-tall limestone ear of corn calls the Kansas State Fairgrounds in Hutchinson home.

After the 1893 exposition, it was shipped back to Hutchinson, where it was displayed at a city park. Over time, the fountain and park fell into disrepair before both were eventually removed.

The fountain then disappeared, only to be found again in a trash heap years later. After being placed in a storage facility, State Fair administrators eventually repaired and installed it near the Administration Building, where it still sits.

For Green, the fountain tells not only the story of Kansas civic engagement, public art, and community pride, but also the story of Kansas agriculture.

“Moveable Monument has so many historic connections to Kansas agriculture that resonate today,” Green said. “It was an honor to share the story and gather feedback from Kansans who are engaged in related work in their own communities.”

➤ **LEARN MORE ABOUT STATE CONVENTION AT [kansasfarmersunion.org](https://kansasfarmersunion.org)**

# HOMEGROWN

# Prosperity

## HOMEGROWN PROSPERITY



**“Cooperatives give communities a proven way to shape their own economic future.”**

**K**ansas Farmers Union, Missouri Farmers Union, Common Ground Producers & Growers, and NCBA CLUSA are pleased to announce that the associations have received support to launch the Homegrown Prosperity initiative, a two-year effort focused on expanding cooperative education, readiness and early-stage development opportunities for rural communities in Kansas and Missouri. This project is supported in part by a 2025 grant from the Patterson Family Foundation.

The Homegrown Prosperity initiative will provide rural residents with access to cooperative development training, community-based technical assistance, and tailored support for groups exploring cooperative solutions to local economic and social challenges. Through collaboration with grassroots partners and local leaders, the initiative aims to strengthen rural resilience, expand economic opportunity, and build community-owned pathways to long-term prosperity.

“Cooperatives give communities a proven way to shape their own economic future,” said Cristine Nardi, director of U.S. Cooperatives and

Economic Development at NCBA CLUSA. “With support from The Patterson Family Foundation, the Homegrown Prosperity initiative will expand access to cooperative education, helping rural Americans explore community-owned solutions that strengthen resilience, create opportunity and keep wealth rooted locally.”

The following organizations will partner over the next two years to implement the project:

The National Cooperative Business Association CLUSA International (NCBA CLUSA) is the primary voice in the United States for people who use cooperatives to build a better world. NCBA CLUSA works to build a better world and a more inclusive economy that empowers people to contribute to shared prosperity and well-being for themselves and future generations.

Kansas Farmers Union & Missouri Farmers Union are individual grassroots family farm organizations that have worked to protect and enhance the economic interests and quality of life for family farmers, ranchers, and their communities throughout their respective states.

Common Ground Mobile Farmers Market and Mobile Food Hub has made a significant impact on urban agriculture while providing fresh produce to food deserts and food-insecure areas in the Wichita, KS region.

“We are excited to be working - boots on the ground - with NCBA CLUSA, to provide outreach and education on cooperative development throughout rural Kansas,” said Kansas Farmers Union President Donn Teske. “Cooperatives and cooperation has been one of the foundation stones of Kansas Farmers Union since its founding in 1907. We thank the Patterson Family Foundation for deeming this project a worthwhile project to improve quality of life for rural people.”

“As we strengthen the local and regional food system, and look for ways to support family farmers, the cooperative structure merits consideration as a possible configuration to address challenges and bring different entities together when forming partnerships,” said Missouri Farmers Union President Tom Coudron

“Common Ground Producers and Growers is thrilled to partner with NCBA CLUSA, Kansas Farmers Union, and Missouri Farmers Union on the Homegrown Prosperity grant,” said Common Ground CEO Donna Pearson McClish. “We’re eager to foster meaningful connections in rural communities and to share valuable insights about the incredible benefits of community cooperatives.”

The organizations will share updates on program activities, learning and impact throughout the grant period as cooperative-ready groups and communities participate in training, feasibility exploration and early-stage cooperative development milestones. Look for more information about the initiative on each organization’s website in the coming weeks.



**LEARN MORE ABOUT HOMEGROWN PROSPERITY BY SCANNING OR CONTACTING NICK AT [nick@kansasfarmersunion.org](mailto:nick@kansasfarmersunion.org)**



# FARMER BRIDGE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Kansas Farmers Union (KFU) members gathered in November 2025 at our state convention to debate and consider policy priorities for 2026. One of those policies includes language that reads, “If a farmer cannot raise a crop that covers the cost of inputs and makes a profit, then they are not making a living wage.”

Unfortunately, that is where most farmers have been trying to live for some time, and this misguided trade war compounded already high input costs, low commodity prices, rising inflation, and growing corporate control of the ag industry.

These bridge payments may help some farmers cover some of their costs, but according to North Dakota State University economists, farmers have lost in excess of \$44 billion with all of the aforementioned factors taken into account, and

there are some farmers who won't benefit from these payments at all.

The Trump administration's \$12 billion bailout to farmers won't come anywhere close to covering all of the losses incurred, and we are not convinced these proposed payments will be equitably distributed based on past relief programs. At the end of the day, farmers want trade, not aid.

We call on Congress and the administration to prioritize developing and passing a new Farm Bill that reflects today's challenges and realities. A better farm safety net, stable and fair markets, and stronger protections to address consolidation in agriculture must also be prioritized if we truly want to make systematic change that benefits farmers, consumers, and the economy.



# FOOD FOR PEACE MOVES TO USDA



Kansas Farmers Union (KFU), longtime supporter of P.L. 480 Food for Peace, is pleased to learn that the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) has reached an interagency agreement with the U.S. State Department to take on the work of Food for Peace.

Food for Peace, once part of the now defunct U.S. Agency for International Development, was defunded as part of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) cuts in early 2025. Following the cut to Food for Peace, U.S. Representative Tracey Mann and U.S. Senator Jerry Moran of Kansas introduced legislation that would move the program to USDA's Foreign Agricultural Service. Since introducing the legislation, though, neither the House or Senate Foreign Relations Committee held hearings on the bill.

“I am glad to hear that Food for Peace will have a new home at USDA's Foreign Agricultural Service,” said KFU Executive Director Nick Levendofsky. “While this is an encouraging step in the right direction, I worry there won't be enough funding or capacity to meet the needs of those across the world struggling with food insecurity. I am hopeful that Congress and the administration recognize these concerns and funds and staffs the program at the level it was prior to the DOGE cuts,” he said.

KFU member and farmer emeritus Tom Giessel of Larned, KS, has been a passionate advocate for Food for Peace and recently traveled with a group of KFU members to Washington, D.C. to lobby for its continued funding. “Farmers shipping grain to where people are hungry – that we did these kinds of things is really what made America great,” said Giessel.

KFU looks forward to supporting USDA's efforts to ensure that Food for Peace remains a viable program to address food insecurity across the globe.



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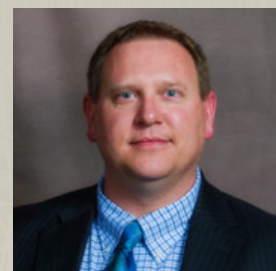
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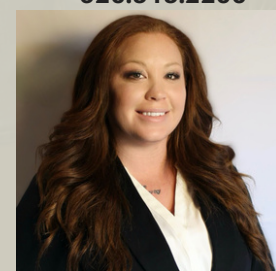
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