



Grassroots

Winter / Spring 2025

A Quarterly Newsletter from the
Iowa Farmers Union

Since 1915, Iowa Farmers Union members have worked together to strengthen the independent family farm through legislation, education and cooperation and to provide Iowans with safe food, a clean environment and healthy communities.



BOARD OF DIRECTORS

President Aaron Heley Lehman, Polk City;
 Vice President Ryan Marquardt, Van Meter;
 Treasurer Karen Varley, Stuart;
 Assistant Treasurer Haleigh Summers, Ames;
 Secretary Suzan Erem, West Branch;
 John Gilbert, Iowa Falls; Chris Henning, Cooper;
 Beth Hoffman, Lovilla;
 Joshua Manske, Algona; Chris Petersen, Clear Lake;
 Shaffer Ridgeway, Waterloo; Jerry Rosman, Harlan;
 Aidan Struve, Woodward; Tony Thompson, Elkhart;
 Berleen Wobeter, Toledo;
 Beginning Farmer Representative Elle Gadiant, Hopkinton

STAFF

Matt Russell, Interim Executive Director;
 Deborah Bunka, Membership & Fundraising Director;
 Christina Dexter, Communications Director;
 Tommy Hexter, Policy Director;
 Jonathan Lawrence, Education Director



Iowa Farmers Union
 mailing address:
 P.O. Box 1883, Ames, IA 50010
www.iowafarmersunion.org

Cover photo contributed by Suzan Erem, West Branch, IA.



Photo Source: The Chicago Tribune

A Letter from the President: Fighting for Swampbuster

By: Aaron Lehman,
 Iowa Farmers Union President

It's kind of like the old farmer adage, "If you want to fill a hole, the first step is to stop digging the hole deeper." The Swampbuster provision of the Farm Bill does just that.

Before 1985, nothing stopped farm program benefits from going to those who were draining the few remaining wetlands left in rural America. But in 1985, Congress passed the Swampbuster provisions as part of the Farm Bill to protect the public benefits wetland provide, including groundwater recharge, water quality, flood control, habitat protection, and recreation.

Just to be clear, congress doesn't intend to regulate farmers with Swampbuster. Instead, it just stops paying people who are acting outside the public interest.

In fact, many environmental historians call Swampbuster and its policy sister "Sodbuster" the most effective policy innovations in the last 50 years to improve water quality and to reduce soil erosion.

Of course, the rules that define what makes a wetland have been carefully scrutinized. That happens often at the local, state, and federal level as we learn more about soil health, water quality, and habitat needs.

But the fundamental principles still apply. We need wetlands. We shouldn't pay people destroying them.

But a holding company in Northeast Iowa is attempting to change all that. They have filed a

lawsuit against the USDA with the help of a well-financed conservative legal behemoth challenging environmental laws all over the country. The lawsuit, if successful, would sink “Swampbuster” for good, and most likely “Sodbuster” too.

All on the idea that those participating in voluntary farm programs shouldn't have any rules that protect downstream farmers from additional flooding. Or that protect our local landscapes and natural resources. Or that improve our state's water quality and natural habitat. Iowa Farmers Union supported Swampbuster and Sodbuster provisions during their passage in 1985 and we support them now.

The Iowa Farmers Union, along with Food & Water Watch, Dakota Rural Action, and Iowa Environmental Council was allowed to intervene in the Swampbuster case on December 3. The judge in the case rejected the plaintiff's efforts to remove us from the case. We will make our arguments as the case progresses in 2025.

This is especially important as a new administration brings new priorities into the USDA. With the help of our legal

partners, Environmental Law Policy Center, IFU will remain a strong voice for common sense farm policy that protects our natural resources and the rights of downstream farmers.

Farmers Union members Elle Gadiant and John Gilbert have stepped forward as intervenors on behalf of the Iowa Farmers Union and deserve our thanks for illustrating how important this issue is to family farmers and sustainable agriculture.

As is often the case, John says it best...”At a time when almost daily there is more evidence linking Iowa's deplorable water quality and its sky-high cancer rates, we're glad to play a small role in the fight against a predatory out-of-state land speculator and carpet-bagging lawyers who seem to think they're entitled to plunder our natural resources, simply to satisfy their greed.”

Learn more by reading a recent article in the Chicago Tribune and tune into a recent IFU Lunch and Learn on the topic.

Food System Coalition Hosts Food & Farm Day on the Hill

On January 23, 2025, members of the Iowa Food System Coalition, including the Iowa Farmers Union, gathered at the Iowa State Capitol to celebrate food systems success and advocate for a stronger, more sustainable food system in Iowa. As part of our “Food Farms Deserve a Bigger Slice of the Pie” campaign, we served fresh pie and took the opportunity to meet with lawmakers, highlighting key issues that matter to our rural communities and food systems.

One of our top priorities is the expansion of the Double Up Food Bucks (DUFEB) program, which allows SNAP recipients to double their dollars for fresh produce, both in grocery stores and at farmers markets. This program not only helps low-income Iowans access healthy food but also provides a vital market for Iowa's farmers. We were thrilled to see progress on Senate Study Bill 1012, which would allocate \$1 million to expand the DUFEB program and broaden its impact across the state.

Another major focus is the Choose Iowa local purchasing program and value-added grants program, which help connect Iowa-grown products with food banks and schools and provide much-needed grants for small farms to invest in equipment and infrastructure. Coalition members recognize this program as an engine for local food markets to become viable in Iowa, providing farmers around the state with the capital and the purchasing dollars to support their communities with high quality food and through local food



Nearly 70 Iowans attended the Jan. 23 Food and Farm Day on the Hill

donations. We are pushing to substantially increase the budget for Choose Iowa so that it can continue to grow and benefit farmers and consumers alike.

Additionally, we are advocating for House File 59, which would create a \$2 million fund to support rural grocery store improvements and local produce processing equipment. These investments will help ensure food access in rural communities and keep our local economies strong. Our day at the Capitol, with over 50 advocates present from around the state and 8 different organizations tabling together, was a reminder of the power of collaboration and the importance of continuing to fight for policies that support Iowa's farmers and food systems. We're excited to keep pushing for these critical initiatives in the year ahead.

IFU WELCOMES MATT RUSSELL AS INTERIM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

In February, the Iowa Farmers Union announced that Matt Russell had joined the organization as its interim executive director. Russell's wealth of experience in agricultural leadership and long history of involvement with the Farmers Union makes him capable of leading the organization into a season of growth and expansion.

As former State Executive Director of the USDA Farm Service Agency in Iowa for the Biden Administration, Russell understands the support needed now more than ever for family-scale farmers in the face of a consolidated ag industry.

"Iowa farmers are in a great position to provide the solutions Iowans need for increasing conservation, improving water quality, and diversifying our rural communities," said Russell. "IFU is investing in farmers and ranchers, rural communities, and consumers to advance a hopeful and abundant future for Iowa."

After a year of significant growth for IFU, Russell took on the role as David Andrews, former executive director, moved into retirement.

"As I retire from this role with IFU, I feel comfortable handing this position off to a very capable individual with great experience, Matt Russell," said Andrews. "IFU, Iowa's oldest farm organization, has led the fight to support small to midsize family farmers, beginning farmers, and fruit and vegetable growers around the state, and I know that will continue."

As interim executive director of IFU, Russell will focus his efforts on working with members, the board, and staff to evaluate expanded programming, identify challenges, and prioritize opportunities for advancing IFU's mission.

"Iowa Farmers Union is in a strong position. We've had nearly a decade of year-over-year membership growth and continue to expand our programming and outreach," said Russell. "With so much change in agriculture, Farmers Union continues to lead the nation as a general farm organization supporting a wide diversity of farmers and ranchers."

Russell is a fifth-generation Iowa farmer who grew up on a commodity and livestock farm in Cass County. He now co-owns and operates Coyote Run Farm near Lacona, Iowa, with his spouse, Patrick Standley. In 2018, Russell became the Executive Director of Iowa Interfaith Power and Light, a statewide faith-

based climate action organization. Prior to that, he spent 12 years on staff at the Drake University Agricultural Law Center. He has been an active member of Iowa Farmers Union for over 20 years.

"David was instrumental in building the Iowa Farmers Union into a new phase of growth and activity," said IFU President Aaron Lehman. "We are grateful for David's expertise, devotion, and guidance to the Farmers Union and look forward to our relationship with him in his next phase as he moves ahead. Matt Russell will play an important interim role with the Farmers Union as we transition into our next leadership opportunity. The future is bright at the Iowa Farmers Union, and we are excited about what will come next."



Matt Russell farms in Marion County, IA.

Letter to the IFU Membership from Matt Russell:

"What a great time to be a member of the Iowa Farmers Union! When I was leading Iowa Interfaith Power and Light, which is now called Iowa Faith and Climate Network, I used to say, "Who you are is who the world needs right now."

I firmly believe that who we are as Iowa Farmers Union is who the world needs right now to move Iowa into a hopeful and abundant future. As all of agriculture and rural America scramble to adjust to the draconian cuts to funding and federal staff by the Trump administration, IFU leaders and members are speaking up to

defend the important investments USDA makes in Iowa farmers, researchers, rural communities, food security, and the workforce that delivers all of it.

We are not ducking the questions. We are not keeping our powder dry for a later fight. We are boldly speaking the truth to the media, to our members, to our partnering organizations, and to our elected officials. More than 170 people, including members of the press, joined our virtual town hall meeting with Senator Chuck Grassley on March 3. The town hall was covered by many media outlets including the Des Moines Register, Iowa Capital Dispatch, Axios Des Moines, and Morning Ag Clips.

We are able to do this because we are on solid ground. We've grown our membership every year for a decade. We have a talented and nimble staff delivering creative programs. Our board is filled with an increasingly diverse group of Iowa leaders. Groups and organizations in Iowa and beyond want to partner with us as we strengthen the independent family farm through education,

legislation, and cooperation and fight to provide Iowans with sustainable production, safe food, a clean environment, and healthy communities.

I was beyond thrilled when the IFU board invited me to serve as the Interim Executive Director to build a bridge between the great work David Andrews did as the first Executive Director in nearly two decades and what comes next in terms of staffing and leadership. The growth under his 14 months of leadership has been impressive. I'm excited about the coming months as we assess the strengths of IFU and leverage the opportunities in front of us.

I farm with my husband, Patrick Standley, in Marion County. I've been involved with IFU since moving back to Iowa in 1999. I served in the Biden-Harris Administration as the Iowa Farm Service State Executive Director until Inauguration Day. It was an incredible honor serving with USDA staff in Iowa and across the country to deliver government investments in Iowa family farmers. Now, I'm ready to roll up my sleeves and get back to the advocacy work fighting directly for independent family farms with an organization I've been part of for over 25 years. "

To welcome Matt into this new role, email mrussell@iowafarmersunion.org.

MEANINGFUL IMPACT THROUGH EDUCATION BY: JONATHAN LAWRENCE, EDUCATION DIRECTOR

As the Education Program Director at IFU, one of the most rewarding parts of my role is the opportunity to make a meaningful impact on our communities. Working with the Education Committee allows us to create spaces for real conversation. While informing the public on issues affecting both rural and urban communities is vital, the true power of education lies in listening to one another.

Listening allows us to learn why people think the way they do, providing insight into their perspectives and experiences. Even if someone's views don't align with our own, giving them a platform to share is essential for meaningful conversation and growth. By bringing this approach into the Education Committee, we aim to bridge the gaps and divides amongst us and share information in a way that resonates with people across Iowa, building connections within and across communities.

One of our main priorities is to amplify the voices of the next generation of Iowans—young farmers, small-town residents, and city-dwellers alike. As the oldest and most historic farm organization in Iowa, we owe our strength to the dedication of past generations who paved the way for small to medium family farms to thrive. However, the future of our organization depends on hearing from and representing younger voices. These conversations between generations are important to fostering growth, preserving our values, and ensuring we continue to evolve in ways that reflect the needs and aspirations of all Iowans. By inviting input from diverse perspectives, we can ensure that everyone has a stake in shaping the future of agriculture and our communities.

The Education Committee's work also ties closely with other IFU committees like Policy, Growth, and Outreach. Educating our members about critical issues like conservation practices, pesticide drift, eminent domain, and rural mental health not only empowers them but also equips them to advocate for change on Capitol Hill. These collaborations strengthen our collective voice, allowing us to bring attention to issues that impact Iowans directly and indirectly.



Through partnerships with like-minded organizations and providing spaces for back-and-forth conversation, we can inspire action and amplify the concerns of our communities. When we educate, we empower—and empowered members can drive meaningful change. Knowledge is power when you do something about the things you learn.

Ultimately, the work of the Education Committee is grounded in respect, understanding, and curiosity. Growing up, I remember a time when people could agree to disagree, and while times have changed, the principle of respecting different perspectives remains vital. To truly understand the issues we face, we must step out of our echo chambers and engage with those who think differently.

This isn't about changing one's beliefs but about challenging our perspectives, strengthening our arguments, and learning from one another. If we create spaces that prioritize understanding over judgment, we can work toward a more informed, empowered, and united Iowa. By coming together, we can transform knowledge into action and foster the positive change our communities deserve.

To learn more about the work of the Education Committee or to join, email jlawrence@iowafarmersunion.org.

IFU CONVENTION STRIVES FOR “FAIRNESS FOR FARMERS”

Iowa Farmers Union members from across the state gathered on Dec. 6-7 at the Quality Inn & Conference Center in Ames for the 109th Annual State Convention.

The IFU convention set the grassroots legislative policy that will guide the organization’s efforts in 2025, elected leadership, and conducted workshops and panels that focus on topics at the forefront for family-scale farmers.

This year’s programming emphasized themes around fairness in farming and the impact of agricultural policy. Keynote speaker Austin Frerick discussed antitrust policy, the impact of monopolies on agricultural systems, and his recent book, Barons. Panel speakers took on discussions about the volatile Farm Bill debates in Congress. Workshops tackled various topics, including strategies to respond to farmer stress, Iowa’s water quality, storytelling tools, and protections from pesticide-related injuries.

“Farmers Union members were ready to take on the issues of the day,” said Aaron Lehman, IFU president. “We know that the challenges facing family farming are intense, but our group was energized by learning from one another and developing plans and priorities for moving ahead.”

Aaron Lehman, a Polk County farmer, was elected president of the Iowa Farmers Union for another term. Ryan Marquardt, a Madison County farmer, was also reelected as vice president. Tony Thompson was newly elected to the Board of Directors in the Southwest District, and Berlene Wobeter now represents the Northeast District. Jerry Rosman, Mike Carberry, and Aidan Struve were reelected to the board.

During the policy debate, members approved seven special orders of business:



Iowa Farmers Union members receive Aaron Lehman’s State of the Farmers Union address.

- The Farm Bill
- Opposing CO2 Pipeline Use of Eminent Domain
- Farmers’ Legal Rights in Pesticide Cases
- Agriculture and Iowa’s Rising Cancer Rates
- Local Food Marketing and Purchasing Incentives
- Fair Trade and Tariffs
- Continuing Support for Farmers in Ukraine

To view the seven special orders of business, visit www.iowafarmersunion.org.

IFU presented Friends of the Farmer Awards to State Rep. Chuck Isenhart for his work to advance the local and regional food system, Jana Linderman for her years of service to IFU as former president of the organization, Cheryl Tevis for her commitment to grassroots journalism that impacts family-scale farmers, and Iowa Farmers of Colors for their work to provide valuable information and networking opportunities to farmers of color in Iowa and the midwest region.

IFU Members Respond to Farmer Stress

The Iowa Farmers Union has received a grant from the Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health (GPCAH) to work with farmers who are suffering from stress and anxiety. Iowa farmers are experiencing increased levels of stress due to the lingering effects of pandemic conditions, low commodity prices, decreased farm income/opportunities, and a decreasing number of input purchasing options in an increasingly consolidated farm economy.

We will reach out to our IFU members to get signed up as volunteers to become part of the IFU Peer Network Project. Hopefully, this Peer Network will lay the groundwork for IFU to continue offering this type of needed work in our farming communities.

A training conducted by Iowa State University Extension and Outreach will take place sometime in early June. The members of the Peer Group Network will receive the same training as those individuals who take calls on the ISU Iowa Concern Hotline. The topics to be covered are stress assistance response, mental health literacy, and how to support and communicate with farmers to get through rough spots.

IFU believes that by training our farmer members to recognize the symptoms of stress and anxiety, they will be able to help farmers find ways to deal with their feelings and make referrals to trained professionals within the mental health community. We’re thankful for the opportunity to be involved in this kind of work and look forward to connecting with those interested.

Would you like to be involved in IFU’s Peer Network Project? Email jlawrence@iowafarmersunion.org.

MEMBERSHIP MATTERS

2025 Goals: Harnessing the Power of Peer-to-Peer

2025 has to be the year we finally reach the magic 1,250. This membership goal has so far eluded us in spite of increasing numbers for the last 10 years.

Our year-end membership certification number for 2024 is 1,101 - a 6% increase over the previous year. Still, it's not what I was hoping for.

Our biggest barrier to achieving the stated goal has been member retention. This last year was a particularly difficult year for renewals. IFU received a record number of returns in the mail - members who have moved with no forwarding address. So, if I may, I'd like to encourage everyone who has relocated in the last couple of years to update us on your new address. By doing so, you will receive newsletters and notices of events that will add a lot to your overall membership experience.

The same goes for providing your emails. A significant portion of our membership declined to provide an email address (or doesn't have one). I definitely understand the reluctance to give one's address out to others because I don't appreciate a constant barrage of emails in my inbox. However, I must say that our primary mode of communication with our membership is done by email. Notices of events and links to webinars are all provided through email.

Of course, we want our members to be able to take full advantage of everything we offer throughout the year. If you haven't shared your email address or, if it has changed recently, please call me and let me know. My number is (515) 451-8492. I will be happy to hear from you!

Other 2025 membership and fundraising goals include:

- Development of a successful peer-to-peer membership program



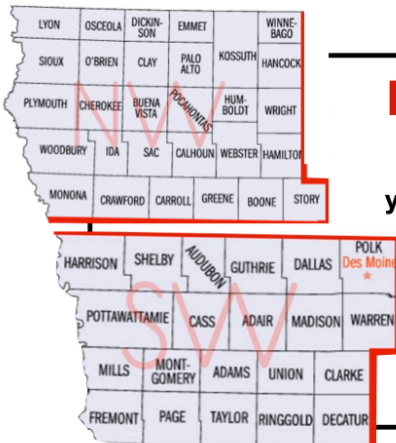
Mikel B. from West Union, Iowa signs up as a new member at the recent Practical Farmers of Iowa conference in Des Moines.

- 1 in-person meeting in each IFU District (NW, NE, SW and SE) during the year, in addition to our annual member Barn Party in July.
- Development of a Legacy Giving Program
- Development of corporate giving campaign.

There will be some exciting announcements ahead, especially as we work to create 'Membership Ambassadors' and appoint a Legacy Giving Representative.

Finally, I want to thank everyone who generously donated to our recent \$40,000 in 40 Days annual fundraising campaign. The money raised goes toward funding our educational efforts throughout the year. Whether it's our Education Foundation fundraiser or Silent Auction at our convention . . . whether it was the cooperative live pie auctions or the fervent pleas for funds (at the convention and via snail mail), we appreciate every cent you give us. At this point, I can't say whether we have reached our \$40,000 goal but things are looking good for that to happen and it's all thanks to a membership that never disappoints. Thank you! Now let's get cracking and make this a great 2025!

Deborah Bunka
IFU Membership & Fundraising Director
dbunka@iowafarmersunion.org

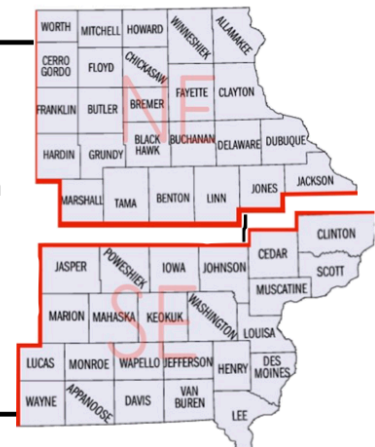


IFU District Meetings

Members & Non-members welcome!
Please pre-register to obtain a zoom link to your meeting. All meetings run from 7 - 8pm

- Southeast - Thursday, April 10
- Northeast - Tuesday, April 15
- Southwest - Tuesday, April 22
- Northwest - Tuesday, April 29

Register at www.iowafarmersunion.org



1,250 in 2025

GROWING OUR NUMBERS, GROWING OUR POWER

BE A PART OF REACHING OUR GOAL AND WIN

WHAT IS OUR GOAL?

IFU's 2025 membership goal is to have 1,250 members by the end of the year. Why 1,250? Because that is the number at which National Farmers Union certifies our state charter. We have been working toward this goal since 2014, increasing our membership every year. The time is now!

WHAT DOES CHARTER CERTIFICATION MEAN?

It means that:

- we are recognized by NFU as a viable, active and growing state organization.
- IFU will have more power to advocate for our needs at NFU board meetings.
- IFU will have more power to advocate legislatively for policy that will affect the lives of our entire membership.

HOW CAN YOU GET INVOLVED?

We need you to help us reach this milestone. The best advertising any organization can get is word-of-mouth. And that is what we are asking you to do . . . spread the word. But we also want to make it fun and rewarding so we are offering monthly prizes. You can access recruitment materials by clicking at the email link at the bottom of this page.



Invite

Invite fellow farmers, friends, family and community members to join IFU. Too shy? Host a potluck or throw a house party, bring people together and we'll make the ask.



Share

Share your experience as an IFU member. What prompted you to join? Why have you stayed with the organization? Let others know and ask them to join.



Rewards

Each month prizes will be awarded to the individual who recruits the most new members. Winning individuals will receive a \$25 VISA gift card and free renewal of their membership.

Any member signing up 5 new members will earn a free IFU convention registration.

Recognition

At the end of the year, the member who has recruited the most new members will receive a \$100 VISA gift card, an IFU swag basket and recognition at our annual convention in December.

The region with the highest number of new members will also be recognized.

To request a membership recruitment materials package, email dbunka@iowafarmersunion.org

Continue reading to see how you can win rewards and be honored by the National Farmers Union while growing IFU.

National Farmers Union Membership Awards Program

When you recruit a new member, or bring a lapsed member back into the Farmers Union family, the National Farmers Union recognizes your enthusiasm and initiative through the Membership Awards Program. Plus, for each person you sign up, you can earn points that can win you special awards. These are given during the awards ceremony at the National Convention in March of the following year.

We are stronger when we work together!

Earnings

- 10 points: Farmers Union logo cap
- 15 points: Farmers Union shirt
- 20 points: \$100 credit towards a Farmers Union event registration
- 40 points: The Blue Star Awards; \$200 VISA gift card & Farmers Union swag
- 50 Points: The Silver Star Award; \$350 VISA gift card.

NFU Point System

- One-year renewals - ½ point
- One-year new memberships - 1 point
- Multi-year membership renewals - ½ point per year renewed (e.g. 2-year renewal = 1 point)
- New multi-year membership - 1 point per year (e.g. 2 year membership = 2 points)

Points are awarded to volunteer/ members only and must be collected between January 1, 2025 and December 1, 2025.



PO Box 1883 Ames, IA 50010

Website: www.iowafarmersunion.org

Facebook: Iowa Farmers Union

Instagram: [@iowafarmersunion](https://www.instagram.com/iowafarmersunion)

Presorted
First-Class Mail
US Postage
PAID
Ames, IA
Permit No. 307

2025 FALL LEGISLATIVE FLY-IN

Farmers Union members from across the country will gather in Washington, DC for the NFU's 2025 Fall Legislative Fly-In from September 7-10. If you are interested in joining IFU's Fly-In team, email alehman@iowafarmersunion.org.

