Grassroots

Summer 2026

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.

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Cover photo contributed by Suzan Erem, Draco Hill Nature Farm, West Branch, IA.

President Lehman at the Iowa State Fair

Empty Talk and Cheap Platitudes Won't Get It Done. Real Investment in Farmers Will

By: Aaron Lehman, IFU President

I have been lucky enough to serve in this role as Iowa Farmers Union President for almost 10 years. In that position, I get a front-row seat to see how rural Iowa is ready to lead. In our fields, on our pastures, in our classrooms, at our clinics and hospitals, and on our Main Streets, we see example after example of where ingenuity meets drive. Where commitment connects to creativity. Where service combines with innovation.

That energy doesn't happen in a vacuum. That evolution from personal grit and vision to a true rural creation can only take place if we all do our job to help it germinate, emerge, grow, blossom, and multiply. It doesn't happen without our investment and our stewardship.

Empty talk and cheap platitudes from our leaders will not get the job done. And it is very clear……We are on the wrong path.

Farmers need a path to fair trade domestically and overseas. Instead, a chaotic and random trade approach has baffled our customers and put farmers in the cross hairs of retaliation. We are left with lower prices for what we grow, and still we are no closer to fair trade.

Farmers need markets that are transparent and free from manipulation. Instead, Federal Trade Commissioners are fired for simply doing their job. And common-sense competition rules for producers are smothered before they can reach sunlight.

Farmers need certainty in their health care before they can invest themselves in their farm. Instead, many

farmers' health care premiums have doubled since supports were knocked out from under the Affordable Care Act. At the same time, our rural hospitals and clinics are shutting off services and sometimes even shutting their doors entirely. Farm innovation dies on the vine if your choices are limited to those rare rural jobs that provide adequate insurance to employees.

Rural families rely on robust rural school districts. Instead, school dollars are being siphoned away to private schools that can pick and choose who gets an education and who gets turned away.

New, beginning, and under-resourced farmers need real pathways to find ground to farm just to get a shot at farming. But instead, our land access programs have been chopped up randomly.

Research toward new and diverse farming opportunities is needed now more than ever. Yet our institutions are either being starved one day or hamstrung the next unless the results feed into an agribusiness-centered vision.

Farmers who step up to put in place real practices to get to healthy soil and cleaner water find the doors shut to their local USDA office and programs that have a waiting list too long to endure.

Consumer food prices climb at the same time the farmer's share of the food dollar has plummeted to an all-time low.

All this while, a farm bill update is 3 years overdue. While promises of reform are everywhere in Washington, it seems the only things that truly get cut are nutrition programs and billionaires' taxes.

We have so much potential in rural America. As stewards of our farms and rural communities, we must work to place farmers at the center of the solutions. That only happens when we invest in farmers, in rural communities, in healthy landscapes and clean water, and in a more just food system.

The era of all talk and no action needs to end.

A MESSAGE ON NEW BEGINNINGS FROM TOMMY HEXTER

Tommy Hexter and State Rep Austin Baeth

The first time I attended an Iowa Farmers Union Convention in December 2019 in Grinnell, I was invited to serve as the student board member. Three years later, at my first National Farmers Union Convention in Denver, I realized I had found a family.

As a young person who grew up on a farm and dreams of building a better food and farm system, Farmers Union has given me opportunities I never imagined – from lobbying at the Iowa Capitol and on fly-ins to Washington, D.C., advocating for local food in schools and cancer prevention, and allowing me to grow Grinnell Farm to Table alongside my work as Policy Director.

As I begin new roles with the National Caucus of Environmental Legislators and the Iowa Food System Coalition, I want to assure you this is not goodbye. I am firmly grounded in IFU, and I can't wait to keep growing with the organization as we hire a new Policy Coordinator.

See you all at Convention in December!

MESSAGES FROM THE STAFF - MEET THE NEWEST ADDITIONS

Natalie Jefson, Administrative Assistant

My name is Natalie Jefson and I started as the Administrative Assistant for IFU in May. I am originally from Forest City, Iowa, where I grew up on an acreage south of town. I spent much of my childhood outside with my siblings. While I did not grow up on a farm, my parents grew a large garden each summer and we frequented the local campgrounds often. Growing up in my rural community gave me a deep respect for the hard work it takes to care for our environment and our communities. I was very involved with FFA in high school, and I had the opportunity to spend a year in college as an Iowa FFA officer.

It was during my year as State Secretary that I was first introduced to the Iowa Farmers Union when I attended the NFU Fly-in. The trip offered leadership development for FFA officers from across the country, as well as time to witness the advocacy that IFU members were doing at the federal level. It was my first time on an airplane! Even seven years later, I still believe it was an unforgettable experience to join IFU members as they shared the real-life impacts of federal policy on their communities.

In 2023, I graduated from Iowa State University with a degree in Human Development and Family Studies. Since then, I've spent time doing work with youth, county extension services, and in higher education. In my free time, I love to read, crochet, camp, and spend all the time I can with my friends and family. Currently, I'm on a mission to build up my physical media collection, so I love to thrift for CDs, DVDs, and VHS tapes.

I am really excited to be a part of IFU, especially because of the experience I had at the fly-in years ago. In the three months that I've been on the team, I have met many of you at the Barn Party and the Iowa State Fair. I'm looking forward to being a part of the important work here at IFU, and to connecting with you all at future events!

Raquel Tenbrink, Policy Coordinator

My name is Raquel Tenbrink and I have just started as the Policy Coordinator for IFU. I grew up in Kansas City, Missouri where I fell in love with nature and conservation. During high school, I had the opportunity to intern with my local government and work with the city's nature sanctuary. During this, I learned about policies' effect on local communities and how outreach to those communities impacts things such as the nature sanctuary.

I graduated from Iowa State University in May with degrees in Environmental Science and Political Science. During my time in school, I participated in research that looked at the impact of extreme weather events on rural communities in Iowa. In this role, I learned a lot about the importance of making sure rural communities' concerns are heard and how policy can be something that creates meaningful change for those communities.

In my free time I enjoy reading, hiking, and playing the violin. I also really enjoy movies, so you can often find me at the theatre. Currently, I'm looking forward to football season starting and for the weather to start feeling like fall!

I'm super excited to join the team at IFU and looking forward to getting to know everyone!

AGRICULTURAL SOLUTIONS TO OUR WATER QUALITY CRISIS CAN BE AN OPPORTUNITY FOR IOWA FARMERS - IF WE INVEST IN THEM

BY: MATT RUSSELL, IFU EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Iowa has a water quality problem. We've known it for much more than a decade — it's not breaking news. Claiming agriculture isn't a major cause of our water quality challenges in Iowa is like arguing that corn, pork, and eggs aren't a big deal to our state. Iowa is the number one producer of all three commodities. Accepting the fact that agricultural production is the leading cause of our degraded water might be a threat to some in the agriculture community. The Iowa Farmers Union disagrees that this has to be a threat to Iowa farmers — and here is why that matters: Farmers and ranchers are not just a part of the problem. They are our best available path to solving it.

The solution already exists. Iowa farmers and ranchers know how to deploy natural infrastructure (e.g., cover crops, wetlands, diversified rotations, integrated livestock, on-farm energy) that can simultaneously reduce nutrient runoff, improve water quality, and manage floodwaters across Iowa's watersheds. What's missing is not the knowledge. It's a system that rewards applying it.

Unfortunately, Iowa farmers are forced to make rational decisions about soil health, water quality, conservation, and profitability in an irrational agricultural system. Major updates to supporting farm profitability and better environmental outcomes need to happen within Iowa's agriculture. Currently, we're failing on both fronts.

The Systemic Barriers Standing in the Way

First, we put the responsibility on the farmer to create better public outcomes by investing in better farming practices. While there are some cost-share dollars to incentivize these practices, most farmers can't take these benefits to the bank. If you're good at conservation farming, own your land, and have a long enough time window, investing in better environmental outcomes might actually be more profitable — but that profitability comes from bucking the trends and going against the simple economics of our agricultural systems in Iowa.

On the other hand, when farmers take out the buffer strips and clear trees on marginal land, they often can capture that short-term gain in their crop insurance portfolio, but the public pays for externalized environmental costs. The best environmental farmers can't cash the check for delivering what Iowans need, while farmers causing the most problems never have to account for those costs in their books. This irrational system drives profits across Iowa's agricultural industry. Additionally, in 2025 and 2026, enormous cuts were made to federal programs supporting farm and ranch conservation, including cost-share programs for cover crops, wetlands, and edge-of-field practices that are critical to reducing nutrient runoff into Iowa's waterways, making this separation even wider.

For the first time, candidates from both parties are responding to Iowans, including in rural communities, who are demanding cleaner water.

Farmers Already Have the Answers — If the System Lets Them Use Them

While significant amounts of money will be spent trying to convince Iowans that politicians have the solutions, farmers and ranchers already know how to do much of this work. The natural infrastructure approaches that Iowa's water quality and quantity future depends on involve working with natural systems rather than against them: reducing tillage, integrating livestock, maintaining living roots in the soil year-round through cover crops and perennial vegetation, extending crop rotations, and generating cleaner energy on the farm.

Farmers, not the agriculture industry, have been the innovators for all of these practice areas. If this innovation were to grow and be economically rewarded, Iowa wouldn't just get cleaner water. We'd get more jobs as these practices take higher levels of management and often more locally sourced inputs (e.g., fencing, cover crop seeds, and more diverse and often smaller-scale equipment). We'd get more wildlife. And we'd need more farmers, not fewer.

The Real Barrier Isn't Knowledge — It's Power

A rational agricultural system would reward farmers for this kind of innovation. Instead, the rewards pile up for consolidating farms and agribusiness by piling onto the status quo. Agricultural solutions to our water quality challenges are not a threat to farmers and ranchers if we focus on farmers and ranchers. But let's be clear: this kind of innovation across Iowa's agricultural landscape is a threat to global agribusiness that continues to consolidate and use their monopoly power in the marketplace and growing political influence to make sure the seeds of change that could benefit farmers, rural communities, and our entire state never get planted.

Iowa's water will not clean itself. But the farmers and ranchers who work this land every day already know what needs to happen — and they are ready to lead, if we build a system that empowers them to do so.

Growing Community Through Education
By: Jonathan Lawrence

As we head into fall, I wanted to share an update on some of the important work we've been doing in Iowa Farmers Union's Education Foundation. Over the past several months, our team has tackled some of rural Iowa's biggest challenges, from mental health to water quality to building stronger local food systems. Here's what we've been working on:

Great Plains Rural Mental Health Project

We are proud to say that we wrapped up our Great Plains Rural Mental Health work at the end of March.

This 18-month grant went through some ups and downs, particularly due to things out of everyone's control with delays to grants all over the country nearly 2 years ago. The project was about reducing stress, anxiety, and suicides among farmers and rural residents. We did this through outreach and education by training members in recognizing mental health symptoms. Through this peer-to-peer interaction, trained farmers can then assist members of their community in managing feelings and connecting with mental health professionals.

By the end of the project, we are proud to say we exceeded our initial expectations and had 30 total IFU members take part in mental health trainings provided by Iowa State University Extension & Outreach. One of the members had this to say, "The training reinforced that mental health challenges can affect anyone and that noticing, listening, and reaching out can make a real difference. The most important component was practicing how to ask about suicidal thoughts and how to seek help. The skills help create peer communities where people are more likely to recognize when someone is struggling and connect them with support."

When we surveyed our members ahead of the grant, here were the results:

- 38% felt the stress they were feeling was attributed to farming
- 53% felt talking to someone would help them with their stress
- 45% talked to fellow farmers about their stress
- Pre-project, 45% of survey participants felt talking to a Peer-to-Peer Network member would not help -> Post-project, 72% of survey participants felt talking to a Peer-to-Peer Network member would help
- 96% of training participants felt they took something valuable moving forward from this training
- 100% of training participants felt that an informal event would benefit the Peer-to-Peer Network

Water Quality

As many of you probably know, the rising rates of cancer have continued in Iowa for another year. So, for the second year in a row, Iowa Farmers Union Education Foundation collaborated with the Iowa Environmental Council and Harkin Institute to share information on these rising cancer rates and the linkages that environmental exposures have had on the state of Iowa. So, everything from nitrates to PFAS to radon are brought up in these sessions.

Getting to hear what the research says about each of these exposures is incredibly important for the public to feel informed because at the end of the day communities need to be heard. Our stories matter more than ever! We are sitting in a time where water quality is an election issue. It's time for us to do something about it and come election time, let's hope we have the elected leaders who are willing and inspired to step up.

Iowa Food System Coalition

Another very important piece to my job is working with the Iowa Food System Coalition. I specifically work with the Education, Labor Equity, & Business Development priority groups. Some of the work has involved: Providing resource lists and tool-kits for other organizations to throw their own educational events, collaborating with labor and immigration groups for solidarity and better working conditions, & identifying all the farms in Iowa to show where the gaps in our food system are located.

This group of over 60 partner organizations work together amongst 9 priority groups and have committed themselves to the growth of our local food system. I really encourage our readers to check out the coalition's website at iowafoodsystemcoalition.org.

LUNCH & LEARN WEBINAR SERIES

Thursdays from 12:30 to 1 pm CT on Zoom

To register, visit the events calendar at www.iowafarmersunion.org.

IOWA FARMERS UNION IN ACTION

AT THE IOWA STATE FAIR

IFU members Aaron Lehman and Jay Yarnell volunteer at booth.

1,087 fairgoers cast guesses for cover-crop-in-a-jar challenge.

IFU member Tony Thompson volunteers at booth.

IFU had an incredible time at the Iowa State Fair in the Agriculture Building from August 13-23. We connected with hundreds of fairgoers, spreading the word about family farming, water quality, and rural issues. Our volunteers staffed the booth, answering questions about our work.

The most exciting outcome? We recruited over 100 new members! People were excited to learn about IFU and eager to join a grassroots organization fighting for family farmers and rural communities. Thank you to all our volunteers who made this happen, and welcome to our new members. We're excited to have you join us!

IFU members gather for Potluck Barn Party.

ANNUAL POTLUCK BARN PARTY

On July 25, Iowa Farmers Union held our annual Barn Party at Big Oak Barn in Elkhart. Over 100 members gathered to celebrate our community with good food, music, and conversation. Candidates joined us to talk directly with farmers about the issues affecting rural Iowa, from water quality to farm economics to the future of family farming.

Thank you to everyone who attended and volunteered to make this event special. And thank you to the Thompson family for hosting us. The Barn Party reminds us that we are stronger when we stand together as we fight for thriving family farms.

SOMETHING IN COMMON

Recently, the Iowa Farmers Union had the opportunity to celebrate young, rural civic leaders in Iowa. We partnered with the Henry Luce Foundation for an event called "Something in Common," a series of events happening across the country aimed at reimagining the civic space in America. Given the deepening political divide, the Luce Foundation wanted to hear directly from youth about our nation's future. IFU was the local partner to help make this happen.

We reached out to partners from the Iowa Environmental Council, Iowa Food System Coalition, Iowa Faith & Climate Network, Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement, and local Creston leader Sarah Scull to help with logistics and identify young leaders. We ended up with 15 leaders for the event.

IFU celebrates young rural civic leaders.

We started with a closed-door conversation about their values and the successes and challenges of living in rural Iowa. The 15 leaders then self-selected 4 to have a public panel discussion with Henry Luce Foundation CEO Jonathan Holloway about what democracy means to them and the state of Iowa's affairs. This took place at Henry Wallace's birthplace in Orient. Thank you to the leaders who joined us and the IFU members who came out to attend.

Iowa Farmers Union

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IFU 2026 Annual Convention

Save the Date

Friday, December 4th & Saturday, December 5th

Location:
Meskwawki Casino, Hotel and Convention Center near Tama, IA

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