

Agriculture

OUTLOOK

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AG OUTLOOK '23

Farm bill is critical to keeping America's food supply affordable

By **RICHARD GUEBERT JR.**
Illinois Farm Bureau President

With spring weather on the horizon, farmers across the state are gearing up for another productive spring planting season. Once the frost melts and the soil temperatures rise, it will be time to hit the fields, but for many farmers, high prices for fertilizer, fuel and other critical tools remain a challenge.

Like consumers, farmers are feeling the pain of ongoing inflation. The ripple effects of the war in Ukraine and supply chain issues pose significant hurdles for farmers. Heading into the spring season and farm bill negotiations, these difficulties remain top of mind at Illinois Farm Bureau (IFB).

In early February, the United States Department of Agriculture's latest Farm Sector Income Forecast report indicated that U.S. net farm income will fall nearly 16% from the previous year while production costs are expected to increase more than 4%. That's on top of an already record increase in production costs in 2022.

While fuel and fertilizer prices are expected to soften, other costs related to marketing, storage and transportation are expected to increase 11%, and labor by 7%. Rising interest rates and farm sector costs are another concern as the USDA projects farm sector debt will increase \$31.9 billion to a record \$535 billion.

General inflation is a long-term issue squeezing the pocketbooks of families across America, but the farm income forecast is a reminder that farmers are not benefiting from higher prices at the grocery store.

While some commodity prices are rising, farmers are grappling with additional circumstances, such as drought, avian influenza and supply and labor costs. After accounting for business expenses, farmers' share of the food dollar is only 7.4 cents.

That is why the farm bill is so important for everyone, not just farmers. Farm bill programs provide farmers with critical support to mitigate natural disasters and other crises. Other programs secure America's domestic food supply, which keeps our agricultural economy strong while providing consumers with affordable, high-quality products at the grocery store.

The farm bill also addresses hunger through nutrition programs, which serve our most vulnerable populations and ensure that everyone has access to affordable, fresh and healthy food. Conservation is another key focus of the farm bill, which invests in agriculture research and conservation programs to increase sustainability.

IFB is dedicated to working with our members and elected officials on both sides of the aisle to pass a farm bill that meets the needs of all agriculture segments.

Our members and leaders believe the farm bill must maintain the link between nutrition and commodity programs. IFB also supports maintaining the current crop insurance program, providing price and revenue protection for farmers, and retaining both SNAP and TEFAP (The Emergency Food Assistance Program) in the farm bill in their current form.

As we head into another eventful spring, I look forward to working with our members and elected officials to get this critical piece of legislation to the president's desk.

(This story was distributed through a cooperative project between Illinois Farm Bureau and the Illinois Press Association. For more food and farming news, visit FarmWeekNow.com.)

Weed scientists criticize EPA's proposed rules on herbicide atrazine

Loss of weed control ingredient could threaten crop yields, increase herbicide resistance

By **SIERRA HENRY**
Illinois Farm Bureau

BLOOMINGTON — Weed researchers are challenging proposed federal restrictions on a common weed control ingredient, arguing that the rules could reduce yields and increase herbicide resistance.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency last year unveiled new concentration limits on atrazine to stop runoff from harming aquatic plants and animals. The herbicide is used primarily on corn, grain sorghum and sugar cane fields.

"Atrazine is one of the most cost-effective herbicides for farmers, used especially in corn, literally for decades," said Aaron Hager, University of Illinois associate professor of crop sciences. "We're trying to manage these pests that basically have the same requirements and same resource needs as what the crop does. If we allow these unwanted plants to go and utilize these resources, then that begins to adversely affect the yield potential of that crop."

"We need more tools to be able to do this, not fewer."

If adopted, the new regulations would lower the current concentration equivalent level of concern (CE-LOC) to 3.4 parts per billion (PPB), far below the 15 ppb CE-LOC set by EPA in 2020 through an interim decision. Farmers would also be prohibited from using the herbicide in saturated fields and limited application rates of 2 pounds per acre for sorghum, sweet corn, and field corn.

Aerial application of the chemical would be prohibited when it is raining, or if a storm that could produce nutrient runoff from the treated field is "forecasted to occur within 48 hours after application."

Field corn, sweet corn and sorghum growers in watersheds containing atrazine levels above 3.4 ppb



— which the EPA estimates applies to 18% of all U.S. watersheds — are required to choose from a "picklist" of conservation practices to alleviate runoff. The number and type of practices varies depending on crop type and could include use of cover crops, contour buffer strips, terrace farming or field borders.

Sarah Lancaster, a Kansas State University assistant professor and extension specialist, said the picklist adds another layer of complexity to stewardship practices already regulated by the Natural Resources and Conservation Service (NRCS).

"For farmers who are already using some of these practices as part of NRCS contracts, how do we ensure that those practices align well with the label," Lancaster questioned. "How do we ensure that our state departments of agriculture have the resources to enforce these (regulations), and the farmers and applicators that are already keeping good records have no additional requirements?"

EPA began re-evaluating the herbicide after the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in 2021 granted the agency a partial remand, which fol-

lowed a petition filed in 2020 by environmental groups over the 15 ppb CE-LOC.

"We've done a lot of work with our scientific community here in Illinois, and really outside of Illinois, in order to fully understand what is really a complicated proposal," said Lauren Lurkins, IFB environmental policy director. "In our view, the most complicated issues land in the laps of applicators and the farmers who are going to have to look at this label if it is made final. For us, we just want to draw attention to the issue and hopefully change it to something that's more manageable out in the countryside."

Weed scientists argue that atrazine is one of the most well-researched chemical ingredients and is used in thousands of herbicide mixes. Researchers have raised concerns that the data set EPA used to draft the new CE-LOC limit came from a larger study that wasn't as rigorously vetted. Some have also raised concerns that lowering the current CE-LOC level could ultimately affect crop yields, weed control, and jeopardize soil conservation practices like no-till and cover crops.

"It's my understanding

that the 15-ppb number was based on what was believed to be the most accurate and well conducted data that was available," Lancaster said. "I think it's important for folks to remember that science is a bit of a moving target and that not all science is created equal, and we should really be using the best data to ensure that we have the best outcomes for our farmers."

Lancaster added that more than 95% of the experimental treatments she and her peers use for corn and grain sorghum include atrazine in some form. Chemical application treatments included both before and after corn sprouted out of the ground.

"My question to the EPA has been this: Does the agency actually have data—field derived empirical data—that shows that any of these practices actually reduce atrazine runoff, not water runoff, but atrazine runoff," Hager said. "My concern is that there's no data to actually illustrate how effective any of these practices are."

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Ag economist pushes for more free trade, not less

By **ZETA CROSS**
The Center Square contributor

SPRINGFIELD — Breaking down non-tariff trade barriers is a major concern for American farmers.

Last year was a banner year for U.S. agricultural exports. International sales of U.S. farm products rose by 11% in 2022, exceeding \$196 billion. The outlook for 2023 looks like that growth will continue.

Illinois farmers depend on robust sales overseas to remain profitable.

"Exports are absolutely crucial to the agricultural sector, particularly in the Midwest," University of Illinois agriculture economist Gary Schnitkey told The Center Square.

Soybean farmers, for example, export 50% of their crop.

"Those exports increased in 2022, in part because there was a drought and shortages, to a certain extent, in Brazil and Argentina," two of the U.S.'s top export competitors, Schnitkey said.

U.S. farmers have come off three very profitable years, where good weather, high yields and high demand have meant high prices. For that to continue, the export market needs to remain vibrant.

"For income and prices to remain at the levels they are now, we need exports to continue to grow," Schnitkey said.

Illinois is the number one state in the U.S. for soybean production. Brazil is a top U.S. competitor in soybean exports. China is the

number one buyer of exported soybeans for both the U.S. and Brazil.

USDA undersecretary for trade and foreign agricultural affairs Alexis Taylor was in Iowa recently to talk about the Biden administration's efforts to increase international trade. She told Brownfield Ag News that the USDA is working to expand market opportunities.

"Strong export markets are really critical to farmers' and ranchers' livelihoods," she told Brownfield.

"An overreliance on any single market could lead to trade disruptions," she said.

One of the failings of U.S. trade policy in the past few years, Schnitkey said, is the failure to remove non-tariff trade barriers with other countries, in particular with the Pacific Rim countries.

"The idea of freer trade in agriculture has not been growing. We seem to be taking steps back. And that is not a good thing for the wellbeing of U.S. farmers," Schnitkey said.

Schnitkey would like to see the removal of non-tariff trade barriers get higher priority from the government.

"There is not a big push to make that happen," Schnitkey said. "It is not a priority these days."

Nigeria and the Pacific Rim countries are markets with potential for more U.S. trade, Schnitkey said.

"Free trade and freer trade is a message that most commodity groups feel is important," he said.



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Illinois farmers encouraged to review safety practices around grain bins

SPRINGFIELD – The Illinois Department of Agriculture (IDOA), along with the Office of the Illinois State Fire Marshal (OSFM) are encouraging Illinois farmers grain bin safety and review safety practices while working in and around grain bins.

According to researchers at Purdue University, more than 900 cases of grain engulfment have been reported with a fatality rate of 62% in the past 50 years ending in 2010. In 2010, at least 26 U.S. workers were killed in grain engulfment accidents – the highest number on record. It only takes four seconds for a full-grown adult to sink to their knees in flowing grain and 20 seconds to be completely buried in flowing grain. Suffocation from engulfment is the leading cause of death in grain bins.

“Often times we become complacent when doing tasks we have done a thousand times and for farmers that often means working in and around grain bins,” said IDOA Director, Jerry Costello II. “Unfortunately, problems involving flowing grain can snowball quickly. That’s why it’s important to set aside time to go over safety measures, to prepare farmers for a potential grain bin emergency.”

“Departments across the state continually train for

these types of responses and continue to apply for grants to receive special tools and devices to help with these rescues, said acting Illinois State Fire Marshal Dale Simpson. “In rural areas of Illinois, response times are increased due to the remote nature of these grain bins, which makes it extremely important that farmers follow proper safety measures and don’t take any unnecessary risks.”

University of Illinois Extension suggests whenever possible, don’t enter a grain bin. If you must enter the bin, as a farm owner/operator you should:

- Break up crusted grain from the outside of the bin with a long pole. When using a pole, check to see that it doesn’t come into contact with electric lines.

- Wear a harness attached to a properly secured rope.

- Stay near the outer wall of the bin and keep walking if the grain should start to flow. Get to the bin ladder or safety rope as quickly as possible.

- Have another person, preferably two people, outside the bin who can help if you become entrapped. These people should be trained in rescue procedures and should know and follow safety procedures for entering the confined space.

- Grain fines and dust may cause difficulty in



It only takes four seconds for a full-grown adult to sink to their knees in flowing grain and 20 seconds to be completely buried in flowing grain. Suffocation from engulfment is the leading cause of death in grain bins.

breathing. Anyone working in a grain bin, especially for the purpose of cleaning the bin, should wear an appropriate dust filter or filter respirator.

- Stay out of grain bins, wagons and grain trucks when unloading equipment is running.

- If it is necessary to enter the bin, remember to shut off the power to augers

and fans. It is a good idea to lock out any unloading equipment before you enter a bin to prevent someone from unintentionally starting the equipment while you are in the bin.

- Children should not be allowed to play in or around grain bins, wagons or truck beds.

- Where possible, ladders should be installed inside

grain bins to be used for an emergency exit. Ladders are easier to locate inside a dusty bin if there are brightly painted stripes just above or behind the ladder.

Farm workers are required to attend training as a reminder to utilize the best practices while working in and around grain bins. In addition to required training there are several

online training resources available:

- The Grain and Feed Association of Illinois at: www.gfai.org

- The Grain Handling and Safety Council at: www.grainsafety.org

- University of Illinois Extension at: <https://web.extension.illinois.edu/ag-safety/equipment/grainbin-safety.cfm>

U.S. dairy industry poised to grow

By DANIEL GRANT
FarmWeek

Milk demand is projected to grow by 21% globally between 2020 and 2030, according to Matt Daley, president of GEA Farm Technologies.

And he believes much of that demand could be met by U.S. dairy farmers.

“With more people, more dairy is consumed,” Daley said this month at the Agricultural Bankers Conference in Omaha, Neb. “What’s amazing is we’re doing it with fewer cows.”

“A dairy cow in the U.S. produces two to three times more milk because there’s more sunshine and greater access to grains (than other parts of the world).”

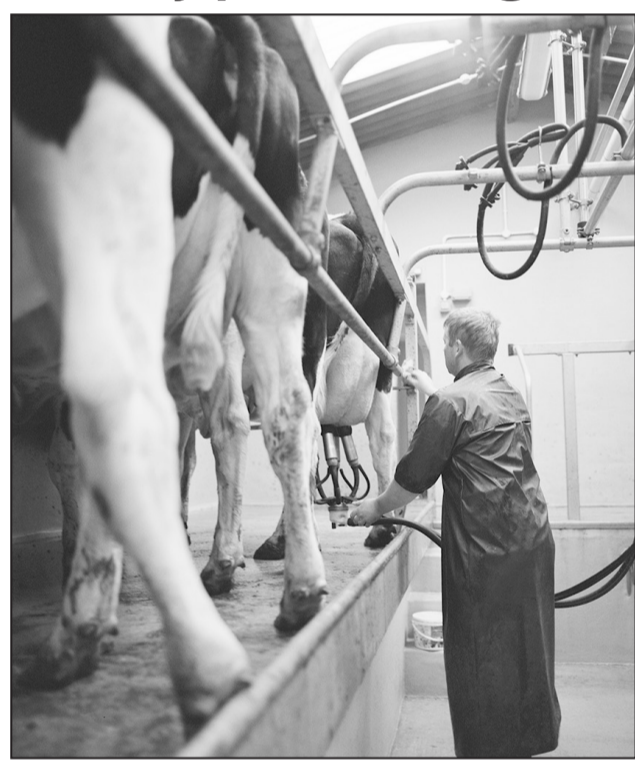
The world population reached an estimated 8 billion people as of Nov. 15, a new milestone in human development. The rising population and a growing middle class in some areas likely will drive increased demand for dairy products.

But with tighter environmental regulations in Europe, dairy output could actually decrease in that part of the world. Daley believes dairy expansion is also unlikely in New Zealand.

“Who’s slated around the world to produce more milk? It’s us in the U.S.,” he said.

Technology and automation will be critical for U.S. farmers to continue to boost milk output with fewer cows. GEA manufactures about 25% of robotic milking technology in North America, according to Daley.

“As long as we can expand processing capabilities, we’ll produce more milk,



because the world needs it,” he said. “As labor continues to get tighter, more automation will come.”

GEA is quoting plans for new dairy plants in Nebraska, Kentucky and Georgia and three new whey distilleries are going up in the U.S.

DEA is also building more concentration facilities, which separate the milk and can lower shipping costs by 70%.

A strong appetite for dairy is also driving local demand, which bodes well for small dairies looking for niche markets.

“The last four or five years, we’ve never put in so many small cheese plants,” Daley said. “The craft cheese industry is booming. A lot of dairy farmers are making their own cheese and selling it locally.”

If you’ve never heard of DEA Farm Technologies, chances are you’ve eaten food produced with its technology or at a plant it built. DEA is one of the world’s largest system suppliers for the food, beverage and pharmaceutical sectors.

“We do food on a small and massive scale,” Daley said. “Every third chicken nugget in the world is produced with GEA technology. If you eat cheese, GEA technology likely sliced it and put it in the package.”

About a quarter of processed milk in the world comes from GEA or is processed with its equipment.

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Illinois dairy farmers focus on margins, dietary guidelines

By DANIEL GRANT
FarmWeek

Maintaining profitability in the dairy industry is one of the top priorities for the Illinois Milk Producers Association (IMPA) every year, and particularly for 2023.

That’s due to a concerning combination of potentially lower milk prices paired with higher input costs ahead, according to Tasha Bunting, Illinois Farm Bureau associate director of commodities and livestock programs who also serves as IMPA manager.

She outlined IMPA’s priorities for this year on recently at the Illinois Dairy Summit in St. Rose.

“Milk prices throughout 2022 remained pretty strong but, from what we’re hearing, they probably won’t stay quite as strong in 2023,” Bunting said. “With rising input costs, feed costs and everything else associated with dairy production, we need to help farmers find ways to keep them profitable and in business.”

USDA’s world ag supply and demand estimates released last month project the all milk price could decline from an average of \$25.55 per hundredweight in 2022 to \$21.60 this year. The average price estimates in 2023 for Class III (\$18.85) and Class IV milk (\$19.25) are also down from last year.

“The Dairy Summit gives farmers ways (they can connect with industry experts and fellow farmers) so they can make changes that will directly impact the profitability on their farm,” Bunting said.

“We brought back a farmer panel (at the event) to talk about how to implement cover crops either on the grain operation side or including the feeding operation for dairy cows.”

But, even after a good year in 2022,

the number of dairy farms in the state continues to decline while the average age of dairy farmers in Illinois continues to creep higher, Bunting noted.

“We are still continuing to lose a number of dairy farms in Illinois,” the IMPA manager said. “The cow numbers remain relatively stable.”

USDA’s Jan. 30 cattle inventory report pegged the number of milk cows in Illinois at 79,000 as of Jan. 1, down 2% from last year.

Two other IMPA priorities this year revolve around policy.

“There could be a lot of different things impacting dairy producers from farm bill discussions to a dietary guidelines committee about to start meeting,” Bunting said. “It can really impact the way dairy is represented in a lot of our schools and institutional food programs.”

USDA dietary guidelines currently encourage most Americans to consume three servings of dairy per day.

Dairy contains key nutrients including vitamin D, calcium and potassium.

“It seems there’s interest (from the new committee) in maintaining the dietary guidelines. It looks so far to be moving in a positive direction (for dairy),” Bunting said. “We want to make sure dairy stays on the table.”

Looking ahead, IMPA leaders and members will participate this spring in the Illinois Ag Legislative Day, during which they will share dairy facts and information with legislators. IMPA will also host its annual Dairy Tech Tour this summer, although the date and location are undetermined at this point.

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Study forecasts tile drainage and crop rotation changes for nitrogen loss

By LAUREN QUINN
U of I ACES

URBANA – Midwest agriculture contributes the vast majority of nitrogen in the Gulf of Mexico, causing an oxygen-starved hypoxic zone and challenging coastal economies. State and federal policies have tried for decades to provide solutions and incentives, but the hypoxic zone keeps coming back. A recent study from the University of Illinois offers a new way to understand Midwestern nitrogen dynamics and forecasts future nitrogen loads under various management scenarios across the region.

“Our model explains what’s going on across 83 watersheds in the Midwest, providing a quantitative understanding of why certain watersheds differ in terms of nutrient loss. But the most important contribution is our scenario prediction, which hasn’t been done before. If you increase tile drainage or the corn fraction, how much does the nitrogen load change? We can predict that, and I think that is really exciting,” says Kaiyu Guan, associate professor in Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences (NRES), founding director of the Agroecosystem Sustainability Center (ASC), and senior author on the study.

Guan says a more detailed understanding of nitrogen and water flow dynamics, as

“If you increase tile drainage or the corn fraction, how much does the nitrogen load change? We can predict that, and I think that is really exciting.”

–Kaiyu Guan, associate professor in Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences (NRES), founding director of the Agroecosystem Sustainability Center (ASC), and senior author on the study.

well as the ability to forecast the impact of management changes, is a critical step in developing effective policies for nutrient loss reduction from field to watershed scales.

The research team analyzed the relationship between daily flow rate and nitrate concentration across 83 Midwestern watersheds, finding a universal pattern throughout the region: nitrate increases with flow before leveling off at a high flow threshold.

“To further unpack this pattern, we built a simple yet elegant model that reveals the mechanism. We looked at the contributions of shallow soil water, which has a greater flow rate and more nitrate, and deep soil water, with a slower flow and lower nitrate,” says Zewei Ma, doctoral student in Guan’s group and first author of the study. “The contributions from these areas of the soil profile change depending on the tile drainage and how

much corn is planted.”

Guan says the more tile drainage is installed and the more corn is planted in a given watershed, the greater the nitrate load in the water. That conclusion isn’t new, but the ability to forecast the impacts of increased tile installation or changing levels of corn is. The team created an interactive map [screenshots and instructions here] to show how and where a 10 to 30% increase in tile or a 20% increase or decrease in corn will change nitrate loading.

“This model gives us a starting point for a meaningful discussion about ways to reduce nutrient loss: How we should invest our effort, and, just as importantly, where we should focus on reducing tile or changing the rotation pattern. These are key questions as we actively work towards nutrient loss reduction with farmers and policymakers,” says Bin Peng, research assistant professor in NRES, senior



A more detailed understanding of nitrogen and water flow dynamics, as well as the ability to forecast the impact of management changes, is a critical step in developing effective policies for nutrient loss reduction from field to watershed scales.

research scientist at ASC, and study co-author.

Study co-author Richard E. Warner adds, “This work offers a significant advance in our understanding of the variability in nutrient loss across watersheds and sets the stage for developing decision support tools that will help inform more cost effective land and water conservation practices and policies.” Warner is an emeritus professor in NRES and senior scientist at the National Great Rivers Research and Education Center.

The study, “Agricultural nitrate export patterns shaped by crop ro-

tation and tile drainage,” is published in *Water Research* [DOI: 10.1016/j.watres.2022.119468]. In addition to Ma, Guan, and Peng, other authors include Murugesu Sivapalan, Li Li, Ming Pan, Wang Zhou, Richard Warner, and Jingwen Zhang. Funding was provided by the National Science Foundation’s CAREER Program, the Illinois Nutrient Research and Education Council, the National Great Rivers Research and Education Center, the Walton Family Foundation, and the USDA’s National Institute of Food and Agriculture.

The Department of Nat-

ural Resources and Environmental Sciences is in the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

The Agroecosystem Sustainability Center (ASC) aims to be a world-leading innovation powerhouse in advanced monitoring and modeling of agroecosystems to improve sustainability under climate change. ASC is jointly funded by the Institute for Sustainability, Energy and Environment (iSEE), the College of ACES, and the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research and Innovation (OVCRI) at U of I.

FFRI expanding free mental health resources for farmers

By TAMMIE SLOUP
FarmWeek

Karen Stallman keeps a file with ideas to help farmers struggling with mental health stress.

As program coordinator for the Farm Family Resource Initiative (FFRI), Stallman knows more can always be done. FFRI, which is managed by SIU School of Medicine’s Center for Rural Health and Social Service Development, has been gaining momentum since it was established with grant funding in 2019.

Its free helpline connects farmers throughout the state with mental health specialists in times of need. Averaging a handful of calls per month, the issues range from financial stresses to conflict and relationship troubles on the farm.

“We’re getting positive feedback, but we do want to keep it in front of people and let them know that it is available at no charge, and you can remain anonymous,” Stallman said. “If you just need somebody to talk to, they are there.”

Follow-up telehealth counseling sessions with SIU Medicine counselors are also offered. Up to six individual, couple or group sessions are available at no cost to the farmer or farm family member.

And late last fall, FFRI began offering a free monthly virtual suicide bereavement group overseen by Bonnie Landwehr, a licensed clinical social worker and behavioral health program supervisor with SIU Medicine’s De-

partment of Family and Community Medicine.

“Suicide among the rural population is higher than the general population,” said Stallman, who farms in southern Illinois with her husband. The idea for the group was planted after an Illinois farmer died by suicide and Stallman connected an SIU School of Medicine counselor with the late farmer’s county Farm Bureau. She also learned about a similar bereavement group in Minnesota that’s had success connecting with grieving farmers and their families.

“I just thought that’s something we could do here,” Stallman said. “And we had those discussions and Bonnie was willing to head that, and she’s got a strong background in suicide prevention. It’s something that we thought we’d try to see if it would benefit farm families.”

The group began meeting in November and has had a couple participants; Stallman said they’re continuing to spread the word about the free offering. For questions or to register, call 217-757-8115 or email blandwehr54@siumed.edu.

Looking to the year ahead, Stallman is excited to expand FFRI’s resources by organizing community forums for aging farmers and having a rural mental health summit in March.

“We’ve got lots of things planned. I’d like to see us connect more with rural

faith leaders; that’s going to be a target audience that we’re going to focus on,” Stallman said, adding they’re always exploring ways to connect with farmers, including podcasts and webinars. An upcoming self-care series called “Harvest to a Healthier You: Wellness Strategies for Farm Families,” will also launch early this year on FFRI’s website.

“We identified the tough topics that we need to address: coping with loss, grieving, depression, alcohol abuse, farm legacy and divorce and its emotional toll on the farm family,” Stallman said, referring to issues the series will focus on.

“I know it’s very difficult to admit if you’re struggling or you need help, because there’s such a stigma with that. But we encourage people to use our resources,” Stallman said, adding the website is frequently updated. “And we would just encourage people to think about mental health as being physical health.”

“Farmers are so good at taking care of their land and their equipment and their livestock, but oftentimes farmers don’t take care of themselves, and the farmer is really the most important asset on the farm.”

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A mild February wraps up a weak winter

CHAMPAIGN – February in Illinois was particularly mild, ending a winter season that was 2 to 6 degrees above normal, according to Illinois State Climatologist Trent Ford at the University of Illinois' Illinois State Water Survey. February also brought wetter weather to the state.

February is typically the second coldest month statewide after January. This year, however, the February average temperatures ranged from the high 20s in northern Illinois to the mid-40s in southern Illinois, between 2 and 8 degrees above normal.

Several weather stations saw daily high temperatures in the 70s last month, including 74 degrees in Williamson County and 70 in Coles County. Meanwhile, a brief period of extreme cold at the start of the month pushed stations in northern Illinois well below zero, including nighttime lows of -14 degrees in Kane County and -13 degrees in Jo Daviess County.

The preliminary statewide average February temperature was 35.1 degrees, 4.0 degrees above the 1991–2020 average.

The 2022–2023 winter average temperatures ranged from the high 20s in northern Illinois to the low 40s in southern Illinois, between 2 and 6 degrees above normal. The preliminary statewide average winter temperature was 33.1 degrees, 4.9 degrees above the 1991–2020 normal and tied with the 2019–2020 season for the ninth warmest on record.

In Illinois, the average winter temperature has increased by about 0.20 degrees per decade since 1895, and the average winter temperature over the last 30 seasons is about 2 degrees warmer than the 20th century average.

Precipitation

February is also one of the driest months of the year. However, this year's statewide average total February precipitation was 3.03 inches, 0.92 inches above the 1991–2020 average. Total February precipitation ranged from around 2 inches in south-central Illinois to over 4 inches in southern Illinois.

Last month was the second wettest February on record in Rockford, third wettest on record in Freeport, fourth wettest in Quincy, the seventh wettest in Bloomington, and the eighth wettest on record in Chicago and Moline.

Only the areas north of Interstate 72 saw any measurable snowfall last month, with totals ranging from less than half an inch from Adams County to Iroquois County up to 12 inches in far northwest Illinois. All but the northwest tip of the state saw below normal snowfall, 2 to 8 inches less than expected.

The wet winter eradicated all drought across the state. Drought recovery in southern Illinois was particularly remarkable given that each of the southern seven counties were in severe or extreme drought on Dec. 1.

Outlooks

The Climate Prediction Center temperature outlooks lean toward colder than normal across most of the state, suggesting that our unseasonably mild weather may be on hiatus for March.

Precipitation outlooks for March are leaning to likely wetter than normal, possibly continuing the wet streak from January and February.

Senators renew push for year-round E15 fuel use

By KIM JARRETT
The Center Square

SPRINGFIELD – A bipartisan group of Senators is asking the Biden administration again to allow the sale of E15 fuel throughout the year.

The Environmental Protection Agency bans the sale of gasoline mixed with 15% ethanol during the summer months. Sen. Kevin Cramer, R-N.D., and 16 other senators said in a letter to the administration the prohibition should be removed as soon as possible.

"Taking early action on E15 will send timely and necessary signals across the energy supply chain so that fuel producers and retailers will have the certainty they need to ensure affordable, reliable, and cleaner fuel options for American consumers throughout the year," the senators said. "Further, U.S. use of E15 will continue to displace Russian oil and finished gasoline products, ease domestic and global supply constraints, and lower net domestic fuel prices."

Cramer joined Sens. Deb Fischer, R-Neb., and Amy Klobuchar D-Minn., in sponsoring the Consumer and Fuel Retailer Choice Act last year. The bill did not make it out of Congress.

The E15 fuel blend is sold at more than 2,900 retailers at prices that are up to 96 cents less per gallon than regular gasoline, according to the letter. Approval to sell the blend year-round could save consumers more than \$20 billion a year and reduce carbon emissions by 17.62 million tons, the senators said.

The Biden administration allowed gasoline retailers to sell the E15 blend last summer in response to rising gas prices blamed on the war in Ukraine. That action saved consumers \$57 million, the senators said.

Taxpayers for Common Sense questioned expanding the use of ethanol. Since 2011, the Department of Agriculture has offered three subsidy programs for blender pumps, that dispense ethanol blended gas. Congress did not approve the subsidies, according to the organization.

"More than four decades of government-set mandates and subsidies for the corn ethanol industry have distorted markets, picked winners and losers, and worked at cross purposes with



other federal programs aimed at protecting consumers, the climate, and environment," the organization said in its report issued last year. "Expanding the use of E15 in the short-term would likely have limited effects. Expanding E15 use long-term through legislative action—or worse yet, subsidizing it—would only worsen the negative impacts of ethanol use, without benefiting the climate. Instead of continuing to expand corn ethanol's market share, policymakers should invest in real climate solutions such as agricultural conservation practices that sequester carbon long-term."

The EPA introduced a proposed rule on March

1 allowing E15 to be sold in eight states year-round. The waiver for Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, South Dakota and Wisconsin will not take effect until April 2024, according to the EPA.

Sen. Joni Ernst, R-Iowa, said in a social media post the EPA needs to expedite the waiver. "Biden's decision is over 200 days past EPA's lawful deadline, and not in time for the 2023 driving season," Ernst said in a Twitter post. "POTUS must grant an emergency waiver for this year."

The EPA is planning a virtual public hearing for late March or early April, the agency said in its proposal.

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AG OUTLOOK '23

ISA opens FY24 process for proposal and project funding

BLOOMINGTON – The Illinois Soybean Association (ISA) is now developing budgets and accepting proposals for FY24, which strategically align with the organization's key priority areas. The fiscal year runs from Sept. 1, 2023, through Aug. 31, 2024.

"Every year, ISA's 24 farmer Directors carefully evaluate and consider every submitted proposal and project for funding," said Chairman Steve Pistick. "This process is essential in allocating Illinois soybean farmers' checkoff and membership dollars into plans of action that provide beneficial returns to Illinois soybean farmers and industry stakeholders."

Proposals will be assessed on providing a return on ISA's mission to uphold the interests of Illinois soybean producers through promotion, advocacy, research and education. They will also be evaluated on their effectiveness in addressing the needs of Illinois soybean producers and overall alignment with ISA's new strategic plan.

"Implemented in September 2022, ISA's new strategic plan identifies how the organization allocates resources to remain a trusted partner of current and future Illinois soybean farmers while positioning them to be successful, profitable and competitive within the industry for years to come," said Pistick.

ISA's strategic plan also helps set association priorities, boost operations, and ensures that all farmer Directors, employees and stakeholders work toward common objectives and targets. The following objectives from the ISA committee areas open for RFPs are:

Market Development
The Market Development committee promotes Illinois soy as the preferred



choice for U.S. and global customers and supports advancements in infrastructure. Market Development's fundamental areas of focus are:

1. Building the reputation of U.S. and Illinois-grown soy (protein/oil) among international buyers with market growth potential.

2. Growing domestic markets for Illinois soy in the feed, food, fiber and fuel industries.

3. Promoting the Illinois competitive advantage in infrastructure to stakeholders across the value chain and supporting programs and policies to maintain and improve that advantage.

4. Communicating the benefits of soy as a healthy source of protein and fat in food and feed products.

5. Identifying and prioritizing the development and promotion of high-value soy-based individual products.

6. Working with strategic partners to increase soy-based fuel usage in major markets, including diesel fleets, equipment, marine and aviation.

Soybean Production

The Soybean Production committee is cross-functional in agronomic research, education and outreach, creating opportunities for Illinois soybean farmers to

increase on-farm profitability and manage crop production risks. The Soybean Production committee is committed to the following:

1. Building partnerships with public and private entities to augment ISA's agronomic research and education programs.

2. Establishing basic and applied research priorities that address regionally specific production opportunities, challenges, and economic factors.

3. Demonstrating soybean system agronomics focused on soil and water quality, agricultural resource resiliency and land stewardship.

4. Continuing to expand the ISA agronomic network by raising awareness and establishing trust among farmers through ongoing outreach and research education.

Communications

The Communications department is responsible for implementing, supporting and monitoring ISA's public relations efforts, internal and external communications, websites, social networking accounts, educational outreach, and more. The department develops the association's publications, including its flagship property, Illinois Field & Bean magazine,

and strengthens the association, brand and marketing efforts to ensure effective communications across all departments, directors and staff. Functions of the ISA Communications department include:

1. Internal & external communications efforts targeted to farmer audiences

2. Corporate reputation/branding

3. Communications to consumer audiences

4. Youth outreach and education efforts

5. Industry relations

Proposals are due by the close of business, 5 p.m. CST, May 1, 2023.

More details on the ISA proposal process, including access to the proposal packet, timelines, specific focus area requests and strategic plan documents, can be viewed HERE.

If you have any additional questions or questions, please call Jessica Scott at (309) 846-8581 or you can reach out to rfp@ilsoy.org.

The Illinois Soybean Association (ISA) checkoff and membership programs represent more than 43,000 soybean farmers in Illinois. The checkoff funds market development and utilization efforts, while the membership program supports the government relations interests of Illinois soybean farmers at the local, state, and national levels through the Illinois Soybean Growers (ISG). ISA upholds the interests of Illinois soybean producers through promotion, advocacy, and education with the vision of becoming a market leader in sustainable soybean production and profitability. For more information, visit our websites www.ilsoy.org and www.ilsoygrowers.com.

Inflation Reduction Act funding for climate-smart ag in Illinois is available

CHAMPAIGN – The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is making funding available for agricultural producers and forest landowners nationwide to participate in voluntary conservation programs and adopt climate-smart practices. The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) provided an additional \$19.5 billion over five years for climate smart agriculture through several of the conservation programs that USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) implements.

Nationally, NRCS is making available \$850 million in fiscal year 2023 for its conservation programs: the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) and Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).

These funds will provide direct climate mitigation benefits and will expand access to financial and technical assistance for producers to advance conservation on their farm or forest land through practices like cover crops, conservation tillage, wetland restoration, prescribed grazing, nutrient management, tree planting, and more.

How to Apply

NRCS accepts producer applications for its conservation programs year-round, but producers interested in CSP or EQIP financial assistance through IRA should apply by Illinois' application deadline of April 28, 2023 to be considered for funding in the current cycle. Funding is provided through a competitive process and will include an opportunity to address the unmet demand from producers who have previously sought funding for climate-smart conservation activities.

Producers interested in CSP or EQIP should submit a signed application (NRCS-CPA-1200 form) to the local NRCS field office. A blank NRCS-CPA-1200 application form may be obtained from the NRCS staff. Otherwise, an application may be submitted through the Farmers.gov website using your farmers.gov account. Producers who wish to use Farmers.gov, can sign in or create an account by clicking on "Sign up" in the upper right portion of the website.

CSP and EQIP applications submitted by April 28, 2023 will be evaluated by local NRCS staff. The NRCS staff will work with an applicant to assess land and resource concerns, answer ranking questions, and determine program eligibility. If an application is ranked high enough to be funded, the NRCS staff will work with the applicant to develop a contract.

For more information on CSP and EQIP, contact the local NRCS field office or visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/il

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AG OUTLOOK '23



As the U.S. works to reduce carbon emissions, renewable diesel from resources like soybeans are being studied as a low-carbon fuel solution.

Renewable diesel: Soy positioned as a low-carbon fuel solution

As governments and companies set aggressive carbon emission reduction goals, those organizations are looking to renewable diesel made from lower carbon, renewable resources like soybeans as a direct substitute for petroleum diesel.

Renewable Diesel vs. Biodiesel

Renewable diesel differs from biodiesel in that it can also be produced from a variety of non-fat feedstocks (like energy grasses, wood, ethanol, and even garbage) — in addition to traditional feedstocks like soybean oil. Additionally, renewable diesel can have better handling characteristics, including a longer shelf life and lower freeze point. Although there are key differences, renewable diesel, like biodiesel can still deliver a 40-86% reduction in emissions compared to petroleum diesel according to Argonne National Lab.

Renewable diesel is created through hydrotreating, a process like a traditional refinery operation. The high-heat, high-pressure process produces a fuel with chemical properties like conventional diesel, according to Clean Fuels Alliance America, formerly National Biodiesel Board.

“Renewable diesel is a top choice in markets with aggressive climate targets,” Matt Herman, Senior Director of Renewable Products Marketing for the Iowa Soybean Association, told participants at a Soybean Research Forum and Think Tank earlier this year.

Renewable Diesel Production in the United States

In 2021, U.S. renewable diesel production equaled about 815 million gallons. Consumption equaled about 1.16 billion gallons, which included about 392 million gallons of imports, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

California uses most of U.S. renewable diesel products and imports, accounting for over 80% of national demand. In 2021 the state consumed a combine 1.229 billion gallons of biodiesel and renewable diesel, replacing a full 1/3 of their petroleum diesel with renewables. The state has set a target of carbon neutrality by 2045. Utilizing biodiesel and renewable has helped California sprint toward its carbon reduction targets, while novel technologies like electric vehicles continue to gain steam.

Think Tank

Participants at the Think Tank, ranging from researchers to farmers and sustainability experts to food company executives, were asked to bifurcate the challenges and opportunities associated with renewable diesel.

They identified six challenges the soybean industry can work through to find greater success in the renewable diesel space:

- Meeting demand: Can the soybean industry produce enough soybeans to meet all demand from food, feed and fuel customers?

- Genetic edits for end uses: Will there be a yield drag for farmers if soybeans are modified in a way that creates beneficial properties for end users? (i.e. higher oil content, different fatty acid profile).

- Infrastructure: What investments are needed to support the increase in renewable diesel capacity in the U.S.?

- Carbon intensity scores: What can be done in the lab and in the field to reduce the carbon intensity of soybeans and their crop rotations?

- Process byproducts: What can we do with the increased amount of soybean meal produced domestically?

- Market stability: What’s the market look like for renewable diesel? What does it mean for soybean farmers? The soybean meal market?

Opportunities

Renewable diesel presents several opportunities for participants all along the value chain to extract greater value from soybeans, contributors to the Think Tank said.

These include:

- Soy profile: This can be an opportunity for soybean breeders to alter the bean for fuel market optimization.

- Marketing alongside electric vehicles: Renewable diesel has a place alongside electric vehicles to reduce carbon emissions.

- Sustainability/carbon intensity: Soy is a sustainable, renewable feedstock. Increasing the sustainability of biofuel will make soy meal more sustainable, too.

- Increase demand: There are several untapped markets (marine, rail, bioheat). This demand can be influenced by policy, corporate sustainability goals, and partnerships with environmental groups.

- Processing: As the renewable diesel process becomes more widely available, costs of processing will decrease and new products like sustainable aviation fuel may become more commonplace.

- Value add/identity preservation: Can soybeans with a higher oil content be incentivized? Is there an opportunity for regional incentives? Can we avoid

identify preservation?

Unconventional Partnerships

Guiding the Iowa Soybean Association’s efforts in exploring opportunities in renewable products, Herman is bringing together various stakeholders.

“We’re now starting to see these legacy petroleum companies lean into renewable diesel because this is a product they can make in their existing refineries,” Herman says.

One such conversation happened earlier this year with Valero, the world’s largest independent refinery. The company is also the second largest renewable diesel producer in the world and a large producer of corn ethanol.

The conversations and plant visit with what was typically considered an adversary has morphed into finding common goals in how to increase production of renewable diesel, and, therefore, drive demand for soybean oil.

“Valero [and other petroleum companies] are under pressure to reduce their carbon footprint as much as possible for every gallon of fuel they produce,” Herman says. “There is a really strong interest in both parties in reducing the carbon footprint of agriculture feedstocks used to make these fuels.”



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RiverWatch volunteers monitor stream health across Illinois

Upcoming training sessions planned in Genoa & Byron

EAST ALTON – Illinois RiverWatch Network will host several training sessions across the state in March and April. The sessions will teach community members how to monitor the health of their local streams.

RiverWatch, a community science program, is coordinated by the National Great Rivers Research and Education Center (NGRRECsm) at Lewis and Clark Community College. Each spring, RiverWatch offers workshops where volunteers learn to collect and identify stream macroinvertebrates (water bugs) and describe the physical condition of the stream habitat.

Upon completing training and becoming certified, volunteers may adopt a stream site where they can monitor water quality and contribute to a state-wide dataset using RiverWatch survey methods.

“Macroinvertebrates are in all of our streams and many people don’t know they are there,” RiverWatch Volunteer Coordinator Hannah Griffis said. “The critters in our streams are impacted by changes in the health of our streams, whether natural or caused by humans. Based on what we find living in the stream, we can get an idea of the overall health of the stream.”

No previous knowledge or experience is required to attend RiverWatch workshops. The workshops will provide enough information for volunteers to monitor streams, whether they have a biology degree or just want to better understand the stream in their own backyard.

Upcoming RiverWatch Training Workshops include Saturday, April 1 in Genoa and Sunday, April 2 in Byron.

Continuing education credits are available for current Illinois educators. Those interested should make a note on their registration form, which is available at <https://conta.cc/3ltLaoI>.

The registration fee is \$50 for adults, which includes a copy of the RiverWatch manual as well as invertebrate identification resources. Up

to two children per registered adult may attend at no cost.

For more information, visit www.ngrrec.org/RiverWatch or contact Griffis at hgriffis@lc.edu or (618) 468-2781.


National Great Rivers Research and Education Center (NGRREC)

Founded in 2002 as a collaborative partnership between the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

and Lewis and Clark Community College, NGRREC is dedicated to the study of great river systems and the communities that use them. The center aspires to be a leader in scholarly research, education, and outreach related to the interconnectedness of large rivers, their floodplains, watersheds, and their associated communities. To learn more about NGRREC, visit www.ngrrec.org.




Upcoming RiverWatch Training Workshops include Saturday, April 1 in Genoa and Sunday, April 2 in Byron.



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