

Spring 2023

Today's Farm



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Ag transportation costs ease, but issues linger

Dan Grant
FarmWeek

The farm sector shouldn't see quite as many transportation-related challenges this year compared to 2022, according to industry experts at the Grain and Feed Association of Illinois' (GFAI) 130th annual convention in Peoria.

Barge freight rates eased in recent months from historic highs last fall. And trucking rates were down about 8 percent as of Feb. 21 compared to last year.

"One thing that's improved year over year is transportation," Eric Wuthrich, manager of Farmers Grain Co. in Roseville, told FarmWeek after being elected GFAI president at the event.

"Last year it seemed freight was

awfully hard to come by," he noted. "It seems to have improved somewhat, especially for trucking."

And that's particularly important for facilities such as Farmers Grain that don't sit on a river or rail line and therefore rely on trucks to move all products.

"One of the main challenges now is interest rates," said Wuthrich, who has spent 15 years in the grain industry and the past seven serving on the GFAI board. "We buy a lot of grain for December and January. There's a big difference between borrowing \$20 million at 3 percent interest or borrowing \$20 million at 7 percent."

Higher interest rates not only cut into grain handling margins but could also slow expansion or upgrade projects at elevators and other facilities.

"Capital will play into a lot of decisions (in the grain industry), including

expansion and capital projects," the GFAI president said.

Jake Brodbeck, vice president of ARTCo barge line, a subsidiary of Archer Daniels Midland, believes shipping rates in the trucking industry possibly eased in recent months due to slightly lower fuel prices and an easing of the driver shortage.

The situation is similar in the barge industry, although labor shortages mostly occurred at individual ports but not as much for long-haul crews for that mode of transportation.

"I think barge freight will remain firm the next couple years," Brodbeck said. "But I don't think it will be a repeat of the fourth quarter 2022, unless we get another crazy weather event. We had a perfect storm last year of low water, harvest demand and a shrinking fleet size."

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Agtrans / from page 4

Drought-induced low water levels on the Mississippi River last harvest caused barge operators to reduce payloads by 25 percent to 50 percent and idle much of the fleet.

But barge transportation is still one of the most efficient for grain and other ag products. A barge can move a ton of cargo more than 800 miles on just a single gallon of fuel, Brodbeck noted.

“The most important thing to keep in mind is the incredible advantage we have because of the waterway system (which contains about 25,000 navigable miles in the U.S.),” he said.

A challenge for the transportation sector moving ahead is the high cost of building new barges and train cars. The cost of building new train cars increased about 20 percent in recent years.

Meanwhile, the high cost of steel not only remains prohibitive to build new barges, but it’s also an incentive to scrap them. A scrapped barge currently is worth nearly \$100,000 compared to just \$30,000 in previous years.

“Interest rates are high and the cost of capital is strong,” Ken Eriksen, senior vice president of Agri Supply Chain, IHS Market Agribusiness, told the RFD Radio Network at the convention. “People are unwilling at these levels to invest in something, especially when you look at the cost of steel.

“While it peaked and has come back down, there’s still a lot of (steel) inventory priced high that companies are going to have to work through.”

The current U.S. barge fleet consists of about 12,000 covered hoppers, 5,000 open hoppers and about 4,000

tanks. A barge typically has a lifespan of about 30 years and the average age of the current fleet is about 20 years, meaning more are close to retirement, Brodbeck said.

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Clinton FFA wins awards in competition

CLINTON — Section 16 Public Speaking -- The Clinton FFA Chapter hosted the Section 16 Public Speaking Contest on Tuesday, January 24. Five local students competed.

Paisley Schick placed 5th overall in Creed speaking, Mabrey Schick placed 1st overall in Creed Speaking, Conley Schick placed 1st overall in JV Prepared, Chloe Barth placed 3rd

overall in Varsity Prepared, and Davis Howell placed 1st overall in Varsity Extemporaneous.

FFA photos continued on page 7



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Clinton FFA wins awards in competition

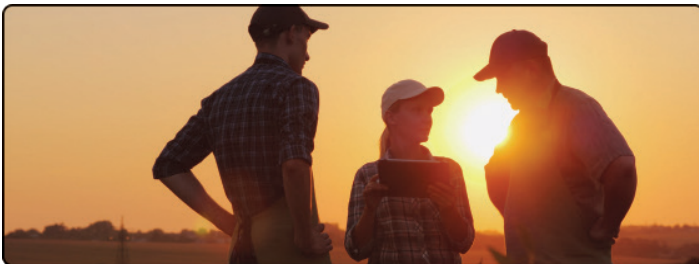
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Fertilizer demand expected to grow this year

Daniel Grant
FarmWeek

The supply of fertilizer is improving around the world following shocks to the system last year.

And the timing of the buildup is critical as fertilizer demand is expected to grow this season, according to BK Morris, senior markets editor, fertilizers, for CRU Group.

“The driver for prices will be from demand, not so much from supply,” Morris told attendees of the Illinois Fertilizer and Chemical Association’s annual convention in Peoria.



FarmWeek photo

See **FERTILIZER** / page 13

More Clinton FFA news

State FFA Dairy Foods -- The State Dairy Foods contest was held at the University of Illinois on Saturday, December 10, 2022. The Clinton Junior High team placed 3rd overall as a team. Individually, Preston Howell placed 5th, Lexi Merriman placed 11th, Cooper Fletcher placed 16th, Sophie Rider placed 18th, and Wyatt Burton placed 24th. The Clinton High School team 12th overall. The team was composed of Sarah Mills (6th overall), Leah Mills, Tristin Roberts, Kael Morlock, and Brody Wilson.

Ground Zero Conference -- Eight Clinton FFA Members represented our chapter at the Ground Zero Conference in Champaign-Urbana on February 3rd-4th. Logan Newberg, Oliver Goar, Conley Schick, Mabrey Schick, Paisley Schick, Audrey Toohill, Emily

Atten, and Leah Mills attended this conference to learn about leadership styles, explore unique perspectives, network with other FFA members from across the state, and participate in a community service project together.

Section 16 Proficiencies -- The Section 16 Proficiency contest was held on Wednesday, February 15 at Maroa-Forsyth. Chloe Barth competed in the area of Specialty Animals, Kreston Carter competed in the area of Diversified Horticulture, and Davis Howell competed in the area of Swine Production Entrepreneurship.

State FFA Degrees -- Davis Howell and Kreston Carter will interview for their State FFA Degrees. To be eligible to receive the State FFA Degree, members must meet several criteria

including earning at least \$1,500 or working at least 750 hours on their project in excess of scheduled class time, as well as productively investing \$1,000 and demonstrating strong leadership abilities.

American FFA Degree -- Elsie Nord will interview for the American FFA Degree. To be eligible to receive the American FFA Degree, members must meet several criteria including earning at least \$10,000 and productively investing \$7,500 or earning and productively investing \$2,000 and working 2,250 hours in addition to demonstrating strong leadership abilities.

Clinton FFA



Gordon Woods / Today's Farm

"SharkFarmer" Rob Sharkey talks to members of the Soil & Water Conservation District during its annual meeting in February.

No, he doesn't farm sharks

Rob Sharkey: From failed hog farmer to rural media personality

Gordon Woods
Today's Farm

Rob Sharkey is pretty well known at this point as "SharkFarmer," and for his ag content work, TV, radio, podcasts and public appearances. But, he does occasionally run into people who aren't familiar with his work who think shark farming is a real thing.

No, his media identity "SharkFarmer" is just an amalgamation of his name, Sharkey, and his profession, farmer.

The Bradford, Ill. farmer was guest speaker at this year's Soil & Water Conservation District annual meeting, held in Clinton in February. He told how he went from being a failed hog farmer to becoming a rural media personality, while running his farm.

"I have five older sisters, and my parents just kept going so they could have a boy," Sharkey said. "Why? Because back then, only the boys came back to the farm."

Sharkey noted that was changing, "which is fun to see. It's a whole new ballgame."

Sharkey said he met his future wife, Emily, at age 16

during a 4-H activity.

He got his courage up and used his usual line, "Hey, would you like to go see my show pig?"

See **SHARKFARMER** / page 10



Gordon Woods / Today's Farm

"SharkFarmer" Rob Sharkey

SharkFarmer / from page 9

Eventually, they both attended Southern Illinois University, and Sharkey returned to the family farm after graduation. He planned to work for his father for a few years as a hired hand.

“But, you know how it is, you want to start being your own guy,” he said.

Sharkey decided he would start raising hogs, as his father did. He rented two buildings and bought some feeder pigs. That was in 1998.

“Nineteen ninety-eight was the lowest point right there,” Sharkey said. “Yeah, I lost my shirt.”

Sharkey said he knew how to raise hogs, but he didn’t know how to market them.

“I lost so much money, I mean I was broke.”

He said he had nothing left on his operating note, “no money left on the credit cards, absolutely nothing,” he said.

Sharkey and his wife were newlyweds at the time, and he hesitated to tell her about his setback. In fact, he didn’t tell her for some time.

“I just didn’t want to put that burden on her,” Sharkey said. “Because I knew what it was doing to me. I mean it was killing me.”

Sharkey said he spent morning, noon and night thinking

about his huge debt. Eventually, the bank called, and he knew his wife would learn how bad things were.

“I knew what the bank was going to say, ‘you’re done’.”

He said his banker told him he’d blown his opportunity and was finished. Sharkey said it was funny where his mind went at that moment.

“Someone is sitting there telling you everything you dreamed about is gone, and I found myself not even paying attention.”

Sharkey found himself staring out the window, where two pigeons suddenly began mating.

“All I could think of what how much I had in common with that bottom pigeon,” he said.



See SHARKFARMER / page 11

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SharkFarmer / from page 10

Starkey said the drive home with his wife and the rest of the evening was quiet. But, then, at around 10 p.m., “we just started talking about everything.”

Their banker told them they should declare bankruptcy and start over. Sharkey said that meant to them they were not only finished farming, “we wouldn’t be able to live in the country anymore, and I’d have to get a real job.”

Sharkey said he and his wife talked about their situation until about 4 a.m. the next morning. He told her that, even though they wouldn’t be farmers anymore, they would be okay.

He said he has never been good at describing that moment but said he believed God took all the pressure off.

“It was like, immediately, everything changed,” Sharkey said.

After a couple of hours of sleep, they awoke the next morning, and Emily said they were not going to file bankruptcy. When he went into town to tell his banker, his banker called him an idiot.

“That cut so far to the bone, it really hurt,” Sharkey said. “The reason was because I was starting to believe him.”

It took them seven years to pay off their debt running several business ventures and side hustles to get it done.

“The one good thing about ’98 was all the other hog farmers were broke, too,” Sharkey said.

Because of this, all of their creditors were willing to work with them in order to eventually collect all their money. But, Sharkey also described himself as selfish.

He said he was offered good paying jobs he didn’t take, “because I was going to be a farmer no matter what.”

Sharkey said one opportunity came along he was open-minded enough to consider. That of an outfitter.

Active in his local Farm Bureau, Sharkey was in frequent contact with members around the state. A friend in another part of Illinois started talking to Sharkey about outfitting for sportsmen.

“There was nothing in my area, so I was fascinated by this,” Sharkey said.

Farmers Sharkey co-oped with often said they had too many deer in their area and asked if he would help hunt their ground.

“This was back in the late 90s, and if you remember, back then, Illinois was the end-all, be-all to deer hunting,” Sharkey said. “It was like the only place the outdoor media talked about.”

Sharkey placed an ad in the back of a magazine and suddenly was flooded with calls from interested hunters. He said, at that point, he didn’t really know what he was doing.

“I should have vetted these guys.”

Many of the potential hunters who showed up didn’t seem to know much about hunting, Starkey said, one calling him from the lodge early in the morning asking him to

come down and help him on with his boots.

He ended up telling a group of experienced hunters he was done with the outfitting business.

“They went home, and a week later called us and said, ‘Hey, what if we bring people we know are going to behave themselves’.”

That was 23 years ago, and the hunters they serve today can be traced back to those original four hunters, Sharkey said.

Since then, Sharkey has started successful podcasts “What’s the Farm” and “Shark Farmer Podcast,” Shark Farmer Radio on SiriusXM RuralRadio, and began Season 6 of “Shark Farmer TV” on the RFD channel. He does all this and farms, too.

Sharkey encourages people to try new things in farming and in life and not be afraid of embarrassment.

“There are people who may never try stuff because they don’t want to be different,” he said. “And, that’s a shame because that’s how we improve.”

Sharkey said he has failed many times but doesn’t feel like a failure.

“We can’t let those failures define us,” he said.

See **SHARKFARMER** / page 12

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SharkFarmer / from page 11

Young people returning to the family farm should be able to chart their own courses and not be tied to the practices of previous generations, Sharkey feels. He said his father didn't understand how the outfitting business worked, but he didn't discourage him. He offered to help.

"We weren't 'broke' broke, but I was a mostly a broken man at that point," Sharkey said. "So, if he would have laughed at me, I don't think I would have done it."

Sharkey said he planned to continue that practice with his family.

"So, if one of my kids comes back to me, and they want to try something that's really dumb, I'm going to ask them if I can help. Because, if they fail, that's a better lesson than I could teach them. But, if they succeed, that's what it's all about."

Visit sharkfarmer.com to find out more about Rob Sharkey.

McDonald's sees value from pork industry partnership

Daniel Grant
FarmWeek

McDonald's, the world's largest restaurant chain, is not only a large end user of pork but also a net exporter of "The Other White Meat."

The Illinois-based company therefore has found great value in partner-

ing with the pork industry to ensure it sources high-quality products in a sustainable system.

Jeff Edwards, manager, U.S. quality systems for McDonald's USA, discussed its work with farmers and the value of pork at the Illinois Pork Producers Association's annual meeting in Springfield. The event kicked off the Illinois Pork Expo.

"We're committed to delivering safe, high-quality products," Edwards said. "How do we do that? We get involved in every step (from the farm to the restaurant).

"We strive to partner with (farmers) as much as possible," he noted. "We understand ag is a good ally."

See **PORK** / page 15



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Fertilizer / from page 8

Fertilizer prices, of course, skyrocketed to historical highs last year as the war in Ukraine and a reduction of Chinese phosphate exports crippled the supply chain, along with numerous other factors.

Morris looks for Russia to export around 2 million tons of nitrogen fertilizer this year, up from just 800,000 tons in 2022. He also looks for increased fertilizer exports from China, Morocco and Saudi Arabia, among other locations into the global market, which should ease the overall supply strain experienced last year.

Elsewhere, new urea production is coming online in Nigeria.

“A lot of countries are getting production back out in the global supply chain,” Morris said.

“Fertilizer affordability is improving,” he noted. “But reluctance to pay high prices remains.”

Morris believes fertilizer prices will generally soften this year compared to last year, although high-priced inventory at some locations is slowing the process. But price spikes are still expected to occur during the peak seasons this spring and fall, but likely nowhere near the same levels experienced in 2022.

“Given where prices have been, there’s a lot of room to go down,” he said. “There’s nothing to stop people from going back to normal production rates.”

Morris believes tight crop supplies and strong prices will incentivize farmers in the U.S., South America and elsewhere to plant more acres and try to maximize yields.

CRU projects U.S. farmers could plant around 92.5 million acres of corn this spring, up from just 88.5 million in 2022. Soybean plantings this season could be similar to last year – 87.4 million acres.

If realized, the boost in corn acres along with an 11 percent increase in winter wheat seedings could drive fertilizer demand.

“There’s going to be a lot of crop production,” Morris said. “We will see lower (fertilizer) prices, although there will be peak periods. Of all products, nitrogen has the most downside potential this year.”

Fertilizer prices in Illinois as of mid-January were steady for anhydrous ammonia (at a range of \$1,190 to \$1,490 per ton) and urea (at an average of \$710), according to the Illinois Production Cost Report.

Average prices in the state declined from the previous two weeks for liquid nitrogen (to \$614 per ton), diammonium phosphate (\$831), monoammonium phosphate (\$852) and potash (\$714).

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‘Rural is changing, not dying’

Sociologist urges changes in narrative

Tammie Sloup
FarmWeek

Ben Winchester is hoping to flip the script on the negative narrative surrounding rural communities.

“The narrative we’re using to describe our small towns and rural places is terrible,” said Winchester, rural sociologist for the Center for Community Vitality at the University of Minnesota. As an example, he points to words like “sleepy” and “dying,” which he sees used regularly in mainstream media.

“The implication is no one is doing anything,” he said.

Winchester kicked off the University of Illinois Extension’s Attracting

Rural Residents interactive webinar series, co-hosted by Illinois Farm Bureau, Rural Partners, the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs, the Association of Illinois Rural and Small Schools and the Governor’s Rural Affairs Council.

During the first webinar on Jan. 17, Winchester walked attendees through misconceptions about rural America and how to change the conversation. The three different webinars – the second was Jan. 31 and the third is scheduled for Feb. 14 – are geared toward community leaders seeking design strategies to recruit rural residents.

Transformations in rural America have been happening since the early 1900s, including:

Technology reduced the need for

farm workers by 20-60%.

Road and transportation development.

Educational achievement. (The GI bill afforded an opportunity for rural residents, mostly men, to get a college degree.)

“We went from Little House on the Prairie to not Little House on the Prairie in 10 years,” he said.

During the second half of the century, several more changes led to rural transformations: Main Street restructuring, school consolidations and hospital closings.

It’s easy to think if a small-town grocery or hardware store closes, the town will “die.”

See **RURAL** / page 15



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Rural / from page 8

“Rural is changing, not dying,” Winchester said. “Show me all the dead towns; our landscape should be littered with dead towns at this point. ... We’re not dead, we’re still here.”

He points to the housing market in rural communities to contradict that narrative.

“I can’t find a home to buy across this country in our small towns and rural places,” he said. “We’re far from dead. In fact, we’re more vibrant and durable than ever.”

So, how can community leaders and rural advocates fight this narrative? Winchester offered several suggestions.

First, watch your language. With more regionalized schools, hospitals and commerce, talk up the region, not just the town.

He also warned to never use population to determine success or failure.

“The rural population hasn’t gone down, it’s gone up. It’s gone up by

11 percent,” he said. “What’s gone down is the relative percentage of Americans that live in small towns and rural places.”

In 1970, one in four people lived in a rural area, but by 2022, it was one in eight.

So, how can the percentage decrease when the rural population went up?

“The pie got bigger; the pie of people,” Winchester explained. “The population got bigger, and the rural part got bigger, but it didn’t get as big and grow as fast as urban areas did.”

While most Illinois counties lost rural population from 2010 to 2019, 71 percent gained housing units.

The composition of housing units also is a factor. Today, 30 percent of rural households are owned by people over the age of 70, while another 45 percent are Baby Boomers, he said, adding the average household size has decreased by one person.

“There is so much change coming into our rural communities. It’s almost unbelievable, over the next 25 years,” he said.

Other actions to change the narrative include creating vitality through community groups and bridging them, and starting a conversation with kids.

He pointed to the phrase “rural brain drain,” meaning high school graduates leave and don’t return. However, that trend is not uniquely rural, he stressed. Plus, it’s not necessarily a bad thing for graduates to leave their hometown.

“Let the kids go but let them know there’s somewhere to come back to,” he said.

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Pork / from page 12

McDonald’s sourced more than 200 million pounds of pork in the U.S. annually as of 2021, with roughly 10 percent of that coming from Illinois (the nation’s fourth-largest pork producer).

Globally, McDonald’s consumes about 440 million pounds of pork and serves a wide variety of pork products in an estimated 75 countries. It sources more than 70 percent of all pork used in the restaurant chain from the U.S.

“We’ve seen growth in the pork category internationally the last five years, especially with strip bacon. It’s become very popular in Europe,” Edwards said.

But, while pork products continue to sell like hotcakes, McDonald’s responded to consumers and pressure from non-government organizations to phase out the use of gestation stalls

from farms where it sources pork.

So, back in 2012, McDonald’s announced plans to purchase pork from farms that phase out the use of gestation stalls by 2022. But, due to animal disease pressure and the COVID pandemic, McDonald’s extended the deadline to 2024, with a goal to purchase 85-90 percent of pork from those farms as of last year.

While the move represented a major challenge to the industry, McDonald’s partnered with pork producers and is on track to meet the goal. It purchased more than 90 percent of its pork from farms that phased out gestation stalls last year.

“We did meet the goal for 2022,” Edwards said. “Continued engagement with producers was the difference maker.”

McDonald’s began sending em-

ployees and executives on tours of hog farms to better understand the industry and also implemented animal health and welfare training.

“McDonald’s values partnerships. It’s engrained in our business model since 1955,” Edwards said. “Consumers increasingly want to know where their food comes from and how it’s produced. Engagement allows us to have better, more meaningful conversations.”

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