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Barge traffic back to normal; lock closures loom

By DANIEL GRANT
FarmWeek

Barge traffic is getting back to normal on the lower Mississippi River for what's typically a slower time of the year anyway.

"The water levels are back up to normal south of Cairo versus where it was in September and October," Tom Torretti, of Consolidat-

ed Grain & Barge Co., told FarmWeek at the Illinois Fertilizer and Chemical Association's (IFCA) annual convention in Peoria in mid-January. "The low water issue last year was the worst we'd seen since 1988."

The low water issues, which Torretti said made parts of the mighty river

temporarily look like a creek, snarled barge traffic and caused freight rates to skyrocket in 2022.

Fortunately, barges are moving again and freight rates are coming down as the planting season approaches. Much of the fertilizer and other input products used on Illinois farms arrive in the state via barge.

"After harvest, things slow down and then start picking up around February as shippers move fertilizer up the river system," Torretti said. "Bulk rate contracts out of New Orleans are 15 to 20% higher than a year ago. All our costs are up. But what southbound grain freight values do remains to be seen. They're back to normal for now."

When asked if farmers will have access to adequate supplies of inputs moved on the river this spring, Torretti said, "I think so (based on current conditions and barring spring flooding).

"The fertilizer industry is so good at what it does, buyers always get their products," he continued. "Just, maybe not when they want it."

The barge industry added 226 new covered hopper barges to the fleet last year from previous orders, which will help increase the flow of products on the river system.

But, with the current cost of a new covered hopper barge between \$900,000 and \$1 million, the existing fleet of around 11,800 barges likely won't grow much more any time soon.

"Until steel prices come down, we probably won't see many new builds," Torretti said.

Meanwhile, the barge industry faces more shipping issues this spring and summer – this time of the planned variety.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers plans to close three locks on the Upper Illinois River at Marseilles, Dresden Island and Brandon Road for rehabilitation work from June 1 through Sept. 30. The planned closure for work at the Starved Rock lock has been deferred to a later date, yet to be determined.

"There'll be no traffic at all. You'll have to plan accordingly," Torretti told attendees of the IFCA

convention. "We've known about this for two years and been through this before. It is what it is."

The Corps previously closed five locks on the Illinois River at LaGrange, Peoria, Starved Rock, Marseilles and Dresden Island from July 1 to Oct. 29, 2020, for major rehab and maintenance work.

"The timing of the repairs (this year) is after spring planting and before harvest, so it's probably the best time to do it," Torretti said. "But, when the locks do reopen, it will be a mad dash on all commodities. We potentially could be harvesting grain and will certainly be moving fertilizer to put down for the fall season."

(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.)

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A tow enters the lock chamber moving upstream at Brandon Road Lock and Dam in Joliet. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers plans to close three locks on the upper Illinois River at Marseilles, Dresden Island and Brandon Road for rehabilitation work from June 1 through Sept. 30. The planned closure for work at the Starved Rock lock has been deferred to a later date, yet to be determined. (Photo by Army Corps Rock Island District)

ISA launches Interactive Trade and Exports Map

BLOOMINGTON – Illinois soybeans travel from the state's 43,000 farmers' fields to worldwide destinations, and the Illinois Soybean Association (ISA) is developing new resources to show how it happens.

The new Interactive Trade and Export Journey brings the Illinois soybean export story to life visually on ilsoy.org in the form of an interactive world map. The map allows farmers and buyers to choose their journey from farm to market, showcasing the different transportation avenues Illinois soy can take once it leaves the farm and how it ultimately gets to destinations like a domestic crush facility or international export market.

"ISA is debuting a slew of new resources surrounding its Trade and Exports program, all designed to help audiences better understand the soy value chain and how exports impact farmers' bottom lines," says ISA Mar-

ket Development Chair and At-Large Director, Scott Gaffner. "We're developing tools to ensure Illinois farmers understand not only the global impact of their crop, but also the buyers around the globe who are generating the demand for soy from Illinois."

In addition to the interactive map, ISA has produced trade booklets geared toward international buyers that feature the benefits of Illinois-grown soybeans. The booklets explain soybeans' consistent quality and reliable supply, in addition to their sustainable production, and Illinois' efficient transportation systems to move soybeans from the farm to their destinations around the globe.

The trade booklets are available in multiple languages for the convenience of diverse international buyers of Illinois soybeans, allowing ISA to continue facilitating relationships and building preference for Illinois soy with inter-

national buyers in key export markets.

For more information on these resources, contact Urish at eileen.urish@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 level, 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 the website www.ilsoy.org and www.ilsoygrowers.com.

ISG applauds passage of Sustainable Aviation Fuels Tax Credit

BLOOMINGTON – Illinois Soybean Growers (ISG) applauds Governor JB Pritzker's signature of SB 2951, which includes the sustainable aviation fuel (SAF) purchasers credit. The bill, which creates a \$1.50 per U.S. gallon SAF tax credit airlines can use to satisfy all or part of their state use tax liabilities, further supports Illinois' soybean and corn farmers by promoting the domestic production of renewable fuels.

"We are pleased that Gov. Pritzker and Illinois legislators recognize the important role renewable fuels play in bolstering our state's economy," said ISA Vice Chairman and Atlanta, Ill. farmer, Ron Kindred. "This bill represents acknowledgment of the need for Illinois-made renewable fuels that are good for the environment, economy and energy security. It also shows support for the hard work of the 43,000 Illinois soybean farmers and creates incentive to grow even more

bushels of soybeans than the record-breaking 677.25 million bushels grown in Illinois in 2022."

SAF is a biofuel used to power aircraft with similar properties to conventional jet fuel but with a smaller carbon footprint. Using many feedstocks and technologies SAF dramatically reduces life cycle greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions compared to conventional jet fuel. Some emerging SAF pathways even have a net negative GHG footprint.

"The passage of this legislation is the beginning of new opportunities for Illinois soybean farmers like we've never seen," said Kindred. "Growing soybeans not only improves soil quality and reduces nutrient loss, but now, we are helping decarbonize the fuel industry, providing domestic energy security and creating new jobs right here in Illinois."

The legislation creates a tax credit for every gallon of SAF sold to or used by an air

carrier in Illinois from June 1, 2023, to June 1, 2033. This tax credit effectively lowers the price airlines pay for SAF pumped into aircraft at airports in Illinois.

Beginning in June 2028, the state tax credit will only apply to SAF derived from domestic feedstocks, creating a new demand for Illinois soybeans and other environmentally-friendly agricultural feedstocks.

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"20 Under 40" Program continues into second year of celebrating Illinois' youngest farmers

BLOOMINGTON – Young farmers are our future and no state's future in agriculture is brighter than that of Illinois. Leading the nation as #1 in soybean production and Top 10 in agriculture as a whole, Illinois is brimming with farmers of all specialties who truly operate in a league all their own.

After a successful first year, the Illinois Soybean Association, along with partners at the Illinois Pork Producers Association, Illinois Beef Association, Midwest Dairy, Illinois Corn Marketing Board, Grain & Feed Association of Illinois, Illinois Fertilizer and Chemical Association, and Illinois Farm Bureau, are working together to continue the recognition program that celebrates Illinois "20 Under 40," recognizing 20 young farmers, under the age of 40, for the work they do in the agricultural community and beyond.

"We are looking for young farmers in Illinois whose achievements in agriculture of the community stand out from their peers," says ISA Chairman, Steve Pitstick. "Someone going beyond jobs on the farm and excelling in the industry in the early years of their career."

Sponsored by John Deere, Illinois '20 Under 40' program is open to farmers of all commodities and farm sizes, as long as they actively farm and live in the state of Illinois. The ideal candidate is an agricultural leader, an exceptional community citizen and role model for their generation and the next.

To nominate someone, or to apply yourself, visit IL20UNDER40.com by March 31, 2023.

The Illinois Soybean Association (ISA) checkoff and membership programs represent more than 43,000 soybean farmers in Illinois.

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Could Brazil surpass U.S. as world's top corn exporter?

By DANIEL GRANT
FarmWeek

Competition in world markets is expected to intensify as Brazil is projected to produce record corn and soybean crops for 2022-23.

Joana Colussi, postdoctoral research associate at the University of Illinois who serves on the farmdoc team there, reported crop production in her home country of Brazil could increase to record levels of 5.6 billion bushels of beans and 4.9 billion bushels of corn.

If realized, Brazilian corn output for 2022-23 would be up 12% from the previous year, with a portion of the additional bushels likely headed to the export market.

"The weather situation so far has been favorable conditions for most regions," Colussi said at the Illinois Farm Economics Summit in

Peoria. "There's been moderate to severe drought in the south, but expectations so far are for good yields."

In 2022, Brazil exported a record amount of corn, 44 million metric tons (mmt) or 1.73 billion bushels. And those sales could swell to 50 mmt (or 1.96 billion bushels) this year.

"China signed an agreement with Brazil to import corn. Those shipments started in November," Colussi said.

If the pace of corn production and exports continues to grow in Brazil, could it surpass the U.S. as the world's top exporter? Colussi believes it's possible.

"Brazil could surpass the U.S. in corn exports sometime between 2024 and 2026," she said. "We'll see. There are many factors at play."

USDA's November forecast pegged all U.S. ag

exports at \$190 billion for fiscal year 2023, down \$3.5 billion from its August estimate.

Grain and feed exports are projected to decrease by \$300 million to \$46.2 billion in 2023. And USDA reduced its estimate of U.S. corn exports by 150 million bushels to 1.92 billion as of Jan. 12, reflecting the slowest pace of sales since 2019-20.

Meanwhile, U.S. ag imports are projected to grow to \$199 billion this year, driven by higher imports of horticultural products, sugar, tropical products and grain and feed.

"A strong dollar, while a headwind to the export forecast, is partially responsible for the higher import demand," USDA noted.

However, there could be an opening for the U.S. to export more corn in the

months ahead before Brazil harvests its second-crop corn, safrinha. That's not the case with soybeans, though, as Brazilian soybeans should start hitting the market next month.

USDA lowered its soybean export forecast for the U.S. by 55 million bushels as of Jan. 12 to 2 billion bushels.

"The U.S. should have an opportunity to sell more corn before Brazil's safrinha harvest in July," Colussi said.

Double- and triple-cropping adds about 66 million acres worth of crop production in Brazil each year.

Elsewhere, the crop outlook in Argentina isn't as rosy. With 85% of corn and 90% of soybeans planted as of Jan. 5, the majority of beans (70%) went into the ground outside of the period to maximize yields due to

weather-related planting delays.

"Drought conditions made it difficult to plant early," Colussi said. "It's a third consecutive La Niña year, which usually creates a hotter and drier summer in Argentina."

And the August-through-December timeframe the past three years there has been the driest in more than 30 years.

Crop output subsequently is projected to decline by 45% for wheat and 15%

for corn in Argentina for 2022-23.

USDA's latest estimates released Jan. 12 pegged the Argentine soy crop at 45.5 mmt, down 4 million from the previous estimate, while the Brazilian soy crop increased a million to 153 mmt.

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A field of corn grows under a sunny sky in southern Brazil last month. Brazilian corn production for 2022-23 could increase by 12% and push exports beyond the 2022 record of 44 million metric tons. (Photo courtesy of Joana Colussi, University of Illinois postdoctoral research associate)

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Fertilizer demand expected to grow this farming season

By 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.

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% 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).

(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.)



A predicted boost in corn acres this spring along with an 11% increase in winter wheat seedings could drive fertilizer demand. (Photo by Illinois Farm Bureau photographer Catrina Rawson)

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ISA announces FY23 Checkoff-Funded Projects

BLOOMINGTON – The Illinois Soybean Association (ISA) announced its list of FY23 checkoff-funded projects. The projects place Illinois soybean farmers' profitability as a top priority by growing opportunities for soybean uses, markets, accessibility, and demand. "Not only are we getting back to our roots in 2023, but we are also spreading our wings," said ISA Chairman Steve Pitstick. "As an association, we need to ensure we stay connected to the needs of Illinois farmers. Our lineup of funded projects in market development, government relations and agronomic utilization will help increase the value, awareness, and opportunities for Illinois soybeans."

Market Development

The ISA checkoff program will continue to work hard for Illinois farmers to expand existing markets and grow new markets in 2023.

"We have a compelling story to tell about the quality of soybeans we produce in Illinois," said ISA Director of Market Development Todd Main. "We hope to host buyers from across the globe here in Illinois to better illustrate soybeans' value and bolster our members' profit margins."

Repairing rural bridges and modernizing locks and dams on inland waterways also are examples of the way ISA is continuing efforts to strengthen the transportation network that remains the

competitive advantage for Illinois farmers in the global marketplace.

"Illinois is set to receive more than \$1 billion in federal funding to build out rural broadband services and ISA is working to ensure rural communities are prepared with plans to secure their share of that funding," Main said. "We have launched a new collaboration with the United Soybean Board (USB) and the Benton Institute to support developing innovative plans bringing broadband service to rural communities."

ISA also is exploring greater collaboration and expansion opportunities for domestic and global market expansion by re-engaging with leadership of the poultry, beef, pork, and aquaculture associations.

"One area we believe has significant growth potential and multiple benefits is the food space concentrated in the Chicago area," said Market Development Committee Chairman, Scott Gaffner. "The concentration of market-leading food companies in our state is an opportunity to not only expand the use of soy as an input but also to combat the unfounded narrative that soy may have some negative health characteristics. We are in the process of developing an informational portal featuring Illinois companies utilizing soy in new and interesting ways."

Agronomy and Utilization

The ISA Agronomy Team has

set goals to support all in-field agronomic needs, advance soybean management systems to protect and improve soil productivity and water quality, continue to sustainably improve the quality and yield of high performing soybean systems, support soybean farmers' production by evaluating economics and ROI, and to promote, research, and drive soybean production education.

"ISA will continue to publish crop progress and condition reports from the 2023 Soy Envoys, and hold field days meant to keep farmers up-to-date with in-field agronomic information throughout the 2023 growing season," said Utilization Committee Chairman Brady Holst. "We also will showcase Illinois soybeans at the 2023 Farm Progress Show."

"ISA Agronomy is especially looking forward to what's in store with the Precision Conservation Management program," said ISA Agronomy Director, Abigail Peterson. "We plan to release guidebooks for carbon and best management practices while also continuing our research."

Government Relations

Under the direction of Government Relations Committee Chairman, Brad Daugherty, and ISA Director of Government Relations & Strategy, Andrew Larson, the FY23 Government Relations Committee has set its sights on a number of forward-facing goals, which in-

clude becoming stronger advocates for Illinois farmers in Springfield and Washington; fostering strong relationships with Illinois elected officials; developing robust federal policy for the American Soybean Association; expanding the Illinois Soybean Growers Political Action Committee and the role it plays in advocating for Illinois soybean farmers; promoting the Voice for Soy advocacy network to be a robust grassroots tools connecting farmers with key decision makers; and working with ISA leadership to develop key legislative priorities.

"The ISA Government Relations Committee will leverage a number of upcoming opportunities for the benefit of Illinois soybean farmers, which include ISA board fly-ins to Washington D.C. and advocating training and recruitment drives," says Larson. "We're also excited to host an Illinois Soybean Growers lobby day in Springfield and to continue policy development ahead of ASA's policy sessions as part of the Commodity Classic."

Some of the key projects on which the Government Relations Committee will focus include expanding non-checkoff work with Michael Torrey & Associates in Washington D.C. to engage more fully on behalf of IL soybean farmers; continuing support for the Midwest Soybean Collaborative; and support for Clean Fuels Alliance America's state policy and

regulatory team working at the state level to advance biofuels.

Communications

Under the direction of ISA Communications Director, Rachel Peabody, ISA will continue to communicate the work of checkoff funded projects through multiple communications channels, including 12 issues of Illinois Field & Bean, ISA's in-house publication going to more than 40,000 farmer mailboxes each issue.

According to Peabody, ISA also allocated \$100,000 to Illinois Ag in the Classroom to fund teacher training and professional development, educational materials, teacher grants, county agricultural literacy coalition grants and more.

The ISA Board of Directors approved funding to join other farmer-led organizations involved in the Illinois Farm Families coalition in a year-long campaign celebrating Illinois family farmers and the contributions they make to their communities. The campaign will kick off in spring 2023 with an advertising campaign and will continue with community activations, which highlight that 96% of Illinois farms are family-owned and operated. Collaborating partners include the Illinois Beef Association, Illinois Corn Marketing Board, Illinois Farm Bureau, Illinois Pork Producers Association, Illinois Soybean Association, and Midwest Dairy.

Be a part of the history of Illinois soils

SPRINGFIELD – Your land, your soil may have been part of an historical and extensive soil sampling program dating back to 1899 by the University of Illinois. If your land was part of the original research, then the Illinois Nutrient Research and Education Council (NREC) needs your help in bringing soil sampling of that specific location full circle.

Dr. Andrew Margenot of the University of Illinois explains, "Our predecessors had the foresight to keep records of soil sampling locations and to store those samples

at the University. By resampling soil from these same locations, we will gain unprecedented insight on how these soils have changed over 120 years." Dr. Margenot is funded with research dollars from NREC and the Illinois Farm Bureau.

Ultimately, what Dr. Margenot learns will enable improvements in soil fertility management and conservation, including updates to the Illinois Agronomy Handbook.

The original soils and approximately 450 locations that the researchers seek

to re-sample are now largely located on private land. Researchers are looking to identify and contact those land owners and/or producers to ask permission to sample soils. Sampling will have negligible impact with a small soil probe down three feet at three points within a 10- to 15 foot-area. All soil sample results will be shared at no cost to the landowner/farmer and will be anonymous to protect privacy of the specific sampling location.

To learn if your land is among the original sampling sites, log on to <https://www.illinoisnrec.org/>. Find the story by clicking on the Important News link and then use the QR code to link to a Google map showing the locations. When you click on the pin of a specific location, you will be taken to an embedded link to share your name and contact information for the research team to follow up. You can also contact the team directly at rothman@illinois.edu or margenot@illinois.edu.

A one-page summary of the project history, goals, and process can also be found on the Illinois NREC website.

U.S. ag trade officials reject latest Mexico proposal on GMO corn ban

By TIMOTHY EGGERT
FarmWeek

Warning that billions of dollars in bilateral trade are at risk, the top two U.S. ag trade officials formally rejected a revised proposal from the Mexican government to ban U.S. imports of genetically modified corn for food production.

USDA Under Secretary for Trade and Foreign Agricultural Affairs Alexis Taylor and U.S. Trade Representative Chief Agricultural Negotiator Doug McKalip announced the decision after meeting with Mexican government officials recently in Mexico City.

Negotiators met to discuss and “address our grave concerns” with President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador’s decree to phase out the use and importation of U.S.-grown biotech corn and other products by Jan. 31, 2024.

Mexico primarily imports feed corn from the U.S., which also provides white corn for food processors to use in tortillas and chips, for instance.

“Our trip further underscores the importance of resolving this issue and we conveyed our continued commitment to strengthening our economic and trade relationship with Mexico,” Taylor and McKalip said.

It was the third such meeting in the past three months between American and Mexican officials over the proposed ban, the terms of which have evolved since it was initially introduced.

In a Nov. 28, 2022 meeting in Mexico City, Obrador told USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack he’d consider delaying the ban on U.S.-grown feed corn while more studies were conducted, but that he’d be less flexible on imports of white corn,

which is used in products like tortillas.

American officials largely rejected that proposal as well as an alternative framework offered at a December meeting in Washington, D.C., between Vilsack, USTR Ambassador Katherine Tai and Mexican officials.

And McKalip and Taylor rejected another counterproposal Monday to eliminate the proposed ban on imports of GMO corn for livestock feed, but to maintain the proposed ban on GMO corn for human consumption.

“... These changes are not sufficient and Mexico’s proposed approach, which is not grounded in science, still threatens to disrupt billions of dollars in bilateral agricultural trade, cause serious economic harm to U.S. farmers and Mexican livestock producers, and stifle important innovations needed to help producers respond to pressing climate and food security challenges,” the pair said in a joint statement.

That move was welcomed by the National Corn Growers Association (NCGA), which called the news a “significant development and good news for corn growers.”

NCGA President Tom Haag added that Vilsack and Tai “understand that banning biotech corn would deliver a blow to American farmers and exacerbate current food insecurity in Mexico by drastically raising prices for corn, basic foods and other critical products derived from corn in the Mexican economy.”

In addition to reiterating that they couldn’t accept terms of the proposals because they are “not grounded in science,” McKalip and Taylor also held firm that they might initiate a formal dispute challenge under

the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement.

“We appreciate our Mexican counterparts’ time and dedication in trying to hammer out a solution,” the pair said. “We made it clear today that if this issue is not resolved, we will consider all options, including taking formal steps to enforce our rights under the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement.”

(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.)



Top U.S. ag trade officials recently rejected a compromise with the Mexican government over the country’s proposed ban on imports of genetically modified corn from the United States. (Photo by Illinois Farm Bureau photographer Catrina Rawson)



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'Rural is changing, not dying': Sociologist urges changes in narrative

By **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. Two other webinars, on Jan. 31 and Feb. 14, were 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."

"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%," 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% gained housing units.

The composition of housing units also is a factor. Today, 30% of rural households are owned by people over the age of 70, while another 45% 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.

(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.)



A barn in Christian County gives off positive vibes. Speakers during University of Illinois Extension's Attracting Rural Residents interactive webinar series stressed rural communities are changing but not dying. (Photo by Illinois Farm Bureau photographer Catrina Rawson)



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