

# THE FARMER'S REPORT

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Wednesday, July 27, 2022





## Tour bridges urban-rural gaps about conservation farming

By KAY SHIPMAN  
FarmWeek

Stepping outside comfort zones and into no-till fields, prairie habitat and organic crops can break down misperceptions about farm conservation in northeast Illinois.

That was one of the goals for a Will County conservation tour on June 24 organized by the Chicago Wilderness, a regional alliance of 250-plus organizations.

“The idea was to, first of all, let everyone see the great progress being made on farms on the collar of the Chicagoland area because I think the impression of people — whether you’re a consumer or a conservationist or just somebody in the city — there’s assumptions made that the farms around Chicagoland are a danger to us,” said Tim Brennan, vice president of the Farm Foundation and co-chair of the Wilderness Ag Committee that hosted the tour.

“We wanted to bring people out to show them how much innovation and innovative conservation practices are happening,” Brennan said while organic farmer

Doug Yunker demonstrated tillage equipment. “But there are also ideas that farmers have about consumers and conservationists. We wanted them (farmers) to meet these people who are extremely thoughtful and eager to learn and eager to better understand the pressures that are on the farm.

“There’s no better way to do that than face to face.” A daylong field day with four farm stops offered face-to-face conversations among representatives of 30-some organizations and government bodies as they traveled on two motor coaches.

A video and photography crew from Chicago’s Field Museum even documented the farmers’ practices on public and private lands. The museum is documenting regenerative agriculture and wanted to talk with “the people doing it,” a photographer explained.

Farmers were represented by the Will County Farm Bureau, Soil and Water Conservation Districts and other traditional ag organizations. Those groups were joined by the Nature Foundation of Libertyville, which fo-

cus on urban and suburban conservation; village and county governments; organizations for wildlife, birds and fish; and even representatives from Aldi.

The diverse mix of perspectives surfaced questions different from those asked on most farm field days.

When asked about their challenges and obstacles, farmer presenters spoke honestly.

Yunker, Will County Farm Bureau member and owner of Yunker Organic Farm, described the three-year, extensive process for acres to become certified organic. Even after certification, a farmer must record and describe each pass through an organic field, said Yunker, who began farming organically in 2018. He farms with a rotation of corn, soybeans, wheat and hay for small, square bales.

“For the three years (of transitioning to organic), you sell a crop that yields less (compared to conventional crops) for less of a price (than organic crops),” Yunker said.

Asked about support he received to learn organic farming practices, Yunker



**Will County farmer Doug Yunker demonstrates tillage equipment adapted to cultivate an organic soybean crop during a recent urban-rural farm tour. Yunker admitted 40-foot swaths require more time to kill weeds compared to applying herbicides but said he also enjoys farming organically. (Photo by Kay Shipman of FarmWeek)**

answered he leaned on a college friend who also farms organically several counties away.

“Having someone as a mentor has been the biggest part,” he said. In 2021, Yunker and his father, Mark, were awarded the Will County Forest Preserve District’s first organic farm license.

During the tour, Yunker demonstrated a 40-foot cultivator adapted to till organic soybeans and admitted that the weed-control process takes longer than using a spray boom and herbicides.

“Organic is more

time-consuming, but I’m enjoying it,” he added.

At the Will County Forest Preserve District’s Laughton Preserve, tour participants learned Mother Nature can hinder even the best conservation practices and intentions. The forest preserve district rents about 3,000 farmland acres and requires tenant farmers to use no-till and other conservation practices.

To reduce erosion and build soil organic matter, the district’s tenant farmer used contour farming and no-till at the Laughton Preserve.

The farmer also seeded two, 50-foot native prairie strips along the contours to catch field run-off and add diversity. In addition, the district put in sediment-control basins.

Walking across no-till soybean fields and a prairie strip, Michelle Blackburn, the forest preserve’s agricultural specialist, pointed to accomplishments and setbacks. While eroded gullies had filled in, soil compaction in combination with intense spring rain caused some gullies to return.

“We are trying different seed for erosion control. We are fortunate the tenant farmer is willing to work with us,” she said. “Laughton (Preserve) is a success story, but it is also a work in progress.”

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## Inflation and the farm: What's a farmer to do?

Fuel and fertilizer prices are rising, labor shortages are emerging, and the supply chain is lagging. While farmers can't control these circumstances, there are ways to manage inflation and its impact on your farm.

For years, longtime farmers have tempered younger producers' concerns about market conditions and high crop prices by telling them they'd seen worse in the 1980s. Unfortunately, they can't do that anymore. The U.S. Consumer Price Index is at its highest since 1981, and it continues to rise. Over the last 12 months, it increased 8.3 percent. (For comparison, during second quarter 2020, it averaged 0.4 percent.) Meanwhile, food prices rose 11 percent from April 2021 to April 2022 – the largest 12-month increase since November 1980. Likewise, the Producer Price Index is also at a high, and that's a widely used indicator for economic health.

### What is Causing Inflation?

Many factors contribute to and continue to push this inflation forward: Chinese demand for feed (including soybeans), labor shortages, an effectively broken supply chain and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which significantly impacts grain and oil exports.

### How Is Inflation Impacting Agriculture?

Farmers are seeing the impact of inflation today in five primary areas:

- Fuel
- Labor
- Seed
- Chemicals
- Fertilizers—where it hit the hardest.

Input prices have been on the rise for quite some time, and the ongoing supply chain issues continue to perpetuate these hikes. Analysts have said that the Russian invasion, combined with lingering and perpetual uncertainty, have put inflation on steroids, and farmers are seeing it firsthand.

“Year over year April to April, fertilizer has seen a 75 to 110 percent increase,” says Thomas Eatherly, agribusiness consultant in Brentwood, Tenn. “In fuel, we've seen close to a 70 percent increase year over year on farm diesel.”

Competition for labor has also been significant for farmers, says Eatherly. “We're planning for a 15 to 25 percent



increase for general repairs in our budgets,” he explains. “That accounts for parts prices, supply chain issues and labor issues.”

Even land, which analysts often call land a “good hedge” in inflationary periods, has begun to be impacted. While land can be appealing for outside investors thanks to reliable appreciation year over year, low interest rates and higher commodity prices, expansion isn't possible for many farmers. A longer trend toward steadily rising land prices as well as increasing cash rent prices makes adding land prohibitive for the average producer. As well, it creates another barrier for younger farmers who want to get into the business or build on their family's operation as succession plans come into play.

### How Can Farmers Manage Inflation?

Unfortunately, according to the experts, there isn't much farmers can do when it comes to prevention, but you can take steps to manage it. Smart spending and careful planning are the key phrases to live by, whether we're talking about new equipment, land improvements, repairs or fertilizer application frequency.

1. Stick with fixed rates: If you borrow or add a capital expenditure, stick with fixed rates, and avoid adjustable options, as those will almost certainly be counter-productive. Know your operational expenses nearly to the penny. While smart balancing and tracking is always recommended for farm and ag businesses, it may be the difference between who is in the field a year from now and who is pursuing another career path.

2. Plan ahead: The supply chain issues won't be fixed overnight, and in fact, many analysts project that 2023 could be worse than 2022 in terms of availability. “We're in a very volatile

market,” Eatherly says, “and there are so many unknowns right now. We have major concerns for 2023 because of the current supply chain issues.”

3. Order what you need in advance: Order parts, inputs, supplies—anything you may need but that you can't predict the day when you'll need it—to have on hand, because you likely won't be able to get it in a timely manner. In other words, don't wait until the machine is down to get a high-wear part. “We have clients ordering parts this summer for repairs in the fall so they make sure they're available,” says Eatherly.

4. Get ahead of your fertilizer strategy: Likewise, think about your mid-to late-season fertilizer strategy early, and order accordingly. Make sure you're utilizing all of your soil nutrients and leveraging soil sample tests. Consider secondary options to supplement your usual production plan, in case you can't get your first choices. Options like micronutrients, organics and a modified fertilizer program could be worth considering to fill out your strategy.

5. Be flexible in your buying patterns: This may also be a time to have a little flexibility in your buying patterns. “As the price goes up, people find secondaries to make up for their primaries,” he says. In other words, if you can't get your first choice on brand or style or format, have a backup already picked out so you can quickly pull the trigger and get something in hand.

It all goes back to margin, but the fact remains that right now, commodity prices are elevated, so building the right strategy to weather through inflation is in your hands. “Input costs are up tremendously, and you still don't have control over your yield—Mother Nature does,” Eatherly says. “At the end of the day, there's still profit to be made, but the risk associated with this profit is the highest we have seen in a long time.”

## ILSoyAdvisor website redesigned with farmers in mind

BLOOMINGTON—The Illinois Soybean Association (ISA) is excited to unveil its freshly redesigned ILSoyAdvisor website.

ILSoyAdvisor, funded by the Illinois soybean checkoff program, is a one-stop-shop for all the latest soybean news, insights, tips and actionable advice to help farmers grow better beans, run a better business and improve overall profitability.

“ISA is confident that the new and improved ILSoyAdvisor.com will allow for a more user-friendly experience for website visitors looking for agronomic information,” said Abigail Peterson, ISA Director of Agronomy. “While usability will be improved, we will continue to offer timely, actionable content—through blogs, webinars, podcasts and more—in addition to more video and interactive content. And it's all available to you right at to your fingertips.”

The new ILSoyAdvisor offers expert advice, timely articles and more on topics ranging from insect, disease, nutrient and weed management, to climate, planting and harvest strategies, ag tech and innovation, agribusiness management, and sustainability.

“We set out to develop a resource that would offer solutions, streamline communication, and add value,” adds Peterson. “It's all designed to help Illinois soybean farmers succeed.”

The program underwent a website platform update in addition to a refresh of the site branding and content to ensure an evolving user experience and continued alignment with program goals. Functionality has been oriented to meet the needs of users looking to access information quickly and seamlessly. And though website visitors will enjoy improved overall aesthetics, speed and simplified navigation, ILSoyAdvisor remains a trusted and respected resource for soybean growers throughout Illinois.

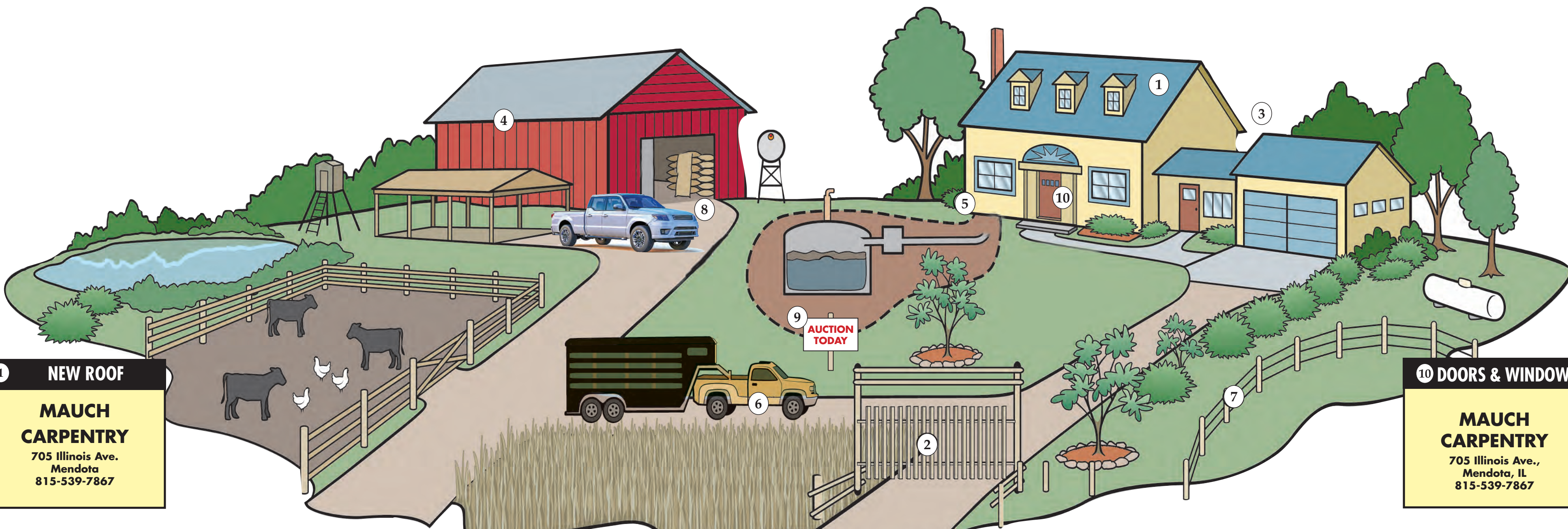
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The Illinois Soybean Association (ISA) checkoff and membership programs represent more than 43,000 soybean farmers in Illinois. The checkoff funds market development and utilization efforts while the membership program supports the government relations 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](http://www.ilsoy.org) and [ilsoygrowers.com](http://ilsoygrowers.com).



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## Illinois project takes on quantitative disease resistance in corn



The new NSF study aims to understand quantitative resistance to multiple corn foliar and seedling diseases by looking at the level of the gene to the whole plant.

URBANA—Like the virus that causes COVID-19, pathogens that attack crops change constantly to evade host immunity, or disease resistance in plant parlance. Sometimes, a single gene makes the difference between a resistant crop and one that's susceptible. In those cases, the gene typically blocks the pathogen for a while, until the microbe makes a change.

That's where quantitative disease resistance comes in. Here, multiple genes work together to offer shades of disease resistance in a plant. If the pathogen

evolves to overcome one of the genes, there are backups. In other words, resistance remains much more durable.

Tiffany Jamann, assistant professor in the Department of Crop Sciences at the University of Illinois, and her colleagues received \$1.5 million from the National Science Foundation to study quantitative disease resistance in corn.

"Plant diseases cause an estimated 13% loss of global crop yields annually, reducing incomes and food quality and safety. Quantitative disease resistance usually works against all variants of pathogens, and thus is an effective disease management tool," Jamann says. "Our research will identify disease resistance mechanisms for some of the most important diseases of corn, which is both a model species for plant quantitative genetics and the most valuable crop in the U.S."

Because there are multiple genes working together in quantitative disease resistance, it's a little more difficult to find them all. But Jamann has experience with that. She and her colleagues were the first to identify genes for corn resistance to bacterial leaf streak disease. She also has worked to uncover pathogen lifestyle for corn diseases as well as resistance mechanisms in sorghum.

The new NSF study aims to understand quantitative resistance to multiple corn foliar and seedling diseases by looking at the level of the gene to the whole plant. Jamann is particularly excited to explore how plants defend against vascular infection, or how plants keep pathogens from entering the xylem, the plant's water transport system.

"For example, bacterial

leaf streak is typically thought of as a nonvascular pathogen; usually the bacteria don't get into the xylem," she says. "But we have a few corn lines that allow bacteria in that way, so we're trying to understand why that's the case."

Other members of the research team, including Santiago Mideros, assistant professor in the Department of Crop Sciences, and researchers at North Carolina State University, will examine resistance to seedling diseases and use gene editing to make corn more resistant to foliar diseases of corn.

"Beyond the work on quantitative disease resistance, we will make genetic resources available to the broader maize genetics community. These resources will be useful beyond just looking at disease resistance," Jamann says.

The project also includes an education component. Project partner North Carolina State University will participate in and provide funds to continue and update a successful plant breeding and genetics workshop for science teachers, as well as participate in NC State's AgDiscovery Camp for high school students.

"I think high school students could get excited about this concept that plants can't run away from diseases. It's all about how they evolve resistance and how the pathogens and plants try to out-manuever each other," Jamann says.

To learn more about a future in crop science research, interested students can visit the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences' (ACES) future students page.



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## State funding to defray FFA costs for students

By KAY SHIPMAN  
*FarmWeek*

FFA membership offers students many educational and leadership benefits as well as career opportunities. Starting this fall, the cost to belong to FFA will no longer be a challenge for ag students in Illinois.

A state appropriation of \$550,000 will pay the FFA membership dues for every student taking agriculture classes in Illinois. The fee elimination makes Illinois an FFA-affiliation-membership state, ensuring every aged student will have FFA dues automatically paid.

Jesse Faber, agriculture teacher and FFA adviser at Pontiac Township High School, told an agriculture education advisory committee June 21, defraying the costs will help students and schools. Faber noted the costs for membership adds up for chapters.

Funding for dues and other required services, such as record-keeping services, added up to an extra \$1,000 to \$1,200 a year for his school.

Gov. JB Pritzker said his priority is to make agricultural education more accessible.

In a statement, the governor said he was proud to implement a measure spearheaded by state Sen. Doris Turner, D-Springfield, to waive FFA membership fees

for all Illinois ag students.

“The more bright minds we can bring in to help solve the agricultural problems of tomorrow, the better we all will be in the future,” Turner said in a statement.

Illinois Agriculture Director Jerry Costello II noted nearly 37,000 students across the state took ag classes, but 23,000 belong to FFA.

“By removing the cost barrier, this opens up the doors for thousands more students to benefit from what FFA provides, which goes well beyond what can be taught in the classroom,” Costello said.

The state also has strengthened ag education’s position in curriculum.

In 2021, the General Assembly passed, and Pritzker signed two measures that added “agriculture education” to the list of acceptable electives qualifying students for admission to state universities and added “agricultural sciences” to the list of acceptable science courses for admission.

In Illinois, FFA membership is offered to students in seventh through 12th grade. Currently, more than 350 schools across the state have a FFA chapter.

*(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.)*

## Illinois Cover Crop Initiative open for applicants in Illinois

SPRINGFIELD – In partnership with ADM and the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Service and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Farmers Business Network, American Farmland Trust has begun taking applications for the Illinois Cover Crop Initiative (ICCI) program in Illinois.

ICCI incentives will be available to an estimated 400 farmers enrolling up to a total of 75,000 acres, including acres that have previously been planted to cover crops. Applicants have the option of 1–4-year contracts and will be required to follow NRCS standards and specifications for managing cover crops. AFT will work closely with farmers to complete contract paperwork, lessening the time burden. Incentives include \$10 per acre annually supported by technical assistance provided in collaboration with farmers’

trusted retail partners and conservation organizations. Acres cannot be enrolled in another privately funded ecosystem market program but may be stacked with federal and state cost-share programs.

As a part of the program, AFT will quantify economic and environmental benefits to be shared with farmers, ADM, NRCS, NFWF and FBN to further cover crop adoption into the future. In additional, technical assistance will be available to anyone interested in cover crops, regardless of program participation.

Information on the program and the application portal can be found at <https://farmland.org/project/icci/>. For additional questions, please email AFT at [icci@farmland.org](mailto:icci@farmland.org).

Contract awards will be made on a first come, first serve basis until contracted acres reach 75,000. The application period will close on Dec. 31, 2022, although

it is encouraged that applications be submitted before the end of August.

The AFT Illinois program is part of a \$2.6 million grant announced on May 24, 2022 by ADM, NRCS, NFWF and FBN to accelerate adoption of cover crops in six Midwestern states. Other recipients include Ducks Unlimited, Kansas Association of Conservation Districts, Minnesota Soil Health Coalition, and Practical Farmers of Iowa.

“This program will provide farmers with technical assistance, education and financial incentives to meet the demands of the growing interest in cover crops,” said Kris Reynolds, AFT Midwest region director. “It also offers farmers the opportunity to stack incentives with additional public

programs, accelerating the adoption of cover crops in Illinois.”

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American Farmland Trust is the only national organization that takes a holistic approach to agriculture, focusing on the land itself, the agricultural practices used on that land, and the farmers and ranchers who do the work. AFT launched the conservation agriculture movement and continues to raise public awareness through its No Farms, No Food message. Since its founding in 1980, AFT has helped permanently protect over 6.8 million acres of agricultural lands, advanced environmentally-sound farming practices on millions of additional acres and supported thousands of farm families.



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## Legislature eases liability insurance cost for agritourism

By **KAY SHIPMAN**  
*FarmWeek*

The General Assembly gave Illinois agritourism businesses some relief on liability insurance costs. Lawmakers passed legislation providing agribusinesses a \$1,000 state income tax credit for liability insurance premiums and forwarded the provisions along with other tax measures to Gov. J.B. Pritzker.

For years, Illinois Farm Bureau and the Illinois Specialty Growers Association have worked to address agritourism liability issues against stiff opposition from the Illinois Trial Lawyers Association (ITLA). After years of inaction due to ITLA opposition, Sen. Rachel Aud Crowe, D-Glen Carbon, and Senate President Don Harmon's office, with help from Rep. Katie Stuart in the House, actively

partnered with IFB and lobbied each chamber to deliver aid for agritourism.

Stuart, D-Edwardsville, worked to pass relief for Liberty Apple Orchard and other agritourism businesses. "It's really important to support these small businesses," Stuart told FarmWeek. "The owners (of Liberty Orchard) and I have had numerous conversations. I understand their point of view about being outdoors (at the orchard) is the same risk as you being outdoors in your yard."

Farmers in Illinois lead the nation in soybean, corn and swine production, but some also contribute to the state's economy by offering immersive, recreational experiences to visitors through pumpkin patches, hayrides, tree farms, petting zoos and more, Crowe said.

"As small business own-

ers, agritourism operators truly make our state unique by attracting visitors to our communities to participate in authentic farm experiences," Crowe said. "By offering state relief to agritourism operators for liability insurance premiums, Illinois is supporting the local businesses who promote economic growth statewide and play an important role in teaching our children and families the significance of agriculture in our daily lives."

"This is huge for agritourism and local food," said Mark Raney, IFB associate director of state legislation. "A lot of people want to enjoy these activities, but liability insurance is a huge barrier into this niche market given how expensive it is."

Raney noted a recent USDA report showed 85%

of agritourism businesses earn less than \$25,000. "These are small businesses," he added. However, the state Trial Lawyers Association long fought efforts to provide agritourism businesses limited liability protection rather than go to court, Raney explained.

"Specialty growers are unique in that we grow fruits, vegetables and herbs for direct use by Illinois families, while also inviting our guests to enjoy a fun, educational experience on our farms," said Randy Graham, president of the Illinois Specialty Growers Association (ISGA). Because specialty growers work in agriculture and tourism, they "incur a higher liability risk than most," he noted.

Graham thanked Crowe and Stuart for understanding specialty growers'

needs and their work to ensure passage of the liability insurance tax credit. He also pointed to the partnership success of IFB and ISGA.

The legislation defines agritourism businesses that would be eligible for the liability insurance tax credit and specifies services that would not meet the law's criteria. Raney explained qualified agritourism businesses would need certification from the Illinois Department of Agriculture after it adopts new rules.

Eligible agritourism businesses include those providing historic, cultural and on-site educational programs, tours, animal exhibitions and petting zoos, crop mazes, U-pick harvesting, horse rides, hayrides and sleighrides.

Under the law, ineligi-

ble businesses solely offer hunting, fishing, rodeos, amusement rides, off-road biking or motorized activities, outdoor recreation and serve as wedding and concert venues.

For agritourism businesses, the liability insurance is very expensive. "We hope the income tax credit will alleviate that burden," said Raghela Scavuzzo, IFB associate director of food systems development and ISGA executive director. "We hope this credit will incentivize them to continue doing business and will stimulate new agribusinesses."

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Pumpkin patches and other eligible agritourism businesses would qualify for a state income tax credit for liability insurance premiums in legislation passed by the General Assembly. Agritourism liability issues have long been priorities for Illinois Farm Bureau and the Illinois Specialty Growers Association. (Photo courtesy of Eckerts)