



# Ag Outlook



*The Glendora Reporter*

Wednesday, March 13, 2024



# AG OUTLOOK '24

## AISWCD selects Woods as new chief executive officer

SPRINGFIELD – The Association of Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts (AISWCD), a grass roots organization founded in 1948 to represent and empower Illinois' Soil and Water Conservation Districts, is thrilled to announce the appointment of Dr. Michael Woods as its new Chief Executive Officer (CEO).

Woods, with more than 30 years of community organizing, education, and government experience is an accomplished and visionary leader, and brings a wealth of experience to AISWCD. With a proven track record of driving growth and innovation in the agricultural industry through conservation and education, Woods is poised to lead AISWCD into a new era of inspiration and service.

Woods succeeds Grant Hammer, who announced his departure from the association effective Dec. 31. His appointment comes after an extensive selection process by the board.

"We are delighted to welcome Dr. Woods as our new service-oriented leader and chief executive officer," stated Tom Beyers, AISWCD Board President. "His exceptional leadership skills, strategic insights, and deep industry knowledge made him the ideal choice to lead the AISWCD. We have great confidence in his ability to steer the Association towards even greater achievements that support the mantra, clean water, healthy soils."

Woods has experience leading multi-disciplinary, cross-functional teams across a wide range of public and private sectors. Additionally, he is well-versed in grassroots organizing, fiscal management, strategic planning, training, and stakeholder engagement.

"I could not be more honored to lead this association," Woods said. "At its core, AISWCD is an assembly of innovative and inspired conservation professionals who seek to protect Illinois' greatest resources...soil and water. AISWCD is an essential voice and partner for the 97 Soil and Water Districts and hundreds of SWCD staff and board members across the state doing transformational work in all 102 Illinois counties. As CEO, I will strive to enable our association, partners, and stakeholders to achieve even greater success in fulfilling our shared vision of clean water and healthy soils."

"Woods' enthusiasm for framing key issues, harnessing creativity, securing vital resources, and building conservation alliances will be instrumental in driving AISWCD's continued service and voice for conservation," stated Grant Hammer, former AISWCD Executive Director. "Under his guidance, we are confident that AISWCD will reach new heights and create lasting value for all stakeholders."



Woods

In Dr. Woods' previous role as the Manager of the Division of Natural Resources within the Illinois Department of Agriculture, he successfully elevated focus on conservation, leveraged vital resources and united partners with a vision to enhance the states commitment to soil and water conservation.

"Dr. Woods played a vital role in building out the Illinois Department of Agriculture's conservation initiatives," said Jerry Costello II, Director Illinois Department of Agriculture. "The IDOA team looks forward to continue our strong working relationship with the AISWCD as we have a shared vision of ensuring that the agricultural industry is resilient to shifts in weather while protecting our soil and water resources across the state."

"In his prior leadership role with the Illinois Department of Agriculture, Dr. Woods showcased his commitment to engaging diverse and divergent voices into the conservation conversations and seeking vital resources to support soil and water conservation capacity building needs," Sarah Earles, SWCD Employee Group Co-Chair, said. "AISWCD is poised for even greater success in the future because of the depth of knowledge, capacity and abilities Woods brings to this new leadership role, and the SWCD employees are primed to work with the Association through grassroots advocacy, education and partnerships."

"Dr. Woods has been seen as a vital voice in the Illinois environmental community, and his new leadership for AISWCD is sure to elevate and amplify a message that ensures our mutual vision of healthy soils, clean water and healthy communities," added Eliot Clay, Land Use Program Director, Illinois Environmental Council. "IEC is thrilled to advance our partnership with AISWCD under Woods' leadership as he has earned a reputation across the state as a voice for advancing conservation strategies that make Illinois agriculture and communities more resilient."

"My vision for the Association centers around increased service, organizational resiliency, and an amplified voice for conservation professionals" declared Woods. "With this clear direction, AISWCD is poised to tackle the challenges of the ever-evolving conservation sector landscape and capitalize on emerging opportunities."

### About Association of Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts

The Association of Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts (AISWCD), is a grass roots organization formed in 1948. It is made up and serves Illinois' 97-member Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs). Soil & Water Conservation Districts work to protect Illinois' greatest assets – the rich, fertile soils and water resources of the state through strategic conservation efforts. Soil and Water Conservation Districts, working in conjunction with agricultural as well as environmental stakeholders, have for decades over played a central role in efforts to protect and sustain the viability of Illinois' natural resources for future generations.

## A message from the IFB President

### Full repeal of California's Prop 12 is urgently needed

By BRIAN DUNCAN  
Illinois Farm Bureau  
President

A lot has changed on our Ogle County farm since I first started helping my dad take care of the pigs over 50 years ago. Gone are the open sheds and large pens for our pigs of multiple sizes and ages — pens where they were exposed to the weather as well as disease.

On my farm and others around Illinois, outdoor facilities have been replaced with protective indoor, climate-controlled housing with modern waste management systems providing a cleaner, safer environment for animals and caretakers.

Behind every pig stands a person. Livestock farmers spend countless hours in all conditions, ensuring the security and well-being of their animals.

We adopt scientifically backed, veterinary-approved, animal care and husbandry practices with the best interest of the animals and those of us who care for them in mind.

Like other producers, I am troubled that people without animal care experience or expertise can dictate the practices that must be used on livestock farms.

In 2018, a proportionately small number of Californians passed a ballot initiative, known as Proposition 12, restricting the sale of eggs, veal and certain cuts of pork that were produced in a manner that did not meet the standards outlined in the initiative. Consequently, uncooked or unblended pork products must come from animals who are the offspring of sows given 24 square feet of floor space upon reaching reproductive age.

Various vet-approved solutions are used for housing breeding females in modern pork production, including grouping sows. Yet Prop 12's arbitrary requirement of 24 square feet per sow can increase the opportunity for the animal to engage in aggressive and sometimes violent behavior, risking injuries to themselves, their pen mates and their caretakers.

American Farm Bureau Federation, along with the National Pork Producers Council, challenged the law's constitutionality as a violation of the Interstate Commerce Clause. We were greatly disappointed last summer when the U.S. Su-



preme Court, in a narrowly split decision, declared the initiative to be constitutional.

With the law's enactment on Jan. 1, pig farmers are now uncertain if they will make massive infrastructure investments to comply with California's arbitrary animal welfare standards, which could be subject to change with future ballot initiatives. Ultimately, Proposition 12 not only violates the principles of interstate commerce but also undermines food access and affordability.

Nobody understands these concerns better than USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack.

Vilsack told U.S. House Ag Committee members during a recent hearing that "there's nothing preventing any state from doing what California did (with Prop 12)," and if Congress doesn't "take this seriously, we're going to have chaos in the marketplace."

That "chaos" from Prop 12 will hit fixed- and low-income consumers the hardest, as the law is expected to severely reduce the affordability of high-quality protein. In fact, prices for certain pork products in California have risen as much as 41% since Prop 12's implementation, according to a USDA study.

State regulations like Prop 12 shouldn't dictate commerce or agriculture production in other states. Prop 12 endangers the financial health of livestock producers, and smaller farms especially might be forced out of business due to high compliance renovation costs and lack of long-term incentives. This could lead to more consolidation in the industry.

Processors also face challenges due to uncertain demand and higher costs to trace and segregate products for Prop 12 compliance.

But California's market is

too big to ignore. Nearly 15% of the pork consumed in this country is eaten in California. And future demand prospects could be significant there as well.

Proposition 12 also serves as a template that ultimately could be used to regulate all sectors of agriculture. Standards could be placed around labor rate, crop inputs used, or certain production methods that could ultimately create chaos in the agriculture space. The risk of disruption increases if more states adopt individual agricultural standards creating an unmanageable patchwork of regulations.

I support any farmer's decision to comply with Prop 12 but advise caution with the uncertainty of further regulatory changes, such as Massachusetts' Question 3.

A full repeal of Prop 12 is urgently needed.

The Supreme Court has called on Congress for a legislative solution. Farm Bureau continues to advocate for one as well.

Illinois Farm Bureau, Illinois Pork Producers Association and state commodity group partners recently sent a letter to the Illinois congressional delegation outlining concerns with Prop 12 and calling for a legislative fix in the next farm bill.

Most vital to addressing Prop 12 is continued collaboration, bipartisan relationships and speaking as the unified voice of Illinois agriculture. Illinois producers can trust there's a grassroots organization committed to protecting the economic well-being of their businesses, just as consumers can trust the family farmer behind every pig.

(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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# AG OUTLOOK '24

## Legislation introduced to change Illinois estate tax

By ERIN HENKEL  
FarmWeek

New bipartisan measures aimed at ensuring the preservation of family farms in the event of a family member's death were announced recently after years of attempting to reform the Illinois Estate and Generation Transfer Tax Act.

Supported by Illinois Farm Bureau, Senate Bill 2921, introduced by state Sen. Dave Koehler, D-Peoria, and House Bill 4600, introduced by state Rep. Sharon Chung, D-Bloomington, are identical bills that if passed would change the state's estate tax, specific to farms.

"Illinois Farm Bureau is proud to support the Family Farm Preservation Act because our policy supports the preservation of family farms and this is a bipartisan effort to keep farm families on the family farm," said Brian Duncan, IFB president. "We are grateful and excited to see members from all four caucuses (lend their support for the legislation)."

The measures are aimed at addressing the discrepancy between escalating farm estate evaluations and annual farm income.

"This is a historic day, we've got some legislation before us that really is long overdue," Koehler said during a news conference at the Illinois Farm Bureau headquarters in Bloomington.

"This is an industry that is made up of family farms. ... 96% of farms are family farms, so why would we risk that from being upset by people having to sell the farm to pay their estate tax."

Chung said after a fall spent on combine rides with farmers, she learned the estate tax is a top concern.

"We're really doing this to help bring a lot of relief to family farms and make sure that family farms stay within families," Chung told RFD.

Currently, any estate in Illinois with a gross value of \$4 million after inclusion of taxable gifts, is taxed in its entirety using a complex formula and is subject to a graduated state estate tax.

Rep. Charlie Meier, R-Okawville, a working farmer, shared examples of how the tax has impacted his own farming community.

"For decades I have watched family farms get sold because they have to pay an inheritance tax. ... People think we are rich because we have this huge asset of farmland," he said. "That's not farmland to us, that's a member of our family. That member of our family has taken care of our family for generations. ... That's what this bill is about—future generations being able to farm that land, keeping America the cheapest fed nation

**"This is an industry that is made up of family farms. ... 96% of farms are family farms, so why would we risk that from being upset by people having to sell the farm to pay their estate tax."**

—Sen. Dave Koehler

in the world and keeping the family farm going."

While farm estate evaluations cross the \$4 million threshold, they do not reflect financial reality for farm families in the state, according to Gary Schnitkey, professor of farm management at the University of Illinois.

"To get that transferred from this generation to the next generation, they are going to owe a sizable chunk of tax to the state of Illinois," Schnitkey told FarmWeek. "It's feasible but they are probably going to have to go into debt to do it. They aren't going to have the cash outstanding. ... They are going to have a new debt payment on that land."

To continue farming on their family farms, many farm families must make the decision to go into debt or sell portions of the farm or equipment, leaving farm families without the assets necessary to sustain their livelihoods and provide for their families.

"It increases the incentive to sell the farmland to settle the estate tax, so you don't have to come up with the funding to do it because there's no other liquid assets in the estate," Schnitkey said.

According to a recent farmdoc article co-authored by Schnitkey, the average farm size in Illinois is 1,300 acres, with farmers owning about a quarter of the land, or 325 acres, with an average annual income of approximately \$100,000.

The estate valuation for 325 acres would be \$4.875 million, based on the average market price of \$15,000 per acre. The land would generate a tax liability of \$250,000. The 325 acres, however, produces about only \$25,000 of income.

Without including the values of farm infrastructure, equipment or the homestead, which are also evaluated under the estate tax and generate additional tax liability, the family is left paying taxes 10 times the income generated by their ground.

Schnitkey said the \$100,000 estimate is still above average due to record high years in 2022 and 2023, when prices were influenced by conflicts overseas. He said he is anticipating incomes to drop back down to around \$70,000 to \$80,000 annually.

Schnitkey said the estate tax is becoming a "bigger deal" due to large increases in land prices and said he thinks the exemption should be increased to reflect inflation.

Furthermore, Illinois' \$4 million threshold lags the federal estate tax exemption, which is at \$13.6 million, but is scheduled to sunset down to approximately \$6 million in 2026.

If either SB 2921 or HB 4600 is passed, it would reform the current state tax for farm estates only, by changing the tax exclusion to a true exemption, and raising it from \$4 to \$6 million. Only dollars over \$6 million will be taxed under the exemption.

In addition, the measures tie the new \$6 million exemption level to inflation and will be adjusted each year according to the increase in the Consumer Price Index.

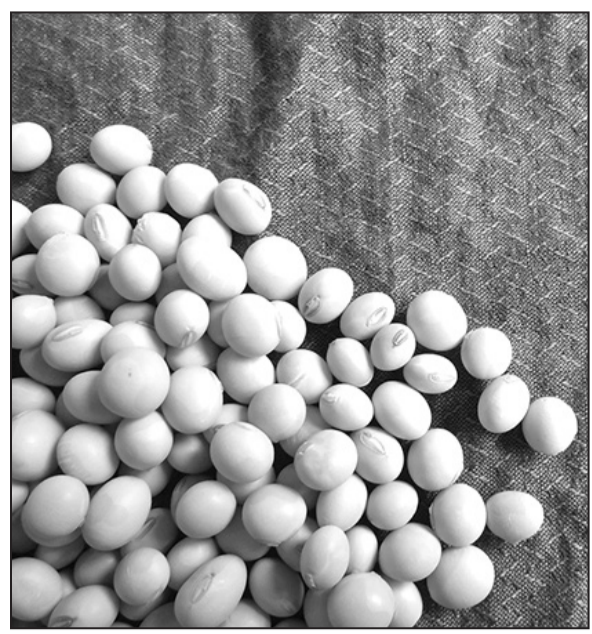
The measures would also allow portability between spouses at the state level, a benefit allowed under the federal estate tax; meaning a surviving spouse can use the unused estate tax exemption of a deceased spouse plus their own exemption when they die.

The measures are limited to agriculture, by coupling the changes to only those estates that are eligible for agricultural special use valuation under federal Internal Revenue Service rules.

The farm must make up at least 50% of the gross estate, with 25% of the estate value being the farmland. Additionally, the farm must be farmed by the deceased or family member for five of the previous eight years prior to the deceased's death, and the surviving family must continue farming for 10 years.

Other members of the General Assembly present included Sen. Mike Halpin, D-Rock Island, Sen. Patrick Joyce, D-Essex, Sen. Christopher Belt, D-Swansea, Sen. Sue Rezin, R-Morris, Rep. Norine Hammond, R-Macomb, Sen. Tom Bennett, R-Gibson City, Rep. Stephanie Kifowit, D-Oswego, and Rep. Jason Bunting, R-Eminington.

(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.)



## Sulfur is key to soybean success

By EMILY HANSEN  
Commercial Agriculture Educator,  
University of Illinois Extension

As the growing season fast approaches, farmers need to prepare for the fertility needs of their crops. While soybeans may not require nitrogen like corn does, this crop has its own unique nutrient requirements. In addition to phosphate and potash, soybeans also need sufficient sulfur to produce a strong, healthy crop.

Sulfur is one of 17 essential plant nutrients that all crops require. In soybeans, sulfur is important for optimal growth during both the vegetative and reproductive stages of the plant. It is also required for nitrogen fixation. Soybeans are capable of fixing their own nitrogen from the atmosphere by forming beneficial relationships with bacteria in their root nodules. Sulfur is required for nodule formation and function. Sulfur is also an essential building block of amino acids, which are found in the protein of soybean seeds and is what determines the quality of it as an animal feed.

Most sulfur in the soil is found in organic matter. As the organic matter breaks down, a process called mineralization, it releases plant-available sulfur to crops. Sulfur is also highly mobile in the soil, and heavy rainfall can cause leaching. Because of this, growers with sandy or coarse-textured soils should monitor for sulfur deficiencies. In soybeans, a sulfur deficiency manifests as pale green or yellow leaves without prominent veins or necrosis in the youngest trifoliate leaves.

Sulfur can also be found in the atmosphere as sulfur dioxide. This form of sulfur is released into the atmosphere by coal-burning power plants. It ultimately makes its way into the soil and is mineralized to plant-available sulfate. As we move away from fossil fuels, less sulfur is being deposited into the soil from the atmosphere. This is why farmers now may need to apply additional sulfur when this wasn't necessary in the past.

One important thing to note is that the symptoms of early-season sulfur deficiencies may disappear as sulfur becomes more available to plants during the summer as root systems continue to develop. Sulfur concentrations vary throughout the soil profile, so as the growing season progresses more sulfur may become available for plants.

Growers are encouraged to strip-test their soil if they believe sulfur is limiting the yield potential of their crops. New research at some Land Grant universities in the Midwest is showing yield increases in soybeans with the addition of sulfur. Soybeans require 0.35 lb/bu sulfur from all sources to produce a successful crop. Sulfur can be added to soils by applying ammonium sulfate (24% S), gypsum (16-18% S), elemental sulfur (99% S), and many others. Sulfur is also available as a foliar treatment for later in the growing season. Each of these sources vary in their availability to plants, with elemental sulfur taking up to a year to become available, so growers should be mindful of this when choosing a sulfur source.

More information about how to manage soybeans can be found in University of Illinois Extension's Illinois Soybean Management 2023 guide.

## Illinois farmers battle adversity to 2023's strong crop yield

SPRINGFIELD – Challenged by a perfect storm intensified by droughts and record input prices, Illinois farmers might not have imagined they'd finish fall 2023 with one of the strongest crops.

According to Illinois Farm Bureau Vice President Evan Hultine, the year proved the power of technology because farmers were helped to compensate for dry spells, one lasting seven weeks.

Hultine said "it wasn't record yields but it was pretty darn good corn yields."

While corn remained on

an upward trend, soybeans missed the mark a bit, he said of crops used primarily for livestock and biofuel.

"The beans were a slight disappointment in some spots but really nothing bad," he said. That's because even soybeans did not dip below average in production levels.

The economy also proved a stress point for farmers in 2023 as inflation spiked input costs like that of seed, and crops met decreased demand with competition from other lands.

Considering the numerous obstacles before farmers

in 2023, this measure of success was more than they could have predicted.

"I would say in general overall people were pleasantly surprised with the yields," Hultine said, adding that even his orchard experienced a sensational year.

As farmers enter 2024 with good moisture levels, he said there's hope for another year of strong crops. On the legislative front, a major issue facing farmers is expected to be the impact of California's Proposition 12, which took effect in January with regu-

lations on pig farming.

Additionally, the Illinois Farm Bureau is working to see a new federal Farm Bill enacted with updated policies and programs for farmers. Whether that bill gets enacted in 2024 remains to be seen.

"With everything else going on in DC politically, it's going to be a hard lift to get a Farm Bill passed this year," Hultine said.

But despite obstacles, the Illinois Farm Bureau and others are working hard to keep the Farm Bill in the forefront, he said.

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# AG OUTLOOK '24

## Illinois' future agriculture teachers shine at National FFA Convention

By ERIN M. HENKEL  
FarmWeek

Being from Chicago's South Side, most people wouldn't expect Carmen Trotta to be interested in agriculture, much less representing University of Illinois College of Agriculture, Consumer and Environmental Studies (ACES) at the 2023 National FFA Convention.

Trotta went to Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences and was enrolled in an 800-member FFA chapter, engaging in urban agriculture activities, working about 80 acres of farmland, participating in activities in the school's food science laboratory and focusing on career and leadership development.

"I just think that there could be a lot of presence of urban agriculture within a lot of different city settings throughout Illinois like Chicago, Decatur, Bloomington and more of the larger populated areas," Trotta told the RFD Radio Network. "It's just a matter of finding the resources and the space to really be able to influence such programs. Agriculture doesn't only have to be a rural thing. It can also be in urban areas, and we want to bridge that gap between both communities."

Trotta said most people are surprised when they find out he is from Chicago and can connect with students from across the country who visit the ACES booth by sharing how Illinois agriculture is trying to bring rural, suburban and urban communities together.

"A lot of surprised faces, but once I tell them about the program they realized, 'Oh wait, that is actually possible,'" Trotta said. "A lot of kids don't realize that there is



an urban presence. It kind of just gets them more engaged to show them agriculture is everywhere."

Trotta is a junior at the U of I studying ag education and minoring in ag business, with the hope of giving more urban students the same agricultural experience he had in school. Having already earned his Illinois FFA State Degree, Trotta is working toward his American FFA Degree.

"I love coming here ... just being able to communicate with these kids," Trotta said.

At the Southern Illinois University booth, Maxwell Berry, from the Maroa-Forsyth FFA, also wants to be an ag teacher after being president for Section 16.

Berry was in ag sales his first three years of high school, selling beef sticks throughout his community at local elevators and school sports activities, while also maintaining a food service placement book at a local restaurant.

"Doing experiences like your SAE in high school just gave you an item on your

resume and lets them see that you've been working since you were in high school to set yourself up for a better future," Berry said. "It opens so many doors, just having that experience of FFA."

Berry said his high school ag teacher inspired him with her passion.

"It's my goal to be able to push the future of agriculture forward by showing those students in my classroom one day that they are welcome wherever they need to be and that they can get that experience in FFA and take it wherever they want to go," Berry said.

Berry received his American Degree at this year's convention in Indianapolis and said it made him think of his freshman orientation where he was introduced to his ag teacher and started his journey through FFA.

For Ally Burrow, the sea of blue jackets is a reminder of her first time attending the National FFA Convention in second grade. Her mom is an ag teacher at Greenville and brought Burrow with her — an experience she said, "you don't forget."

During high school, Burrow participated in ag education events through FFA and did her record book on ag service. She said the personal development generated "big points" of her wanting to be an ag teacher.

Burrow said it was in second grade she realized she wanted to be a teacher like her mom but thought she would teach history instead of ag and enrolled at Illinois State University.

"I first came to Illinois State as a history major, but then I realized as I started going through the program that ag really is what spoke to me and it is what I knew the most about and is what I really have passion for," Burrow said.

Burrow said she loves being able to represent ISU and her local chapter at the convention.

"When I think of my roots in FFA and in ag ed, I'm going to think of Greenfield and I'm going to think of ISU," Burrow said. "But your local chapter always has that place in your heart — that's where you grew up."

## Ag colleges offering new programs for Illinois students

By PHYLLIS COULTER  
FarmWeek

Ag colleges are ramping up a new crop of programs, research efforts and facilities this year. FarmWeek caught up with education leaders to learn about the big new things unfolding on three campuses this year.

### In the Heartland

Everything is new at Heartland Community College (HCC) as students start their first semester at the new Ag Complex at the college in Normal this month.

While classes started Jan. 17, the official opening of the ag complex was Jan. 31. People toured other new facilities, which include the Precision Planting Lab, Illinois Soybean Association Soils Lab, Growmark FS Atrium, three greenhouses, several classrooms and study areas, said Kourtney Watts, associate director of agriculture at HCC.

One of the next big things here will be the installation of a 160-by-80-foot edible windbreak. "Students will be able to pick fruit from it," she said from the college's booth at the Everything Local Conference in Springfield, where IFB was one of the sponsors along with the Illinois Specialty Growers and Illinois Farmers Market Association.

### New building opens at ICC

A new Precision Agriculture Technician program launched at Illinois Central College (ICC) in East Peoria in the fall. Students will learn precision agriculture fundamentals and technical skills related to the troubleshooting, diagnosis and repair of precision agriculture equipment.

Construction was completed in the summer of the new ag building, which will be primarily used for the ag mechanics courses and precision ag classes, ICC agriculture professor Pete Fandel said.

This year, Fandel will be using funding from a National Science Foundation Advanced Technological Education Grant to train students in water quality testing.

### New certification takes flight

Several new things are also popping up at Parkland College in Champaign, said Charlie Mitsdarfer, its agriculture and horticulture program director. Two full-time staff have been added along with a new program in a new building. The AGCO Technical program will be patterned after the successful Case New Holland technician program, he said.

Also, a new drone certification program will be available for agricultural, aviation and other students interested in flying UAVs.

Students will get more hands-on opportunities working on 80 acres, planting and harvesting crops for United Way's Farmers Feeding Families program. Ag and Diesel students will get real life experience on a larger scale than on the school's plots, Mitsdarfer said as he toured booths at the Everything Local Conference in Springfield with an eye out for more new ideas.

A USDA grant will also give students hands-on experience in data-intensive farm management working with real farmers and real data, he said.

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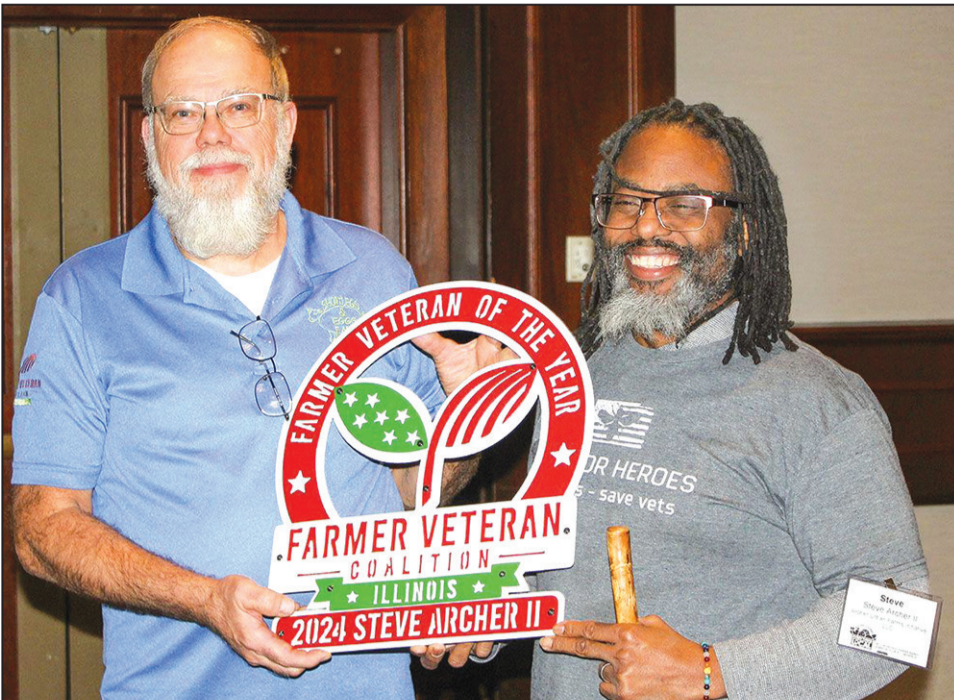
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# AG OUTLOOK '24



Zaelon Rohwedder, left, a Navy veteran, presents the 2024 Farmer Veteran of the Year award to Steve Archer for his work teaching kids about food and farming, and for restoring the soil and his family's land in Chicago. (Photo by Phyllis Coulter of FarmWeek)

## Chicago farmer, Marine veteran honored for lifetime achievements

By **PHYLLIS COULTER**  
*FarmWeek*

A retired Marine, who turned a patch of contaminated Chicago dirt into a place to grow beautiful sunflowers, was named the 2024 Illinois Farmer Veteran of the Year.

Steve Archer was called inspirational at the Farmer Veteran Coalition of Illinois annual meeting Jan. 17 at the Everything Local Conference in Springfield. The event was organized and sponsored by the Illinois Specialty Growers Association, Illinois Farm Bureau and the Illinois Farmers Market Association.

The disabled veteran stood proudly with his walking stick in one hand and holding the metal sign that recognizes his achievements. He shared the honor with his father, Leslie Archer, an Army veteran who had served in Germany when the Berlin Wall was being built in 1961.

Last year, Steve Archer lost his brother and a son, Sgt. Leslie Archer III, who served in Vietnam. He died of post-traumatic stress disorder, his brother said.

"The most important thing is, I need to find a purpose," Steve explained in a written statement that was read at the ceremony. "We wrote a blank check to our country. We will go where you send us," he said. The challenge came of how to continue to serve when they returned home, he said.

Archer found his purpose in restoring family land and volunteer teaching at a Montessori school. He teaches children not to be afraid of bees. "You are not a flower," he tells them. And, that eggs come from chickens, not Whole Foods.

"That is my purpose," he said. The first thing he grew, at age 11, was a pumpkin from seed in the harsh soil of his backyard in Chicago.

The father of four, including twins, continues to grow things at Archer Urban Farms and to raise honeybees. Building on the work ethic and morals he said his family taught him, he grows nutrient rich food to give away, and to teach children about food.

Archer, who holds a degree in English and has a heart for teaching, taught children in a nearby Montessori school about farming with chickens, a donkey and a horse. He volunteers when his health allows it.

"I found my tribe," he said. The eighth of an acre of Chicago land Archer farms was first farmed by his great

uncle. Stories about his father's childhood memories inspired Steve.

At first, he couldn't grow anything on the contaminated Chicago soil. He told FarmWeek he is a believer that you don't "lose" from an experience when you didn't win - "you learn."

One option was to restore the soil slowly, building it up by adding organic matter over time. But through a grant, and the help of his sister and others, he was able to remove the top eight inches of topsoil. It was next covered with Mirafi, a cloth engineered as a barrier to prevent chemicals from seeping water up and water to pass down through. Wood chips and topsoil, also donated, were layered on to make the urban land productive again.

"All things fell into place," he said. Even with the challenge of drought, he produced sunflowers and grew sweet potatoes to give away.

Zaelon Rohwedder, a Navy veteran who made the award presentation, announced that in recognition of the loss of the horse at the Montessori school, he is donating two pasture pigs from his farm, Shortlegs & Eggs in Altamont. He will deliver the gift to Archer and train him and the children how to care for the pigs.

Also recognized at the banquet was Brett Mathews, who farms with his wife, Emily, in Liberty, Adams County. On Dividing Ridge Farm, they raise meat chickens, laying hens, sheep, cattle, hogs and rabbits, all pasture raised.

"Our biggest thing is soil regeneration to build up the topsoil," Emily Mathews said.

Mathews, who served in the Army for 20 years flying Black Hawk helicopters at the end of his career, said he uses some resources available to veteran farmers including the Homegrown by Heroes logo which identifies his products for consumers who want to support veterans.

At the event, other opportunities for veterans were highlighted including beginning farmer training, links to help connect farmers looking for land with landowners looking for them, farm incubators, mental health resources and AgrAbility to help farmers with injuries or illness do tasks easier.

*(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.)*

## Is sustainable aviation fuel the future of biofuels?

By **TAMMIE SLOUP**  
*FarmWeek*

Sustainable aviation fuel (SAF) may be a technology in its infancy, but big market potential exists for "biofuels in the sky."

"This is the place I think strategically to focus on. ... We have hardly even gotten to the starting line," said Scott Irwin, a University of Illinois professor who specializes in biofuels markets and policy.

Production of a mere 1.9 million gallons of SAF in 2016 increased to 15.8 million gallons in 2022, and U.S. airlines have committed to using 3 billion gallons of SAF by 2030, about 10% of their total fuel consumption.

"I agree with my friends in the corn and the soybean industry pushing sustainable aviation fuel and policy," Irwin said during a Farm Assets Conference last month in Champaign. "This is the future, I believe, with the threat from electrical vehicles to gasoline demand in the long run. I really believe this is the future direction that policy should go; this is the place where demand for liquid fuel is going to be the firmest in the long run."

Irwin projects the ag market won't see a large impact for at least five to 10 years, "and that all depends on a lot of different factors."

The good news for farmers is the Biden administration last month issued a long-awaited framework for awarding tax incentives around SAF, one that incorporates an updated model of the U.S. Department of Energy's Greenhouse Gases, Regulated Emissions and Energy Use in Transportation model.

The model is backed by the agriculture, biofuels and aviation industries.

However, updates required for agricultural commodities to qualify as SAF feedstocks under that model won't be released until March 1.

"Numerous fuels will qualify for the credit, including valid biomass-based diesel, advanced biofuels, cellulosic biofuel, or cellulosic diesel," the Treasury Department said in a news release.

USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack said the announcement is the next step in making the 36-billion-gallon industry even more possible.

**Renewable diesel and biodiesel**

Irwin said critics have labeled him "ridiculously bearish" on the renewable

diesel outlook, but he believes SAF is the true future for the sector.

Through 2020, production of renewable diesel was relatively small — under a billion gallons per year in a diesel market of 55 billion gallons. Now, renewable diesel plants are being built at a rapid pace.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency issued a final rule in June 2023 establishing a mandate for 4-4.5 billion gallons of renewable diesel and biodiesel by 2025. The U.S. biofuel industry has announced plans for 6 billion gallons of capacity by 2025 and 7.4 billion gallons in following years.

"We're in the process of a substantial increase of soybean crushing capacity in the next four years," Irwin said. "If all of the expansions and new plants get built in the next four years, we're scheduled to increase soybean crush capacity by about a third in the U.S."

One of the most discussed and debated aspects of the renewable diesel boom is its impact on feedstock markets, such as soybean oil.

"There is a huge change in market dynamics," Irwin said.

Soybean meal has always dominated the value of a bushel of soybeans, but now with renewable diesel taking off, soybean oil prices have exploded. In 2021 and 2022,

half the value came from oil. And while that trend has since backed off, it remains high, Irwin said.

"Of course, not all of the increase in the price of soybeans was due to the renewable diesel boom's impact on soybean oil prices," Irwin said. "But it definitely was part of the wind behind the sails since 2021. So this has been big and it's been economically important, right down to the producer level."

Renewable diesel is expensive to make, as is building a crude oil refining facility. So why the boom? Irwin dubbed the renewable diesel market a "policy market."

"It's not a popular characterization, but it is the economic truth," he said.

The Renewable Fuel Standard minimum volume standards are the most important foundation but other policies and credits also are at play, including the U.S. Blenders Tax Credit, state FAME biodiesel blend mandates (Illinois mandates state vehicles that are diesel must use biodiesel blends), and state low-carbon fuel standard credits.

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