# THE FARMER'S REPORT



The Ambuy News

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#### HPAI leaves Kakadoodle Farm looking for 'what's next'

#### By RHIANNON BRANCH FarmWeek

Cook County farmer Marty Thomas was scheduled to speak about "How to scale your egg business" at the 2025 Everything Local Conference, but an outbreak of avian influenza just two weeks prior changed what he chose to share with fellow producers.

In 2021 Thomas and his wife, MariKate, established Kakadoodle Farm, an online farmer's market for a variety of local produce designed to meet the convenience needs of modern consumers. They moved to a farm raising 3,000 pasture raised hens to provide eggs for the marketplace.

Last month, birds on their farm with little to no symptoms began dying and, despite the couple's best efforts, the entire flock was diminished within a week.

The determined cause was highly pathogenic avian influenza.

"I think one of the hardest things for me was wondering, 'What are people going to think? Are we going to lose our business?" Thomas told FarmWeek.

But his fears were quickly eased as loyal customers reached out. "MariKate and I have been brought to tears daily because of the outpouring of support from our customers and community."

The outbreak resulted in significant financial losses, but the diversity of their business model will allow them to move forward.

"We are fortunate that we are not just producers," he said, noting that the required 120-day quarantine would be detrimental if eggs were their only income. "For us, though, the revenue generating side of our company is the online marketplace."

Thomas said while the situation has been devastating and emotional, they choose to look on the bright

Kakadoodle Farms recently made goals to scale back the egg farm and focus more attention on growing the online marketplace in 2025.

"It was something that we were already moving forward with before this happened and so the silver lining is we don't have a farm to take care of now." Thomas said.

He said local media covering the outbreak also brought more attention to their business which has boosted visitors to their online marketplace in recent weeks.

"Those were the two things that we needed to do this year, and we weren't quite sure how we were going to go about it," Thomas said. "I would have never thought in a million years that this would have been the way, but here we are."

Thomas is no stranger to disease and the influential outcomes it can have. Kakadoodle Farm itself is the product of inspiration Thomas found after a successful battle with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

But the HPAI outbreak has been a reminder of how faith and farming intertwine. Thomas recalled that just a week before the birds got sick their pastor spoke about how in tough times successful people don't ask "Why me?" they ask, "What's next?".

Thomas said they are taking this situation and saying, "Man I never saw this coming, but here we are, so what's next?".

Following the quarantine, Thomas said they plan to reintroduce birds to the farm while continuing to grow the marketplace side of the business and they are excited to see where it leads. His message for attendees of the conference can be best described in a quote Thomas said in a FarmWeek feature of their business back in July.

"I've learned nothing

really works out the way you think it will, but if you just give up when you get hit a couple of times, you're never going to accomplish what you want to do."

(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.)



Marty and MariKate's son, Dillon, with their chickens during summer 2024 after the family had recently moved to their 74-acre farm. (Photo by Hannah Span-



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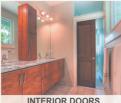
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# Illinois Department of Agriculture launches new I-COVER program

☐ Applications accepted starting March 3, 2025

SPRINGFIELD – The Illinois Department of Agriculture (IDOA) secured a \$7 million USDA grant to launch I-COVER, the Infield Conservation for Operationalizing Vital Ecosystem Resilience Program, which offers cost-share/financial incentives to producers and landowners who are new adopters of cover crops or who utilize new techniques for earlier establishment of cover crops.

The multi-state USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) grant between Illinois, Indiana and Iowa establishes a three-year program for cover crops planted in 2025, 2026 and 2027.

"Research shows that cover crops improve soil health, reduce erosion, increase drought resistance, and reduce pests, weeds and diseases," said Jerry Costello II, Illinois Director of Agriculture. "Illinois is home to some of the most fertile soil in the world, and I encourage farmers to participate in this important new program to conserve and protect it."

Pre-enrollment and applications are available online. Visit the IDOA website at agr.illinois.gov/ and select the I-COV-ER Program link on the home page.

The following rates will be available to selected applications for the following practice scenarios for each of the three years of the program. Scenario rates vary based on species number and type.

- \$61.13/acre for one or more cover crop species, winter killed
  - \$85.65/acre for single cover crop

species, spring terminated

• \$105.40/acre for one or more cover crop species, spring terminated

IDOA will select applications on a first come, first served basis, such that the first application per county will be prioritized, then all remaining applications will be prioritized on a first come, first served basis for qualified and verified applicants. IDOA will verify applications and respective acreage, and local Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) staff will check selected applicants' USDA Farm Bill eligibility, work with applicants on conservation planning, verify practice implementation, and assist with payment and reporting documents. Program viability is subject to availability of federal funds.

A copy of the CCC-902, FSA Subsidiary Report and Producer Farm Data or proof of control of the land will be needed, if the applicant is selected.

Acres must not be currently enrolled in other state, federal or private programs to implement cover crops (e.g. EQIP, CSP, Fall Covers for Spring Savings or any other program that may include state of federal funds) and applicants must have control of the land for the life of the program.

Program viability is subject to availability of federal funds.

For program details, visit the I-COV-ER Program Rules at agr.illinois.gov/resources/landwater/i-cover.html or contact IDOA by email at agr.icover@ Illinois.gov or by phone at (217) 782-6297.





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# USDA Rural Development launches new website

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Development is excited to announce the launch of a new Clean Energy website, https://www.rd.usda.gov/ clean-energy, a proactive approach to promote clean energy projects in rural America. The website is a platform for identifying federal funding opportunities and transforming, developing, or procuring clean energy production in these areas.

Expanding clean energy sources in rural communities will boost economic growth while lowering electricity costs for businesses and families. These programs will also support renewable

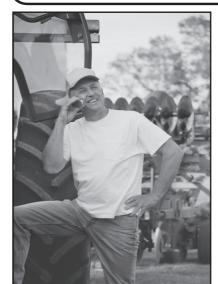


energy infrastructure and zero-emission systems. Investing in these technologies will significantly improve energy efficiency and reduce climate pollution. This helps to enhance the sustainability and resilience of rural communities.

The new Clean Energy website contains information on funding and incentives necessary to bring clean energy projects to life, training resources for community benefit plans, resources for farmers to implement projects as a source of income, information on current clean energy projects by state, and more. Rural Development is transforming rural America for a brighter and greener future by connecting these communities to federal resources.



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# Shedding light on solar panel contracts

#### By PHYLLIS COULTER FarmWeek

Allan Delphi, a LaSalle County farmer and landowner, felt the heat of the sun shining on him when making decisions that would affect him, his children, grandchildren and possibly others who work his land in the future.

"I have had five solar companies approach me. Each one told me what they would do for me. I even had one more today," he said while attending a recent farmland owners conference in Oglesby.

At the event, sponsored by the University of Illinois Extension at Illinois Valley Community College, he gathered more information. Delphi said he is thankful that the responsibility of making the decision isn't his alone. He has involved family members, a lawyer and his support team.

Delphi told FarmWeek he's learned a lot during the process, studying the easements, learning about equipment and construction and details about decommissioning.

"I'm in my 70s. This project will last at least 40 years," he said of the care he is taking for his three sons and five grandchildren.

The company they have chosen practices agrivoltaics, the dual use of land for solar energy production and agriculture. They will likely graze sheep initially, but more research is being done on short corn varieties and other crops that might be compatible with the solar system, said Delphi, who likes the idea of the contracted land still being used for farming.

During his presentation, Garrett Thalgott, assistant general counsel for Illinois Farm Bureau, emphasized the importance of asking questions and having a good team when considering signing a solar project contract.

Insurance is something to consider. It is important to discuss a solar contract with your insurance company and attorney and see what is covered by the energy company and what changes might need to be made to the farmer's or landowner's policy.

Also, be sure to look at the acreage guarantees. It's important to know if five or 50 acres are guaranteed to be involved in the contract.

In terms of compensation for land rented, it is important for landowners to have an escalation provision, so the rental price keeps up with rising rates of rent over the next 50 years, the IFB attorney told FarmWeek.

Thalgott agreed it is important to be clear on the details of decommissioning



Farmland surrounds a homestead in Vermilion County. A recent farmland owners conference in Oglesby provided key tips for owners interested in new opportunities. (Photo by Catrina Rawson)

when in some cases it won't happen for as many as 60 years. The energy company might be sold by then and other generations might be farming.

Some landowners may be against putting solar farms on agricultural land, but eminent domain is not available to solar developers. The landowner has the right to choose what is right for his farming operation for the future and how to use his or her property rights, Thalgott told FarmWeek.

Mary Ludwig, an attorney and partner with Johnson & Taylor in Pontiac, compared property rights to a "bundle of sticks." That bundle includes air, water and mineral rights in the present and future, she told landowners at the conference.

As for solar and wind

contracts, Ludwig offered many of the same cautions as the IFB counsel. She said to make sure attorney fees are considered in the contract costs to understand the contract length and provisions of decommissioning.

"About one-third of landowners receive a letter from an energy company," Elizabeth Strom, an Accredited Farm Manager and vice president of Murray Wise Associates LLC in Champaign told landowners in attendance.

"Before you sign, make sure you fully understand the contract," Strom 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.)





#### Illinois state statistician devoted four decades to agriculture statistics

#### By RHIANNON BRANCH FarmWeek

For some, 40 years of calculating and analyzing numerical data might sound boring.

But for Mark Schleusener, it was a fulfilling career—one that ended following his retirement from US-DA's National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) Dec. 31.

"I found my tribe early," he told FarmWeek. "NASS is my tribe. It's a bunch of data nerds like me and it was kind of my first real job."

For the past 10 years Schleusener was based in Springfield as Illinois' state statistician. But his journey began in April 1984 as a mathematical statistician, with little agriculture knowledge, in Washington, D.C.

His next stop was the Lincoln, Nebraska, field office for three years where he worked on poultry estimates and trained enumerators to conduct surveys. He took some introductory agriculture courses and built a foundation of knowledge for his future with the agency.

After a few years in Jackson, Mississippi, he went to Madison, Wisconsin, where he earned his master's degree and met his wife, Janette. He then returned to D.C. for seven years before his first term in Springfield in 2002. He spent one year in St. Louis on a special project and has been in Illinois ever since.

He said that year in St. Louis was both the highlight and biggest challenge of his career as he volunteered to be in the group that did the initial data processing for the 2012 Census of Agri-

"Our goal was to hire 80 people fresh off the street and teach them how to do

NASS statistician work," Schleusener said. "We had never done this before, so we were kind of writing the rule book, not just following the rule book."

He said recruiting, training and mentoring new employees while working on the census was tiring, but also his fondest memory as several of those new recruits still work for NASS today.

"That has been a 10-year relationship where they came in new and I was the experienced person and I'm still working with them," he said. "And that's maybe the big look back on my career — maybe more so than the work itself, it was the people and the places."

Schleusener said another highlight was recruiting college students at career fairs and educating attendees during trade shows at events like Illinois Farm Bureau's Annual Meeting, Illinois Beef Expo and the Everything Local Conference, just to name some of his favorites.

"These farmers with many, many crops behind them, they're practically a mechanic, agronomist, veterinarian, weather forecaster and businessman or businesswoman," Schleusener said. "They wear a lot of different hats to do their job and they're dealing with prices that change and weather that's unpredictable

and those people are impressive to me."

Schleusener said the biggest change throughout his career was the switch to computer-assisted telephone interviewing for NASS surveys in the mid-1980s

He said the computer program helps guide the interviewer through the survey and routes the next question based on the previous response.

"Also, if an unusual number is recorded or someone keys in the data and makes a mistake, the computer program can catch that right away, and you can clarify and fix the incorrect information."

The way NASS shares information has also changed over the years with the addition of multiple media platforms such as audio files, YouTube videos and webinars.

While Schleusener is looking forward to spending more time on the golf course and traveling to destinations like the Grand Canyon, he said he is proud to have worked for an agency that contributes to the nation's ag industry in a way that maybe isn't always recognizable.

"I'll give an example," he said. 'If there's a terrible freeze that devastates the Florida strawberry crop, it's going to show up in one of our reports and people that



Illinois State Statistician Mark Schleusener, second from left, participates in a recent Illinois Wheat Association crop tour. Schleusener, who worked for the National Agricultural Statistics Service for 40 years, recently retired. (Photo provided by Illinois Farm Bureau)

are in the business will see those reports."

Then a produce buyer for a grocery chain knows to look for strawberries in another area because there won't be enough from Florida and people who transport produce know to start adjusting their routes.

"The reports that we do at NASS help supply and demand, infrastructure and transportation to function well, so we've all got something to eat," Schleusener 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.)







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## THE FARMER'S REPORT

### 'Is farming worth it?' Ag groups testify on ag economy

#### By TAMMIE SLOUP FarmWeek

For fourth generation rice, corn and soybean farmer Jennifer James, last year was her family's most financially difficult year.

And the Arkansas farmer is even more worried about what's going to come.

"Just last week, we had one of the most difficult business conversations my family has had. Is farming really worth it?" James told U.S. Senate Ag Committee members as her voice trembled. "What scares me is we are only one farm family of thousands having these conversations."

James was one of a dozen witnesses during the committee's first in a series of hearings on the current state of America's rural economy. Representatives from numerous commodity and ag groups testified Feb. 5 for nearly four hours, reiterating that coupled with ongoing challenges involving high input prices, low commodity prices and lack of a new farm bill, new barriers are coming into focus, including

the potential risk of tariffs.

While thankful for the \$31 billion in economic and disasteraid approved late last year by Congress for farmers, the witnesses agreed farmers need long-term stability of a new farm bill rather than ad hoc assistance.

USDA's latest forecast for net farm income shows an increase in 2025, however, that bump is driven by higher government payments this year.

Released Feb. 6, the Economic Research Service's report forecasts government

farm payments at \$42.4 billion for 2025, a \$33.1-billion increase from 2024.

Net farm income, a broad measure of profits, is forecast to increase in 2025 after declining in 2023 and 2024 from a record high in 2022. Forecast at \$180.1 billion for 2025, net farm income would be \$41 billion (29.5%) higher than in 2024. Net cash farm income is forecast at \$193.7 billion for 2025, an increase of \$34.5 billion (21.7%) relative to 2024 (not adjusted for inflation).

In inflation-adjusted 2025 dollars, net farm income is forecast to increase by \$37.7 billion (26.4%) from 2024 to 2025, and net cash farm income is forecast to increase by \$30.6 billion (18.8%) compared with the previous year.

While government payments are expected to grow, farm cash receipts are forecast to decrease by \$1.8 billion from 2024 to \$515 billion in 2025 in nominal dollars. Total crop receipts are forecast to decrease by \$5.6 billion from 2024 levels to \$239.6 billion following lower receipts for soybeans and corn. Conversely, total animal/animal product receipts are projected to increase by \$3.8 billion to \$275.4 billion in 2025.

In good news, total production expenses, including those associated with operator dwellings, are forecast to decrease by \$2.5 billion from 2024 to \$450.4 billion in 2025. Spending on feed is expected to see the largest decline in 2025 while livestock/poultry purchases are expected to see the largest increase relative to 2024.

During committee testimony, ag leaders noted that a growing number of farmers are struggling to obtain operating loans for the 2025 planting season, and some producers likely won't qualify for those loans.

National Corn Growers Association President Kenneth Hartman Jr. said corn farmers are facing losses of more than \$160 per acre for the 2025 crop year, which puts them in a "vulnerable financial position."

"Looking ahead, corn growers across the country still face economic headwinds and further action is needed to improve the farm bill safety net programs and the market outlook for producers," Hartman, of Waterloo, said in his testimony.

American Soybean Association Chairman Josh Gackle pointed to the shifts in supply and demand as underpinning uncertainty by soybean farmers.

Even with the U.S.'s abundant soy harvest this crop year, Brazil is anticipating a record harvest, and Argentina is looking at its largest harvest in years. Strong harvest predictions across the largest global soy producers will likely result in a world-record soy harvest this year, Gackle noted in his testimony. At the same time, the world's largest buyer of soybeans — China — continues to face economic woes and increasingly is shifting purchases toward Brazil amid tariff uncertainty.

"This economic downturn results in a diminished demand for U.S. soy at a time of excess supplies," he said.

Both committee leaders appeared in tune with the witnesses' concerns.

"My highest priority for the next farm bill is to improve the farm safety net, whereby every farmer in every region will have access to modernized risk management tools, regardless of the commodity that they grow," Committee Chairman John Boozman, R-Arkansas, said. "If we fail to modernize the safety net, agriculture will see further consolidation as farm families leave the business and the ripple effects to our country will be truly profound."

Ranking member Amy Klobuchar, D-Minnesota, recognized bipartisan agreements on many farm bill priorities, but said there's still work to do.

"There's changes we need to make from the last farm bill to make it even better, and our committee has an opportunity at a time when we've got high input costs, where we've got avian flu, we have an opportunity to pass a bipartisan farm bill and deliver that certainty," she said.

Both the Senate and House ag committees are gearing up for renewed farm bill talks by holding hearings on the farm economy to gauge current conditions as well as educate new committee members. The House Ag Committee held its first hearing on Feb. 11.

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Robots, temperature and moisture sensors, aerial images, and GPS technologies are now routinely employed within the agricultural industry.

#### The role of technology in agriculture

When asked to think of industries that utilize technology in unique ways, few people may immediately think of agriculture. But technology has left a significant footprint in every industry, and the agricultural sector is no exception.

The National Institute of Food and Agriculture notes that modern farms operate a lot differently than the farms of yesteryear. Dramatic changes have taken place within the agricultural industry over the last few decades, helping farming operations become more efficient and profitable as well as safer and more eco-friendly.

Robots, temperature and moisture sensors, aerial images, and GPS technologies are now routinely employed within the agricultural industry. The NIFA notes that the value of such technologies cannot be understated. Thanks to the technologies at their disposals, farmers no longer have to uniformly apply water, fertilizer and pesticides to their farms. Technology now allows them to use only the

minimum amounts required as they zero in on individual plants and target specific areas of their farms. The NIFA notes that the utilization of these technologies produces some very real benefits, including:

- Higher crop productivity
- Reduced impact on natural ecosystems
- Less runoff of chemicals into rivers and groundwater
  - Increased worker safety

Safer, more efficient and more eco-friendly operations can only make the agricultural industry more successful in the decades to come. That's especially notable as the world continues to confront climate change and how it might affect the food supply.

Though few may recognize the role of technology in modern farming, there's no denying the impact that various technologies have already had on the agricultural industry. And that impact figures to become even more profound in the decades to come.



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#### Pesticide dilemma facing Illinois farmers and EPA's endangered species restrictions

SPRINGFIELD – As restrictions on pesticide use ramp up, Illinois farmers face challenges of navigating the law while still producing a healthy crop.

Last year, proposed regulations threatened to remove the practical use of many of the most effective herbicides commonly used in commercial agriculture, which farm officials said would be disastrous for farmers.

As the U.S. Environment Protection Agency implements pesticide label restrictions to protect endangered species, farming officials say the restrictions are already limiting the practical use of pesticides. Under the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act, the EPA must consider the potential impact any given pesticide may have on endangered or threatened species within the state where the chemical is registered for use.

During an Illinois Soybean Growers webinar, Stanley Culpepper, a professor in the Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, said it is important for farmers to do their homework before applying pesticides and herbicides.

"Remember, the pesticide that you are applying on the field, does it or does it not potentially harm the species," said Culpepper. "You have to understand where both of those are at and if they overlap."

Culpepper said farmers he comes across want to know why they should endanger the sustainability of their farm.

"The very simplified answer is lawsuits," said Culpepper. "When our pesticides are taken to the court system, we're simply losing because we're not following the requirements of the endangered species act when registering and re-registering those pesticides."

Culpepper believes the restrictions will expand and impact every U.S. farmer and their ability to manage pests effectively. He adds that it is essential that Illinois farmers work with the EPA and other related agencies to find common ground.

Illinois was the number one soybean producer in the U.S. last year and the number two corn producer behind only Iowa.

