

# the PRACTICAL FARMER

AUTUMN 2020



## IN THIS ISSUE:

Honoring Land  
and Family

Livestock on the Land

Restoring Soil and  
Community







A foggy autumn morning stop on an I-35 exit near Thompson, Iowa, by PFI photographer Sarah Krumm.

## FEATURES

- 6 BEGINNING FARMERS**  
**Finding a Path Through Livestock and Mentors**  
Garin and Kristten Buttermore sought mentors to guide their new farm venture.
- 8 HABITAT**  
**Grazing the Prairie**  
Graziers in the Little Sioux watershed are helping land conservation efforts.
- 11 FARMLAND OWNER LEGACY AWARD**  
**Honoring Land and Family**  
The Bouska sisters, PFI's 2020 award recipients, put relationships first as they plan for their farm's future.
- 16 MEMBER SURVEY**  
**2020 Member Survey**  
Read highlights from the survey we send members every three years.
- 18 LOCAL MEAT MARKETING**  
**Expanding Local Meat Markets**  
The Cooperative Interstate Shipment program means out-of-state market access for small- and mid-size farms.
- 20 PHOTO STORY**  
**Livestock on the Land**  
Glimpse into the lives of a few farmers we visited while making our forthcoming film, "Livestock on the Land."
- 28 POLLINATORS**  
**A Costly Gamble**  
Dick Sloan's on-farm research finds neonics don't boost soybean yields and aren't worth the environmental toll.
- 30 COVER CROPS**  
**Small Grains Afford Cover Crop Options and Benefits**  
In this photo story, see how Noah Wendt and Caleb Akin use small-grains crops in their rotation to facilitate cover crop mixes that can be used as high-quality forage for grazing cattle while boosting soil fertility.
- 32 LIVESTOCK**  
**Restoring Soil and Community**  
Landowner Tom Wind's quest to restore soil and community has connected neighbors and generations.
- 34 EARLY PFI MEMBERS**  
**Paving the Way for Diversity**  
Niman Ranch creates markets for farmers to raise pastured pigs and start farming.
- 36 LAND ACCESS**  
**Sharing Soil to Heal the Land**  
Bart VerEllen and Shirley Waite are working together to restore her family farm.

## DEPARTMENTS

- 5 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR NOTE**
- 15 MEMBER BOOK REVIEW #1**  
"The Road I Grew Up On: Requiem for a Vanishing Era"  
– Teresa Opheim
- 38 MEMBER BOOK REVIEW #2**  
"Red Meat Republic: A Hoof-to-Table History of How Beef Changed America"  
– James West
- 39 PFI NEWS**
- 43 WELCOME NEW MEMBERS**
- 43 CALENDAR**
- 44 THE FINAL WORD**
- 46 JOIN PFI**



### ON THE COVER:

Martha McFarland prepares to work on fencing in one of her bison pastures on a late-September day at Hawkeye Buffalo Ranch near Fredericksburg, Iowa.



## WHAT WE DO

Practical Farmers of Iowa was founded in 1985 as an organization for farmers. We use farmer-led investigation and information sharing to help farmers practice an agriculture that benefits both the land and people.

## OUR MISSION

Practical Farmers of Iowa's mission is equipping farmers to build resilient farms and communities.

## OUR VISION

An Iowa with healthy soil, healthy food, clean air, clean water, resilient farms and vibrant communities.

## OUR VALUES

Welcoming everyone

Farmers leading the exchange of experience and knowledge

Curiosity, creativity, collaboration and community

Resilient farms now and for future generations

Stewardship of land and resources

## THE PRACTICAL FARMER

the Practical Farmer is published quarterly as a benefit of membership to help keep farmers and friends of farmers in touch with one another through informative articles on relevant farming topics, current on-farm research, upcoming events and other news of interest.

**Magazine Editor:** Tamsyn Jones

Back issues are available upon request. Unless otherwise noted, articles may be reprinted or adapted if credit is given. Clippings and notice are appreciated.



## BOARD MEMBERS & STAFF

We love to hear from you! Please feel free to contact your board members or staff.

General info and staff connections: (515) 232-5661. Staff email addresses: @practicalfarmers.org.

### DISTRICT 1 (NORTHWEST)

**Nathan Anderson** - Secretary

400 Locust St., P.O. Box 14  
Aurelia, IA 51005  
(515) 708-5199  
n8andy@gmail.com

### DISTRICT 2 (NORTH CENTRAL)

**Wendy Johnson** - President

2038 March Ave  
Charles City, IA 50616  
(562) 852-7044  
207wendy@gmail.com

### DISTRICT 3 (NORTHEAST)

**Ann Franzenburg** - Vice-President

6925 19th Ave.  
Van Horne, IA 52346  
(319) 640-0262  
eafnan@netins.net

### DISTRICT 4 (SOUTHWEST)

**Mark Peterson**

2311 N Ave.  
Stanton, IA 51573  
(712) 370-4004  
markpete@myfntc.com

### DISTRICT 5 (SOUTHEAST)

**Gayle Olson**

2272 140th St.  
Winfield, IA 52659  
(319) 931-1351  
olsongayle@gmail.com

### AT-LARGE FARMERS

**Carmen Black**

5025 120th St. NE  
Solon, IA 52333  
(319) 331-3957  
localharvestcsa@gmail.com

**Jack Boyer**

1031 Hwy T55  
Reinbeck, IA 50669  
(319) 345-2265  
jboyerfarms@gmail.com

**Vic Madsen**

2186 Goldfinch Ave.  
Audubon, IA 50025  
(712) 254-3057  
vcmadsen@iowatelecom.net

**Mark Quee**

1951 Delta Ave.  
West Branch, IA 52358  
(319) 530-3782  
farm@scattergood.org

**David Rosmann**

1809 N Willow St.  
Avoca, IA 51521  
(612) 219-7396  
davidrosmann@hotmail.com

### AT-LARGE FRIENDS OF FARMERS

**Kristine Lang**

509 Cedar St.  
Brandon, IA 52210  
(515) 825-7525  
kristine.lang@rodaleinstitute.org

**Lisa Schulte Moore** - Treasurer

728 Brookridge Ave.  
Ames, IA 50010  
(515) 294-7339  
lschulte@iastate.edu

### PFI STAFF

**Debra Boekholder**

Membership & Events  
Assistant (debra@)

**Michael Borucke**

Data Analyst (michael@)

**Alisha Bower**

Operations Director  
(alisha@)

**Sarah Carlson**

Strategic Initiatives  
Director (sarah@)

**Steve Carlson**

Membership Manager  
(steve@)

**Celize Christy**

Next Generation  
Coordinator (celize@)

**Rebecca Clay**

Strategic Initiatives  
Assistant (rebecca@)

**Lydia English**

Strategic Initiatives  
Coordinator (lydia@)

**Meghan Filbert**

Livestock Program Manager  
(meghan@)

**Rachel Findling**

Office Assistant (rachel@)

**Stefan Gailans**

Research & Field Crops  
Director (stefan@)

**Suzi Howk**

Finance & Benefits Director  
(suzi@)

**Tamsyn Jones**

Editor & Outreach  
Coordinator (tamsyn@)

**Liz Kolbe**

Education & Engagement  
Director (liz@)

**Sarah Krumm**

Graphic Design &  
Photography Coordinator  
(sarah\_k@)

**Maddie Mueller**

Digital Media Assistant  
(maddie@)

**Hayley Nelson**

Research Assistant  
(hayley@)

**Maggie Norton**

Farmer Outreach  
Coordinator (maggie\_n@)

**Nick Ohde**

Communications &  
Marketing Director (nick@)

**Greg Padgett**

Next Generation Director  
(greg@)

**Jorgen Rose**

Habitat & Farm Transfer  
Coordinator (jorgen@)

**Chastity Schonhorst**

Bookkeeper (chastity@)

**Jason Tetrick**

Digital Media Coordinator  
(jason@)

**Sally Worley**

Executive Director (sally@)

### AMERICORPS MEMBERS

**Emma Liddle**

AmeriCorps Member  
(emma@)

**Megan Sweeney**

AmeriCorps Member  
(megan\_s@)

### CO-FOUNDERS

**Larry Kallem**

1417 Indiana Ave.  
Ames, IA 50014  
(515) 337-1272

**Sharon Thompson**

Boone, IA

**The late Dick Thompson**

Boone, IA

### CONTACT US

**Practical Farmers of Iowa**

1615 Golden Aspen Drive, Suite 101  
Ames, IA 50010  
(515) 232-5661

practicalfarmers.org  
facebook.com/practicalfarmers  
twitter.com/practicalfarmer  
youtube.com/pfivideos  
linkedin.com/company/practical-farmers-of-iowa

## Setting the Stage for Successful Planning

This summer, PFI board and staff pulled off an impressive feat – we crafted our strategic plan for 2021-2023 in a virtual setting. Typically, this is done in-person over two days, with lots of energy, laughs, food and deep thought. Though we were not meeting in person, we still managed to do all of these things. My considerate colleague Debra Boekholder even sent us all care packages with snacks from our members to enjoy during our planning. Practical Farmers' strategic plan helps us work toward our long-term vision – an Iowa with healthy soil, healthy food, clean air, clean water, resilient farms and vibrant communities – by providing a guiding compass. It outlines a practical, nuts-and-bolts vision of what we can accomplish in three years.

Leading up to the strategic plan, we collected member surveys from nearly half of you. THANK YOU for filling these out. This survey tells us who you are, how well we are serving you and what our focus areas should be for the next few years. Read more about what we learned on pages 16-17. We also conducted visioning sessions and interviews to collect in-depth perspectives on how we're doing. You strongly voiced your hope that we don't sacrifice the good things we have going – including events, research and beginning farmer work – to add new areas of work. These sessions reaffirmed that Practical Farmers provides a strong sense of belonging and community. Members often have relationships with a multitude of members and staff. The support people feel from PFI enables them to continue to innovate and make changes. Cultivating this sense of belonging is the bedrock of what we do. Strengthening and expanding our network should be a top priority.

People feel our education is high quality and helps them make better decisions for their farms. Respondents also voiced areas we can improve, such as including economics more visibly in our work. Members see a need for more help in creating reliable markets for products, but they don't have a clear vision of what this would look like. They have tasked us to come up with strategies toward long-term market solutions.

Before delving as group into the findings from the member survey, visioning sessions



With virtual work and social distancing still in force as the coronavirus pandemic continues, virtual meetings like the one shown here are the typical way staff see one another these days.

From top left, winding down by line: Laura Frescoln, Sally Worley, Liz Kolbe, Suzi Howk, Sarah Krumm, Debra Boekholder, Greg Padget, Maggie Norton, Hayley Nelson, Hannah Grosspietsch (AmeriCorps member), Nick Ohde, Meghan Filbert, Rebecca Clay, Phoebe Eichhorst (AmeriCorps member), Maddie Mueller, Alisha Bower, Celize Christy, Jorgen Rose and Chastity Schonhorst.

and interviews, the board and staff gathered virtually to talk about COVID-19 and its implications for our work over the next three years. Group members expressed concerns, including how COVID-19 will impact our budget, how we continue to build connections while we're forced into virtual spaces and whether farm consolidation could worsen due to economic fallout of this pandemic. We also agreed the pandemic has revealed some silver linings, such as local food farmers stepping up and providing food along a shorter, and more resilient, food chain. Read about some of these innovative farmers on pages 6, 19, 20-27 and 34.

PFI staff also conducted an external environmental scan. This exercise helps us adapt to realities in the broader external environment so we can better reach our vision. Some trends – such as continued consolidation of farmland ownership, input supply businesses, processors and food retailers – can impede our work toward a more resilient agriculture. But people are also increasingly aware of how deeply entrenched systemic inequities in agriculture have significantly disadvantaged Black, Indigenous and other people of color. PFI will work to authentically welcome more diverse communities into our membership while continuing our efforts to build a more diverse landscape.

We know that preserving our farmer-led big tent is vital to PFI's identity and impact. While this is essential to our approach, people behave based on the situations they find themselves in. Phillip Zimbardo, in his book "The Lucifer Effect," writes that "unless we become sensitive to the real power of the System, which is invariably hidden behind a veil of secrecy, and fully understand its own set of rules and regulations, behavioral change will be transient and situational change illusory."

Zimbardo likens creating substantive change to taking a public health approach, where the aim is to find what conditions foster illness rather than merely treating individuals on a case-by-case basis. How do we do both? How do we nurture our farmer-to-farmer approach while still driving structural change that will help lay the groundwork for farmers to progress toward resiliency? This is a challenge we look forward to tackling with you all these next few years.

If you'd like to hear more about our findings, please let me know! Thanks for your participation and input to help us do better.

With a head full of information and hope,

*Sally Worley*

## Finding a Path Through Livestock and Mentors

Garin and Kristten Buttermore sought mentors to guide their new farm venture

The path to farming is increasingly varied. Many beginning and aspiring farmers enter the vocation citing the desire for a lifestyle change or value-based career shift as their main motivations.

Many of these beginners also did not grow up on a farm and face a steep learning curve. Because of this, some beginning farmers have turned to raising livestock as their entry into farming – and they are turning to experienced farmers for advice and support. Garin and Kristten Buttermore are two such beginners who came to farming as adults and have been helped by mentors along the way.

### From City Life to Farm Life

Garin and Kristten decided to try start farming after purchasing their 7-acre home near Ogden from Garin's uncle in 2015. During a pasture walk, they realized their land was most suitable for raising livestock rather than vegetables and in 2016, launched their small-scale livestock farm – which they named Uncle G's farm – with free-range laying hens. They soon scaled up to include pastured meat birds, outdoor-raised pigs and a few cows. While many small-scale farms focus on raising vegetable

crops, livestock can offer another avenue for those with a limited land base, either as a sole enterprise or as an addition to a specialty crop operation. Not only can livestock provide manure and weed control, farmers can also market value-added products like meat, soaps and lard.

**“A good thing about mentors is you can ask them the dumb questions you'd be too shy to ask a stranger.”**

– GARIN BUTTERMORE

Garin and Kristten both grew up in the Des Moines metro area – and both, along with their children, became curious about ways they could better sustain themselves off the land. “Even though we aren't growing food for a ton of people, we still like to help our customers regain a connection to their food, as well as a connection to the land,” Garin says. At the outset, Garin and Kristten admit they were ambitious in their efforts to start raising livestock and all that entailed. With no prior farming background, the couple sought ways to connect with and learn from other farmers. Though they acknowledge they had much to learn, Kristten says jumping blind into farming has helped them to “look at and learn everything with fresh

eyes. We had no preconceived notions on the right ways to do something.”

### It Takes a Village

As they took their first steps to start farming, Kristten learned about and connected heavily with PFI. She and Garin attended beginning farmer socials and the PFI annual conference, then decided to apply for PFI's Savings Incentive Program, a two-year program that pairs beginning and aspiring farmers with experienced farmer mentors. “SIP really helped to narrow and focus our farming efforts,” Garin says. “During those two years of learning the business side of farming, we realized the farmers market model wasn't working for us.”

The Buttermores were paired with Phil Kramer as their SIP mentor, a fifth-generation hog farmer near Hardy who also works as a field agent for Niman Ranch. Because Garin and Kristten also market their outdoor-raised pigs to Niman Ranch, this connection was a double boon, giving the couple access to Phil's deep farming knowledge as well as his connections within the Niman Ranch network. “Being a field agent for Niman Ranch has connected me with so many other hog farmers that I continue to learn from,” Phil says. “I used to visit with [PFI co-founder] Dick Thompson



“It’s on-the-ground knowledge and experience that can be communicated to you even if you don’t know what that is. What we have learned through our mentors and farmer friends adds to our confidence, and then we have the confidence to help other people.”

- KRISTTEN BUTTERMORE



**Above:** From left to right, Kyle Buttermore, Kristten Buttermore, Garin Buttermore, Katie Codner and Nathan Even pose on the Buttermores’ farm near Ogden. Not pictured, but also involved in the farm, are Hunter Codner, Josh Meyers and Gabe Buttermore. **Opposite (Left):** Cows graze in pasture at Uncle G’s Farm. **(Right):** Pigs at Uncle G’s Farm enjoy a snack of apple scraps.

before he passed. We’d have great discussions on farrowing hut designs.”

As the Buttermores’ mentor, Phil guided them to improve on some facets of their system they were already doing well that could help boost their profits. His main tip to other farmers searching for a farm mentor? Look for someone with experience. “See if they have been successful and have established cash flow and facilities,” Phil says. “Also look for someone who is open-minded and views things from different angles. Not every farm is the same. Not everyone’s skill level is the same – and everyone might not have the same equipment. You want to be able to mentor someone without being negative at all.”

Because a farm mentor is someone who can speak from experience, these people can serve as vital sounding boards for beginning farmers. Beyond helping newer farmers navigate through their farm challenges, farm mentors can share helpful tips and keep their mentees on track towards a focused goal. But it’s important to know that one mentor can’t be expected to answer every question or solve every farm challenge. Learning to farm successfully requires seeking out different points of view – especially when operating a diversified farm like the Buttermores’. Garin and Kristten knew this, and reached out to Kevin Dietzel, of Lost Lake Farm near Jewell. “Phil is our go-to on pig health protocol and Kevin is our cow guy,” Garin says. “I’ll call

Kevin asking, if the calf isn’t feeding, what do I do?”

The Buttermores also readily acknowledge the role other mentors have played in helping them get to where they are today. “There are several others who have helped us in our farm decision-making – a community of mentors and supporters,” Garin says. “Most of the folks we turn to on a regular basis with questions or for support are PFI members.” For Garin and Kristten, these relationships – and the tangible network of support, encouragement and experience they represent – are at the heart of what distinguishes a mentor from other resources.

“In the beginning, we would YouTube and Google things a lot,” Garin says. “I can go to those sites and find out how to fix my forklift, but if I don’t know why it doesn’t work I don’t know what to search for. Now, I can follow up with our farmer friends, ask questions and they walk me through a solution.” Kristten adds: “It’s on-the-ground knowledge and experience that can be communicated to you even if you don’t know what that is. What we have learned through our mentors and farmer friends adds to our confidence, and then we have the confidence to help other people.”

### Looking Towards the Future

Today, the Buttermores feel they have solidified their farming system and moved “a little past the beginning farmer stage.” But

though they find themselves turning much less often to Google or YouTube, Garin says they “continue to rely on and check-in with our mentors and farmer friends if we don’t know something or need help. A good thing about mentors is you can ask them the dumb questions you’d be too shy to ask a stranger.”

Reflecting on their own farm journey with more experienced eyes now, Kristten and Garin emphasize to those just starting out the importance of starting small. “Don’t limit yourself and get two birds – but don’t overdo it and get 300,” Garin says. “Twenty is a good number to start with. Balance is key. You need enough livestock to know what the challenges are, but not so many that the challenges are too much to handle and the livestock suffer.”

Kristten offers this advice: “Build connections. You need to have people to connect with and learn from. We are fortunate to have started small, and have stayed small while we learn through our mistakes.”

The service their farm provides to their customers is a source of motivation for Garin and Kristten as they move into the next phase of their farming journey. “The feeling that people appreciate and value what we are doing, especially our customers, keeps us going,” Garin says, “as does maintaining our relationship to the farm, the animals we are raising and the land we live off of.” ■

## Grazing the Prairie

Graziers in the Little Sioux watershed are helping land conservation efforts

In the Little Sioux watershed in northwest Iowa, there's still a lot of wild land, according to Amy Crouch of The Nature Conservancy. "We're kind of one of Iowa's best kept secrets when it comes to really cool wild places."

Amy works with landowners and conservation groups to improve land management and conservation of native plant and animal communities, a major goal for the conservancy's land preserves. Creating conservation grazing partnerships with cattle producers is a win-win situation for both groups. Landowners get more grazing land while The Nature Conservancy gains a valuable tool for managing wildlife habitat and soil health.

### Restoring Prairie: From Fire to Grazing

To understand the mutual value of these partnerships, it is important to understand prairies. Amy describes the prairies owned by TNC as "preserves," while cattle producers may simply use the term "pasture." Ecologically, these prairies were formed by a combination of climate, fire and grazing.

Early prairie conservation efforts, Amy says, first focused on purchasing land and allowing it to return to a more natural state without human intervention. "For quite a while, the conservation community thought that you just buy some place, leave it alone and let nature take its course," Amy says. "Well, if you let nature take its course, it's going to turn into trees or weeds, or it's not going to be what you're looking for."

**"Grazers in prairie grasses . . . help to reduce competition with non-native species and encourage a wider diversity of plants on the landscape." - AMY CROUCH**

Over time, conservation professionals realized that some plants depend on fire to thrive, and that fire is integral to prairie ecosystems. A controlled burn every few years allows these plants to germinate and bloom. Pollination also occurs more widely, flower diversity increases and species' gene pools expand. Conservationists also realized that restoration required one more missing piece: grazing.

Historically, the tallgrass prairies were grazed primarily by vast herds of bison and elk. More recently, grazing niches have been filled by cattle, and to a lesser extent sheep – which graze differently than bison and elk, but can still play an important role. Insects are also important grazers of native prairies, Amy says. As insect density has decreased – and with it, the amount of grass they consume – non-native plant species have been able to establish. "Grazers in prairie grasses let other native annuals get sunlight and grow," Amy says. "They help to reduce competition with non-native species and encourage a wider diversity of plants on the landscape."

Spring prairies are full of green grasses, most of which are not native to Iowa prairies. Smooth brome, for example, is a non-native cool-season grass. It is also a sod-forming grass, which Amy says makes it more difficult for native plants to push up through the ground later in the season. Warm-season grasses, as their name suggests, appear when the weather heats up in the summer, and many are native to the Iowa prairie.

Using grazing and other management tools, The Nature Conservancy hopes to suppress the amount of smooth brome and other







**Above:** John Rock walks out to check cattle on some of his pastures. **Opposite:** John Rock (left), Aaron Nelson (center) and Amy Crouch of The Nature Conservancy (right) gather on TNC-owned prairie in August 2020. The trio are working together to graze cattle on the TNC land as part of prairie restoration efforts.

non-native cool-season grasses in its preserves. By doing this, they are helping to reduce competition with native species, increase diversity and restore stability to the prairie ecosystem. But to re-introduce grazing, they needed cattle. This prompted The Nature Conservancy to seek local farmers to partner with.

### Restoring Land With Cattle

John Rock and Aaron Nelson, two cattle producers in the Little Sioux watershed, saw an opportunity to benefit their cattle and the environment. For many livestock producers, finding enough land to graze can be a challenge. Over the last 15 to 20 years, more land has gone into row crop production, decreasing the land available for cattle grazing. John and Aaron each have leases with The Nature Conservancy. Each year from May 15 to June 30, they bring their cattle onto several TNC preserves, hoping their hungry cattle will target those non-native cool-season grasses.

"I think that too often, the media or popular opinion wants to pit farmers as being opposed to conservation or environmental efforts, and conservation groups as opposed to production agriculture," John says. "I think that is unfair and an oversimplification,

**"That timeframe between May 15 and June 30 is ideal because the cool-season grasses have really taken off in those pastures and there's ample feed per acre."**

- JOHN ROCK

because there can be a lot of mutual benefits and common goals."

When John Rock's family neighbor decided to get out of the cattle business in 2010, he and his dad, Jim, got the opportunity to expand their cattle herd and lease two nearby TNC preserves. At the time, John and his family were living in the Twin Cities where John had gone to law school and started his own law firm. In 2017, John decided it was the right time to move back to the family farm near Peterson, Iowa, and fully take over the operation from his dad. Today, he manages the farm while practicing law remotely.

John started his partnership with The Nature Conservancy for several reasons. The two TNC pastures he grazes were near his home, making it easier to get the cattle on and off

the land. He also gained more grazable acres to help maintain or expand his cattle herd. "That timeframe between May 15 and June 30 is ideal because the cool-season grasses have really taken off in those pastures and there's ample feed per acre during that time," John says. "It allows us to do our calving closer to home, and to give our pastures that are closer to home a rest over that 45-day period."

About 5 miles down the road, Aaron Nelson, John's cousin, has been farming for a little over 12 years. In addition to his cattle operation, he manages over 700 acres of row crops and a small feedlot. His grandfather previously owned the land he leases from The Nature Conservancy. After his grandfather's death, the seven siblings sold some land to TNC, with the understanding that the Nelson family might be able to rent the land for grazing.

Being able to graze that land is advantageous, Aaron says. The increased acreage lets him run a larger cow herd. He also doesn't have to worry about raising more hay, which saves money. His cows like grazing the preserve so much, he says it can be a challenge when it's time to move them.

*(Continued on page 10 →)*



Field day attendees learn how cattle producers John Rock and Aaron Nelson graze prairie through leases with The Nature Conservancy during a PFI field day in June 2019. The partnerships bring big grazers back to the landscape, helping with ecosystem restoration while expanding grazing acres for John and Aaron.

[← Continued from pg. 9](#)

“We’re trying to round up cows to leave before the end of the lease, and they don’t really have much incentive to leave because there’s still plenty of grass to be grazed,” he says. The location of these pastures also poses some logistical challenges for Aaron, since the cows need to be transported on and off the land.

But Aaron says the hurdles are marginal compared to the benefits. Beyond accessing more grazing ground, the TNC partnership has opened his eyes to the link between grazing and ecosystems. “There’s a lot more going on in that whole ecosystem than I’d have previously thought about,” Aaron says. “Grass isn’t just grass out there. I had never given much thought to how purposeful grazing can be used as a tool to kind of steer an ecosystem in the direction you want it to go.”

### Start a Conversation

For these two cattle producers, the advantages of having more pasture outweigh the logistical challenges of grazing prairie each spring. Both say working with The Nature Conservancy has been a good

“There’s a lot more going on in that whole ecosystem than I’d have previously thought about. Grass isn’t just grass out there. I had never given much thought to how purposeful grazing can be used as a tool to kind of steer an ecosystem in the direction you want it to go.”

– AARON NELSON

experience, and they encourage other farmers to look for similar opportunities in their areas.

“I think this kind of partnership potentially has a broader appeal,” John says. “There are plenty of other public lands or conservation-focused grasslands that aren’t being grazed, or their stakeholders haven’t considered using grazing to their own benefits.” He recommends that farmers seek out local conservation groups, public lands or other kinds of non-profits to find out if there are similar programs, or an opportunity to start a conversation.

John and Aaron also note that their TNC leases might look a bit different from a lease with a neighbor. For instance, TNC’s leases include additional conservation-focused provisions, such as restricting overgrazing in

the event of drought. To ensure a grazing partnership is mutually beneficial, they encourage farmers to start a conversation with their landlord, look closely at the terms of the lease and make sure it allows for a large enough herd so unnecessary costs can be avoided.

Whether you call it a preserve or you call it a pasture, the end result is the same: improved native ecosystems that benefit nature and cattle producers. “One big takeaway for me,” Aaron says, “is that I’ve learned there are situations where producers and conservation organizations can have a symbiotic relationship – our goals may not be identical, but the means can intertwine and benefit both sides.” ■

## Honoring Land and Family

The Bouska sisters put relationships first as they plan for their farm's future

When the Bouska sisters inherited their family farm in 2009, after their father Edward's death, they became joint owners of the 450-acre farm they grew up on near Protivin, in northeastern Iowa. But they also inherited their parents' legacy of proactive planning, community-mindedness and working together toward shared goals.

As farmland owners, the sisters – Sally McCoy, of Edgerton, Wisconsin; Ann Novak, of Burlington, Washington; Peg Bouska, of Iowa City; and Carol Bouska, of Minneapolis – are now modeling the same kind of thoughtful leadership as they work together to plan for the future of their family land. Since their mother Elmarie's death in 2011, the sisters have taken increasingly deliberate steps to map out their vision for the farm – setting goals, writing farm legacy letters, meeting regularly, attending conferences and consulting experts – while creating space for sometimes difficult emotional dynamics and differences of opinion to be navigated with love and compassion. They have also progressively increased conservation practices on the land, and recently made the bold commitment to convert the farm to a regenerative agriculture system within 10 years.

This exemplary approach to farm legacy planning, as well as the sisters' efforts to manage their land with long-term sustainability in mind, led to their selection by Practical Farmers' board of directors as the 2020 recipients of the Farmland Owner Legacy Award, which will be presented during a virtual ceremony on Oct. 20. Practical Farmers of Iowa grants this award annually to landowners who use their land to help the next generation get started, advance land stewardship and promote long-term sustainability of farm businesses, environmental quality and rural communities. The award highlights the important role non-operator farmland owners can play in the future success of sustainable agriculture.

"Our parents really set the tone for getting along," Peg says. "They worked hard to



From left to right: Ann Novak, Carol Bouska, Sally McCoy and Peg Bouska pose by a brilliantly hued autumn tree during the Women in Sustainable Agriculture conference, which took place in October 2019 in Minneapolis.

improve their community, and in their way, were movers and shakers. We think they would be really proud of us right now."

### Farm With a Dark-Sky View

The Bouska sisters and their two other siblings, Jack and Mary Jane, who both sadly died, grew up on Highland Farm – a relatively flat piece of land about 30 miles south of the Minnesota border that sits on the cusp of Iowa's Driftless Region. Their father, who was born on the farm and died there, planted many trees that now confer lush shade, as well as wildlife habitat in dense thickets along the property's edges.

But the vista still feels vast and inspiring, Peg says, with dark, star-filled skies and a view that "allows one to see the beauty of sunset and sunrise, and watch the weather move through. The Milky Way is always bright

there." In July, she and Carol visited the farm and saw comet Neowise, newly discovered just in March, as it streaked into the depths of the solar system on its 6,800-year orbit around Earth.

The sisters' memories of their childhoods on the farm are just as vivid, and as deep. From summers spent running barefoot, to the rich silence of a land with few cars to mar the sounds of nature, to the sweet smell of clothes suffused with smoke from nights spent around campfires singing and telling stories – the farm left deep imprints that now guide the sisters as they seek, as farmland owners, to honor the land that shaped them as people.

"I learned a lot during those campfire sessions," says Carol, at 59, the youngest of

*(Continued on page 12 →)*



(← Continued from pg. 11)

the six siblings, “about what people were thinking, about what was going on in the world, about memories. I still enjoy the fires we have when we all gather.”

“The farm has a sacredness about it,” Peg says. “We love being there. It’s like a haven.”

For many years, the farm was extremely diverse, with corn, soybeans, oats and hay, as well as cattle, hogs, chickens, a quarter horse and an ever-present cast of farm cats and dogs. Their mother also kept a large garden that, with the livestock raised on the farm, helped the family live a mostly self-sustaining lifestyle. Sally recalls the farm as “a place of hospitality,” where neighbors were welcome, and grandparents and cousins would come from near and far to enjoy the land or share the toil of tasks like butchering chickens.

As he got older, Ed pared down the enterprises on the farm. In his 60s, with none of the Bouska children planning to take over, he rented the farm to a tenant, Tom, who still farms the land – now with his daughter – raising corn, soybeans and alfalfa, and whom the Bouska sisters have involved in their farmland planning process.

### **Nurtured by Family and Farm**

The busyness of farm life meant there were always farm chores. Everyone helped, and the sisters all recall having important roles to play, always encouraged by their parents. Elmarie – who lived on the farm for 70 years

**“Farmers are kind of private people, and it’s really hard to talk about farm legacy planning because you’re planning your death, basically. It requires one to be brave and to think deeply.”** - CAROL BOUSKA

and also died there – was an important role model, driving the tractor, offering mechanical expertise and managing the raising and selling of 500 chickens.

“Doing things that were challenging attracted me, like driving machinery or farrowing hogs,” says Sally, 74, and the eldest of the four sisters. “I loved the feeling that I was contributing. Though many times we hated to be pressed into work, like herding cattle that escaped at 2 a.m., we still had a sense that we were essential to the operation.”

“We learned to work, be responsible and pitch in as a team and family,” adds Ann, who recently turned 70. Peg, 64, was especially active with farm work, helping with a range of chores as her father got older, from cultivating crops to driving the tractor and operating machinery. “Dad needed help and I enjoyed it,” Peg says. “But he was very encouraging of us females to do whatever we wanted.”

Their parents’ support influenced all the Bouska children to follow their talents and interests to college and careers off the farm. Ed and Elmarie also set a sterling example of what it looks like to truly invest in one’s

community. “They were 4-H leaders, and started a card club in the neighborhood that went for 30 years,” Peg says. “With others, they started a community theater. Mom was on the mental health board, and during the farm crisis, they were especially active in peer counselling.” A fine baker, Elmarie also taught a bread-baking class through the local high school’s community education program.

Many of the careers the siblings staked out mirror the ethos of community service their parents fostered. Sally got a doctorate in child psychology and worked in the field for over 40 years, and was founding member of a grassroots volunteer organization devoted to children’s mental health. Ann spent 25 years as a child and family therapist, then went back to school to study environmental science and worked with a salmon fisheries enhancement group before starting an organic vegetable farm on 10 acres 60 miles north of Seattle. “We now are leasing to three sets of young farmers who cannot afford their own land at this time,” she says, “and consider this a form of incubation for their future and dreams.”

Peg works as a physician’s assistant, has worked in family practice and previously worked with a mobile clinic that traveled to farmworker camps to provide basic healthcare. Before COVID-19, she also volunteered widely in her community. Carol became an engineer specializing in process improvement and worked with 3M for many years before starting her own consulting business in Minneapolis. Like the other



Bouska siblings, she also volunteers extensively – and she helped raise her niece, Tess, now 37, after her mother, Mary Jane, died in an accident when she was 9 years old.

These collective professional backgrounds – combined with their parents’ proactive planning for death; their close-knit upbringing; and their shared experience of family loss and tragedy – have helped the Bouska sisters successfully navigate the difficult emotional dimensions of planning for their farm’s future.

“Dad was talking about dying when he was 60,” Carol says, “so we had good role modeling.”

“I believe many families have difficulty with these issues of land ownership and legacy. It requires working through feelings of family history and individual differences,” Ann says. “There is joy and pain in the process. Focusing on compassion and respect has helped bind us as a unit.”

### First Steps as Farmland Owners

In 2013, the Bouska sisters and their brother Jack, who also was a joint owner, decided to incorporate the farm into an LLP, with each sibling owning a share. In 2014, Jack died

---

**(Top Left):** Owen McCoy-Young, Sally McCoy’s grandson, walks on the Bouska family farm with dog Honey. **(Top Right):** Trees planted by Ed Bouska create lush shade, as the golden light of sunset shines on the house and a machine shed on which Ed painted the word “PEACE” in March 2003, just before the U.S. went to war with Iraq. “We just love it,” Peg says.

**“I believe many families have difficulty with these issues of land ownership and legacy . . . . There is joy and pain in the process. Focusing on compassion and respect has helped bind us as a unit.” - ANN NOVAK**

suddenly. As outlined in the partnership agreement, the sisters bought out Jack’s share. “We were so grateful we had put that in place,” Peg says. “We feel like he had some knowledge that his wishes were incorporated into that document.”

The sudden loss also catalyzed their farm visioning process. Before Jack’s death, the siblings had started talking with Tom about the possibility of planting a pollinator field in a small 9-acre area adjacent to a wetland that was not convenient for Tom to farm. A few months before his death, Jack had been keenly researching the idea and seeking advice from someone at Pheasants Forever. “His wife said he was so excited about it, and talked about it a lot,” Peg says.

The following spring, the Bouska sisters pressed forward with the pollinator planting, naming the field “Jack’s Field” in their brother’s honor, and putting some of his ashes there. In 2017, they added two more pollinator fields, 5 acres each, named after their parents. The sisters also started meeting and discussing farm business more regularly. “When we started doing that,” Peg says, “it just accelerated our process.”

In 2014, Peg attended Practical Farmers’ inaugural performance of the play “Map of My Kingdom,” which explores the many thorny and emotional facets of farmland transfer. That’s how she learned about PFI and got connected with Teresa Opheim, PFI’s former executive director. In 2016, the Bouska sisters gathered at the farm with the singular purpose of mapping out their goals for the future of the farm.

Four shared goals emerged from that meeting: 1). Use the farm to stem farm consolidation; 2). Improve soil, water quality and biodiversity; 3). Keep family harmony; and 4). Provide safe and healthy food.

“We were raised in a mindset of conservation, stewardship and love of nature,” Ann says. “My sister partners and I were all concerned about international buyouts of Iowa farmland, CAFOs increasing in our area and land consolidation. This would also mean the decline of the local community, small towns and rural quality of life.”

Maintaining family harmony has been central to the process – to honor their parents’ wishes and example; to work through long-standing sororal dynamics; and to serve as role models for the next generation. With a 19-year age spread between Jack, the oldest, and Carol, the youngest, listening and reaching consensus are essential to how they work together.

“Those roles of big sister, little sister – those have to be worked through as well when

*(Continued on page 14 →)*

From left to right: Peg Bouska (with straw hat), Carol Bouska (lying down), Ann Novak, Tess Bouska, Owen McCoy-Young and Kate McCoy gather on a hay bale on the Bouska farm. Driving the tractor is Roger Kramer.

Photo by Larry Hartford of Hartford Photography, all rights reserved.



(← Continued from pg. 13)

you're adults," Peg adds, "because those run deep."

"We vote, but we also talk through things and explain our concerns," Carol says. "If somebody feels left out, we try to address that. It takes time and effort, but I believe that in the end, we are leaving our healthy partnership as part of our legacy also."

### Committing to Climate-Friendly Ag

As the sisters started gathering more regularly, the farmland visioning process gained momentum. In 2017, each sister drafted a farmland legacy letter, capturing treasured memories and personal hopes for the land's future. Knowing that sharing their letters with one another would trigger deep emotions, they reserved a room for it at the Decorah library. "It was the first time we said this is important, because we need space and privacy," Peg says. "It was kind of a start to us being more formal about [farmland ownership] being a business."

Afterwards, the sisters went swimming together, a tactic – planning a group fun activity after the business ends – they intentionally weave into all their meetings. "It's really, really important to have that relief of fun," Sally says. "We have a very strong ethic of doing the work, then having fun. That contrast between working hard but also enjoying yourself has really cemented our connection."

The big turning point in the sisters' farmland visioning, when they decided to convert the farm to a regenerative system, was in October 2019, when they all attended a Women in Sustainable Agriculture conference, organized by MOSES, in

**"We have a very strong ethic of doing the work, then having fun. That contrast between working hard but also enjoying yourself has really cemented our connection."**

– SALLY MCCOY

Minneapolis. Previously, the sisters had opted to spread out the task of knowledge acquisition by attending conferences separately, or tackling topics on their own, sharing what they learned with everyone later. This time, they decided to attend the conference as a group.

They had hired Rena Striegel, president of Des Moines-based Transition Point Business Advisors, to lead them in two half-day farmland planning sessions over a weekend. Before the first session with Rena, they attended a regenerative agriculture workshop at the WISA conference led by Lindsey Rebhan and Paula Westmoreland of Ecological Design. "It was transformative," Peg says of the workshop. "It was a four-hour intensive, and it was one of those beautiful fall weekends. It was kind of like things just clicked for all of us."

The timing couldn't have been better. The sisters carried their renewed sense of purpose into their session with Rena, who encouraged them to think big, guided them through some hurt feelings and helped them refine their vision. Peg says Rena also gave them confidence that they were much further along than they realized, both emotionally and in having a shared vision.

"We got so much done – but she kept nudging us," Peg says. "She kept us thinking of what's possible, focusing on the higher-level vision."

The sisters have since hired Ecological Design, a women-owned firm, to help them transition their farm from conventional row crops to a system with diverse plants and animals that keeps soil covered year-round. Earlier this summer, they took another big leap, becoming part of the Climate Land Leaders initiative of the Minnesota-based Main Street Project, which Teresa Opheim now directs.

"As part of the initiative, the sisters will be implementing a stretch goal to implement climate-friendly agriculture on their land," explains Teresa, who will present the Farmland Owner Legacy Award to the sisters during the ceremony. "We need more farmland owners like the Bouska sisters, who put family relationships first and are deeply committed to conservation while working with their existing tenant."

### Advice to Others

For their part, the sisters are excited about what the future holds. While they acknowledge they have many questions still to work through – not least, how to transition the farm – they feel closer as sisters, and energized knowing they can use their hallowed ground to care for the land, embody their values and honor their heritage. The sisters advise other families facing a farmland transition to not wait, seek out resources and people who can help, find shared goals, treat the process as a business and recognize it takes time. Above all, they urge others not to wait until death or tragedy forces a decision.

"Don't leave the decision about land until a funeral forces it," Sally says. "That's a time when people are grieving and stressed, not making their most logical or wise choices."

"Farmers are kind of private people, and it's really hard to talk about farm legacy planning because you're planning your death, basically," Carol says. "It requires one to be brave and to think deeply. But it is also so rewarding to know that when I leave this planet, I will not be leaving a lot of unresolved issues for the next generation to deal with."

"I personally went in a year's time from feeling really sad about the farm, and what's going to happen after us, to feeling really excited and energized about what we can do in our lifetime – and that's given me purpose." ■

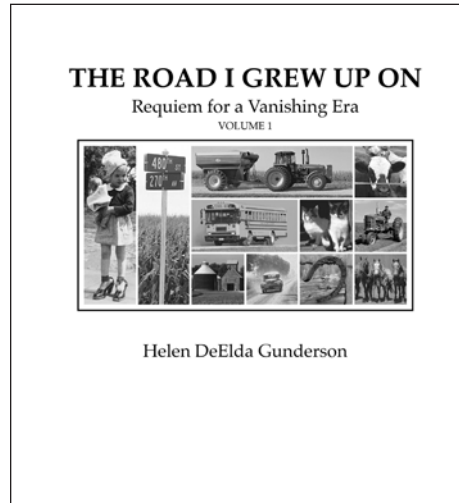
## Review of “The Road I Grew Up On: Requiem for a Vanishing Era”

When Helen DeElda Gunderson was young, 11 families lived on farms along the road where she grew up. Today, only three of those farms are inhabited, and only one is home to children.

The cattle, pigs, and chickens are gone as are the windbreaks, barns and so much more that were typical of rural Iowa for much of the 20th century. Helen’s book “The Road I Grew Up On” explores, through prose and photographs, that vanishing era. My grandparents, Vera and Bill Fisher, farmed just miles from Helen’s road, and I grew up hearing about the various Ives, Gunderson and Brinkman family members who are featured in this book. I remember Helen’s mother as the friendly librarian at the Rolfe Public Library, where my grandmother would take me when I visited their farm. I didn’t meet Helen, however, until 2006, when I joined Practical Farmers of Iowa as its executive director. We became friends, and I was delighted when our board of directors chose her for our first Farmland Owner Legacy Award in 2013.

More than half of Iowa’s farmland is owned by those who do not live and labor on their land. Helen is a leader among those owners. She has worked hard to provide land access for the next generation of farmers. She has begun moving her land toward organic production and has established desperately needed pollinator habitat. Her plans include continuing her legacy beyond her death through her bequests to a few select Iowa nonprofit organizations.

Helen’s leadership is in word as well as deed. She writes thoughtfully about the need for those who own land to be connected with it, “like knowing about the soils, the people who farm it and the ethics involved in managing it.” She writes about the negative effect of programs like the Farm Bureau’s Century Farms Program, which celebrates holding on to land ownership long after a family is gone from it. Why not a program, Helen writes, that “would honor landowners who transfer their property to young farmers, sustainable farmers or other people who would manage the land in ways healthy for the environment, economy and community.”



I love reading books about rural life, such as Mildred Armstrong Kalish’s “Little Heathens” and Ronald Jager’s “Eighty Acres.” But most of those accounts are not honest about the disadvantages of rural life. Helen’s willingness to admit the “nostalgic and disenchantment, the love and disdain” is the reason “The Road I Grew Up On” is so fascinating. She doesn’t shy away from the fact that we stole this land from Native Americans, or that those of us who chose urban life are part of the fabric of “the unsettling and destruction” of the Midwest farm culture. She explores family dynamics, rigidity about what kinds of relationships are acceptable, denial of feelings and the repression of imagination, all of which she experienced growing up in rural Iowa.

Helen’s examination of the limited agricultural opportunities for women farmers is especially fascinating. As she now manages her Pocahontas County farmland and has transformed her Ames properties into a delightfully diverse urban farm, she is a triumphant example of what women can accomplish. As I head toward my 60s, I remain shocked at how quickly any trace of my grandparents’ farmstead and legacy disappeared. Some of that land is still in the family, but what was nurtured by my grandparents is gone. Today, I even need help locating the spot of the former homestead not too far from a parcel of Helen’s land that she calls DeElda Farm – none of the trees or homesteads I previously used as landmarks remain.

Helen’s attention to detail is such a gift for those of us who have experienced that loss. She documents road conditions and maintenance; moving day, when farm families moved to different farmsteads; riding the school bus; farm activism; the coming of electricity; changes in farm equipment; and a whole lot more.

When I worked at PFI, I was continually amazed at the civility and affection people of widely different religious and political perspectives showed each other. Helen is a perfect example, and that tolerance – which is becoming rare – is woven throughout her book. She deeply respects the people she interviewed. She names them all – the landowners, the tenants, the excavator who demolished her parents’ and grandparents’ homes and the cremation worker at the facility who worked with her mother’s remains. As she says about her stoic ancestors, these rural Iowa folks were “born into this world, were once children, were loved and in turn loved others, experienced joy, had their foibles, faced challenges, feared what the future would bring, and yet continued on their journeys.”

Helen’s book is not only a gift for today but for future generations. Helen writes that storytellers are people who “look at the ordinary under their noses and shape it in a way that, if held before us, helps us look at our lives, seeing them in ways that we have not seen before, and giving us new meaning and vision.”

Helen, my friend, you are a true storyteller. ■

***Teresa Opheim is a lifetime member of PFI who served as Practical Farmers’ executive director from 2006-2016. She now lives in Minneapolis, where she directs the Climate Land Leaders initiative of the Minnesota-based Main Street Project.***

### Learn More

➔ “The Road I Grew Up On” will be available for free online reading this fall through ISU Digital Press ([press.lib.iastate.edu](http://press.lib.iastate.edu)). Print versions will be available by or before Thanksgiving from the author. Visit [gunderfriend.com](http://gunderfriend.com) for more details, or email Helen at [book@gunderfriend.com](mailto:book@gunderfriend.com).

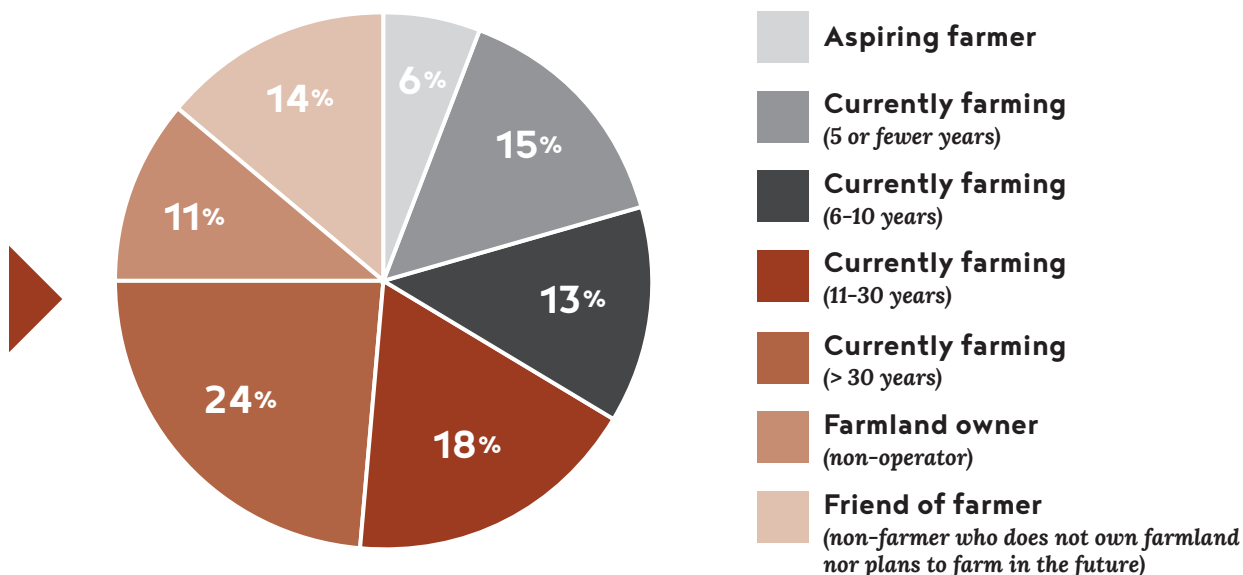
# 2020 Member Survey

This past winter, nearly half of our membership filled out the survey we send out every three years. By doing so, members shared information about their use of PFI resources, farming practices and suggestions for future programming. Thank you for taking the time to share this information with us - it's truly vital for our member-led organization!

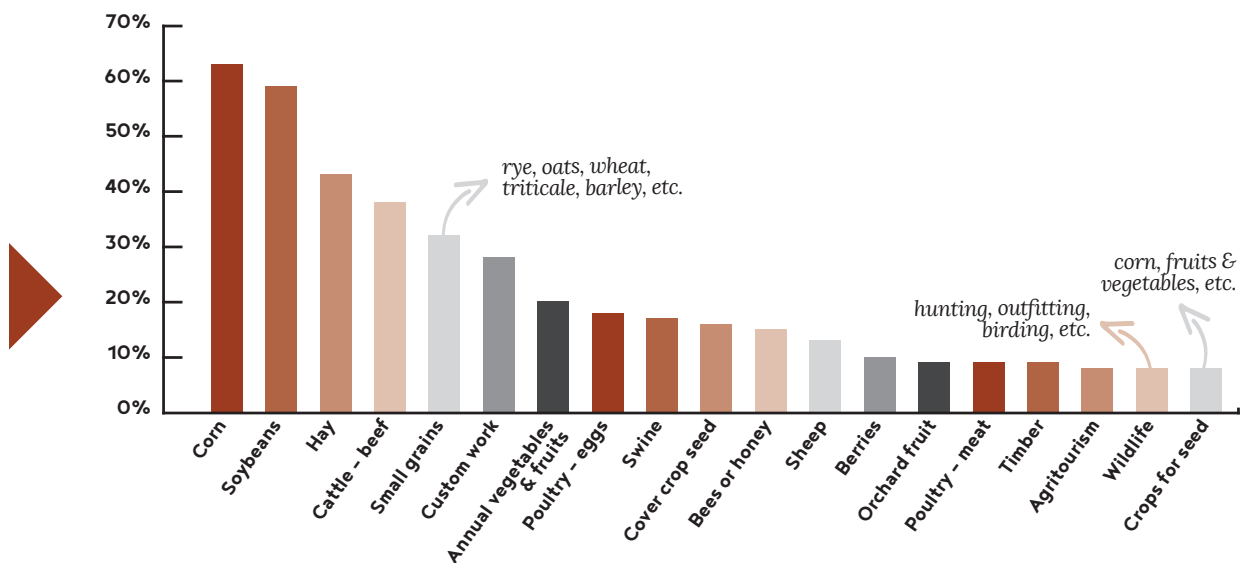
## Who Are PFI Members?

PFI membership includes a diversity of experience levels, ages and enterprises, as well as farmland owners and friends of farmers who support our work and mission. The vast majority of our members, however, **76%**, are either currently farming or hope to farm. Our members also collectively raise a diverse range of crops and livestock, with everything from row crops and vegetables, to trees and flowers, to hay, hemp and livestock of all kinds, among other enterprises. Corn and soybeans top the list, with **63%** and **59%** of members indicating they raise these crops.

Number of Years Farming



Farmer Enterprises





## How Did We Do?

The timing for this survey coincided with the end of our strategic plan that guided our work from 2018 through 2020, and for developing a strategic plan that maps out goals and strategies for the following three years. From survey responses, under the plan's pillar that "PFI builds community in Iowa and beyond," for instance, we're able to report that **73%** of our members have formed friendships, business relationships or other relationships through their association with PFI.

This is just shy of our goal to have helped **80%** of our members report fostering connections through PFI – but it's still a strong testament to the value of PFI to members. We also learnt that members overwhelmingly value our communications: a resounding **99%** of respondents said they read PFI's communications, including our quarterly magazine, weekly "Practical News" emails or website.

From our farming members, we learned that **84%** of respondents raising field crops (corn, soybeans, hay or small grains) have planted cover crops, and **62%** have increased their use over the past three years. Among our members who are non-operating farmland owners, **55%** report increasing their financial investment in conservation practices over the past three years.

While PFI's strategic plan goals are lofty, we're glad to see that we have met, or are close to meeting, many of them. Yet there's always room for improvement. Only **24%** of our farmer members report being satisfied with their work-life balance, well below our goal of **40%**. Only one-third of farmers report gaining better control of their on-farm expenses, far shy of our **65%** goal. In the next strategic plan, we will continue our efforts to support farmers, farms and food systems that are viable.

Throughout the summer of 2020, many staff and board meetings were devoted to reviewing survey results and strategic plan progress, and brainstorming our plan and goals to strive for over the next three years. More results from this "report card," along with the newly minted strategic plan, will be shared this winter.

## Guiding Our Programming

Throughout our history, we've been known for coordinating on-farm research and field days. Survey results confirm that after 35 years, our membership is still thirsty for both research reports and field days as a preferred learning format: **74%** of respondents rate field days as important or very important, and **73%** report the same for research reports. Following these are two learning formats PFI has been strengthening for the past few years: e-newsletters and videos, ranked as important or very important by **60%** and **56%**, respectively.

PFI's program staff are further able to analyze these results by groups of people in their area of work. Not surprisingly, mentorships ranked higher in importance to aspiring farmers than any other experience level, and research reports are most important among those who have been farming for 11-30 years. Member socials are more important to horticulture farmers than they are to field crop farmers, and the reverse is true for videos. Specific information like this is crucial for developing relevant programming for our members, and for being able to find funding to carry out that work.

When asked what areas PFI should place the most emphasis in the future, soil health ranked head and shoulders above 22 other topic areas, with **52%** of respondents selecting it. This was followed by cover crops (**40%**), beginning farmers (**36%**), diversified crop rotations (**35%**) and on-farm research and demonstration (**32%**).

Members who are actively farming were asked to list two short-term goals and one long-term goal for their farms, along with any barriers keeping them from meeting those goals. These open-ended responses provide detailed information from specific farmer-members, but when aggregated also give us a snapshot of their goals in general.

The most frequently cited farm goals fall under the category of business improvement, which often relate to the scale, structure or profitability of the farm business. The next most-cited category of goals involved adopting or improving in-field production practices, such as expanding cover crop acres, transitioning to organic, improving pastures and boosting soil health, among many others. For long-term goals, farmland and farm business transfer issues surfaced as a common area of importance.

Along with all this valuable information, we asked all members if they were interested in getting more involved with Practical Farmers of Iowa. In the PFI spirit of grassroots knowledge-sharing, hundreds of members expressed interest in hosting events, speaking at events or with the media, serving as a mentor or serving on a PFI committee. In addition to daily interactions our staff have with our members, this information helps us identify areas of expertise, interest and enthusiasm to continually cultivate farmer-leaders and advocates in Iowa and beyond.

## Member Quotes

"Contacts and friendships are the best part of PFI. Farming can be lonely, so it really helps to have this association."  
— *Mary Swander*

"PFI community has become like a second family. It's fun to keep in touch with people from around the state. PFI members always seem willing to share what they are doing, what works and what doesn't."  
— *Eric Madsen*

"PFI is a critical support network for our farming family. We chose to move home to Iowa in large part because we were familiar with PFI's resources and knew we'd feel well supported with PFI!"  
— *Natasha Hegmann*

## Farmer Goals

"Be able to better utilize my equipment and resources (manure, no-till, cover crops, etc.)."  
— *Adam Smith*

"Develop and maximize our cow-calf marketing opportunities working primarily with local farm networks."  
— *Matthew Tentis*

"Securing an appropriate succession plan for the next generation to farm."  
— *Darren Fehr*

"Get more biomass growth out of my cover crops before planting spring cash crops."  
— *Rick Pellett*

"Expand sufficiently to be able to hire a full-time or part-time employee."  
— *Bart VerEllen*

"Stay profitable while raising young children."  
— *Lindsay Kaiser*

"Add more aftermarket products to achieve year-round sales."  
— *Terry Troxel*

## Expanding Local Meat Markets

The Cooperative Interstate Shipment program means out-of-state market access

While Iowa's large meat packing plants made national news during the height of pandemic-related food supply disruptions, something else was afoot, brimming with potential to provide a partial antidote to challenges caused by consolidation in the livestock industry.

In May 2020, the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship adopted the Cooperative Interstate Shipment Program, known as CIS, designating Iowa as the seventh state to enter in the program. Cooperative Interstate Shipment allows meat processed at state-inspected plants to be sold outside of Iowa. To qualify for the CIS program, a meat processor must have fewer than 25 full-time employees and comply with all federal food safety, sanitation and facility regulations. Individual livestock producers cannot apply to the CIS program, but they can sell their meat and poultry products across state lines if they are processed at a CIS facility.

Prior to this, farmers had to use a USDA-inspected facility in order to sell meat across state lines. But small- to mid-scale livestock farmers could rarely access those plants, due to volume requirements and logistics tailored to larger producers. As a result, the previous rule had imposed significant marketing limitations, effectively excluding smaller farms from accessing customers and

more lucrative market options in bigger Midwestern cities.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the important role that local community meat lockers play in the food supply chain," Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Mike Naig said when announcing Iowa's participation in the Cooperative Interstate Shipment program. "I am excited for these meat processors to have the opportunity to grow their businesses, move more products and access new markets. It also gives consumers more access to Iowa-raised and processed meat."

**"We are looking to grow beyond what we can direct-market. The timing aligns for us, because presumably, we're really going to need CIS in three years."**

- ASHLEY NOONAN

Currently, Iowa has 68 state-inspected facilities that are eligible to apply to CIS, 13 plants going through the process as of the writing of this article and six that have been accepted into the program.

### COVID-19 Stole the Show

In July 2020, Story City Locker became Iowa's first processor to be approved for the Cooperative Interstate Shipment program. "We initially were interested in the CIS

program to fill our 15% lag in schedule," says Ty Gustafson, co-owner of Story City Locker. "With COVID, we gained a 25% increase, and that was before the CIS program came into effect. We are now booking 18 months out, and our 2021 schedule is 100% full."

Because more Iowa meat processing facilities are now eligible to market across state lines, Cooperative Interstate Shipment offers meat processors and farmers new opportunities to grow their businesses. In spring 2020, the coronavirus pandemic quickly upended existing meat supply chains in the U.S., revealing systemic weaknesses. For instance, when a few large processors temporarily closed due to COVID-19 outbreaks among workers, meat was in limited supply on grocery store shelves. In the wake of those disruptions, consumers turned to local food systems to fill their demand for meat. Most local processors and livestock farmers are now experiencing unprecedented demand for their local meat products. "Processors have been so overwhelmed during the pandemic that taking anything extra on is not good timing," says Kathryn Poking, chief of the Meat and Poultry Inspection Bureau at IDALS.

"Processors may say they are too busy [to enroll], but they are not always going to be this busy," Ty says. If farmers want their local processor to enroll in the CIS program, he urges farmers to "keep having the conversation. Processors are going to keep



**"The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the important role that local community meat lockers play in the food supply chain."**

- MIKE NAIG

“Where I see it [CIS] benefitting us is that south-central Iowa is 2½ hours from Omaha and the Quad Cities. We could sell to specific types of restaurants in Omaha, or even Kansas City. It’s the edges we want to expand into that are within a three-hour range, not shipping to New York.”

- ETHAN BOOK



**Above:** Ethan Book and his family, of Crooked Gap Farm near Knoxville, pose after a PFI field day they hosted in 2016. **Opposite:** Ty Gustafson (second from left), co-owner of Story City Locker, hosted Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Mike Naig (second from left) and Senator Chuck Grassley (far right) on July 16 to explain how the Cooperative Interstate Shipment program can help his small business, and others like it, to grow. (Photo courtesy of Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship)

hearing about CIS from the Iowa Meat Processors Association, and hearing from their customers will make the two ends meet.” Kathryn adds: “The two classes of processing plants this program is best for are those close to another state border or those that are looking to put a product into wider distribution. Also, it’s not that demanding of a process.” Some processors have been shy to enroll, she says, deciding to wait and see how the kinks work out and assuming it won’t be worth the paperwork to enroll. IDALS has been very willing to work with processors in making the process as simple as possible.

### **Crooked Gap Farm: Planning for Growth in 2021**

Ethan Book owns and operates Crooked Gap Farm in Knoxville, and has been direct-marketing meat in central Iowa for over a decade. For the past 14 years, he has also hosted “The Beginning Farmer” podcast, documenting his family’s foray into farming and their questions and experiences over their years farming. “We’ve had past requests [for our meat] from out of state due to our podcast listeners and our moderate online footprint,” Ethan says. “Shipping out-of-state is something we’ve never been able to do because of lack of USDA processing in Iowa.”

Crooked Gap Farm processes everything at Story City Locker and is now exploring taking

advantage of the locker’s new CIS status. “We started an online store when the Des Moines Downtown Farmers’ Market was postponed due to COVID. We use it for local orders, pick-ups and deliveries for now,” Ethan says. “We went with the online platform Barn2Door because it fit us best, offering straightforward shipping integration which provides future possibilities.” Crooked Gap can’t keep up with its current in-state demand right now, but Ethan believes shipping meat out-of-state provides a “natural next step for us to look at in the coming year.”

All of Crooked Gap’s animals have been scheduled for processing through 2021 and Ethan hopes to start taking advantage of CIS in mid-2021. “This gives us time to figure out shipping a bit, and work on our brand outside of central Iowa. Where I see it [CIS] benefiting us is that south-central Iowa is 2½ hours from Omaha and the Quad Cities. We could sell to specific types of restaurants in Omaha, or even Kansas City. It’s the edges we want to expand into that are within a three-hour range, not shipping to New York.”

### **Ashley and Brian Noonan: Three Years From Now**

Ashley and Brian Noonan started raising grass-fed beef near Bernard a few years ago. Since they are located close to the

Mississippi River, and a half-hour south of Dubuque, they hope to sell beef to customers in Illinois, Wisconsin and Minnesota in the future. “We are interested in CIS, but our first concern is scheduling our animals for processing in 2021,” says Ashley, who wasn’t able to get into their nearby locker and instead scheduled dates at a locker almost two hours away.

Ashley sees hope and opportunity in the fact that people are interested in local foods, and sees some momentum they can build on in the future. “The movement to know your farmer and buy from lockers is great,” she says. “We are looking to grow beyond what we can direct-market.” Ashley says she and Brian hope to sell their beef into a branded program that markets more widely. “The timing aligns for us, because presumably, we’re really going to need CIS in three years.”

The Cooperative Interstate Shipment program will help shape new and diverse markets for Iowa-raised meats, which will play a role in more livestock integration on our landscape, greater resiliency and the revival of rural communities. ■

» Photo Story : PHOTOS BY SARAH KRUMM & STORY BY NICK OHDE

# Livestock on the Land





Tica, 4, looks up from a meal on Lost Lake Farm, owned and operated by Kevin and Ranae Dietzel. Tica was born on Gibraltar Farm, run by the Gilbert family, who are fellow PFI members and good friends of the Dietzels.

**In 2017, we started out on a journey** to tell the story of regenerative grazing and its promise for the Iowa landscape. As we talked to more and more PFI farmers about the animals that made up the backbone of their farms, we realized we were onto something bigger – and more complex. High-tensile fences and electro-netting, mob grazing and manure packs, small grains and silvopasture are all part of it. But focusing on these innovative practices obscures the most important part of this story: It’s all about the people.

Our late co-founder Dick Thompson had something to say about this. He said it many times and in many ways, but the premise was the same: When cattle leave the farm, the people leave and the community begins to crumble. While livestock can work wonders for protecting soil, cleaning the water and even providing habitat for the birds and bees, at their core, they reveal things about ourselves and each other.

Meg Schmidt, who farms in southwest Iowa, says livestock teach us many life lessons. “You have to deal with things not going right when it’s most inconvenient,” says Meg, who is one of the farmers we interviewed while making PFI’s forthcoming film and mini-series, “Livestock on the Land.” “You learn to really love something, but then you also have to learn to let it go.” Livestock teach children the values of care, hard work and humility, and those values stick with them whether they stay on the farm or not.

Raising livestock also requires cooperation, whether it’s building fence with your grandpa or calling the neighbors when the cows get out. Anyone who has worked pigs with their elders can tell you it’s not always fun. But nor are many things of value. While livestock can strain relationships with our spouses and families, the stress can also forge deeper bonds. Livestock brings us together.

Those who raise livestock must also be independent. Often, their only company early in the morning or late at night is the animals they tend. That comfort in solitude helps livestock farmers go against the grain, living up to Dick Thompson’s other adage: Get along, but don’t go along.

But perhaps more than anything, caring for other animals pulls at our heartstrings. The connection between people and farm animals is not so easily quantified. It’s difficult to assign a number to the value of a child caring for a bottle calf or a flock of hens. Livestock pull us to our homes – new and old – here in the Midwest, from places as far away as Colorado and Florida, San Francisco and Long Beach, Laos and Guatemala, and from the city back to the farm.

Here’s a sneak peek into the lives of a few of the farmers we visited while making the forthcoming film, which will premier on the opening night of our 2021 annual conference.

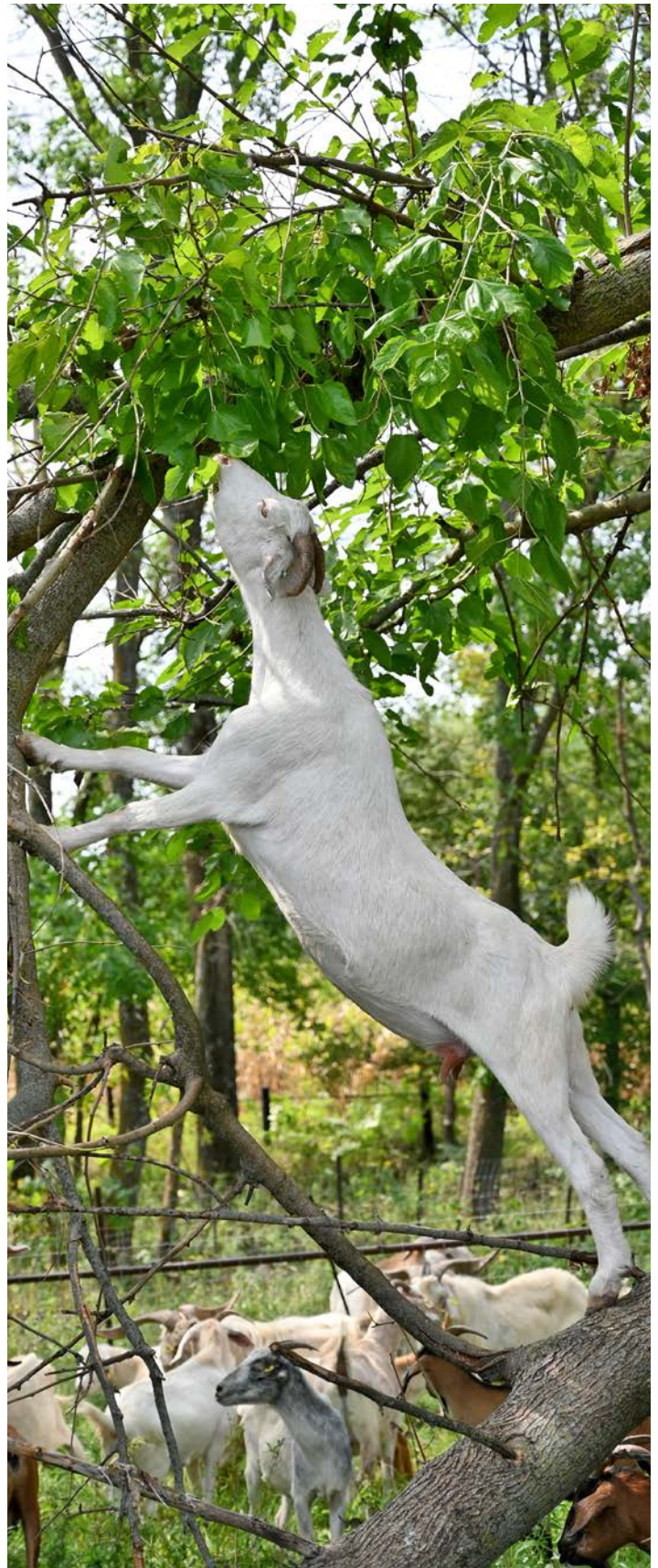
## Adam Ledvina

An ecologist and conservationist at heart, Adam Ledvina has built a business from his Chelsea, Iowa, farm that uses goats to manage forests. In many Iowa woodlands, invasive species like honeysuckle and multiflora rose have taken over woodlands, preventing diverse wildflowers and grasses from thriving. Because goats naturally prefer to browse for their food – meaning they like to strip the leaves off of shrubs and even trees within their reach – they can be managed to strategically eliminate invasive species from woodlands. This innovative strategy lets Adam help landowners improve their woodlands, making them better habitat for wildlife and, ultimately, better places to spend time outdoors.



**Left:** Adam Ledvina moves his goats to a new paddock on his farm near Chelsea, Iowa.

**Right:** One of Adam's goats showing her athletic abilities.



## Wendy Johnson and John Rafkin

Wendy Johnson met her husband, John Rafkin – a surfer from Long Beach, California – while she was living in Los Angeles, working in the fashion industry. They bonded over raising food and a love for animals, and moved back to her family farm near Charles City, Iowa, about 10 years ago. Together, they have created a farm business – Joia Food Farm – selling healthy food to their community.

Wendy and John raise sheep, pigs, chickens (broilers and layers), turkeys and ducks; and organic corn, soybeans, small grains and pasture with an eye toward conservation. Before landing on enterprises that suit their farm, they experimented with raising just about everything. Since starting the farm, working together on their day-to-day business has strengthened their relationship and convinced John that it was a good idea to move to Iowa – in spite of the winters.

**Right:** Wendy and John feed and water the pigs, while their daughter Vivienne looks on.

**Below:** Wendy and John walk through their future orchard and riparian forest. The couple looks forward to being able to harvest fruit and nuts, and to enjoying the wildlife they hope the forest will attract.



## Martha McFarland

After returning to the family farm in 2011, Martha McFarland has gradually taken over management of the Fredericksburg, Iowa, farm from her dad, Dan. The McFarlands raise bison and purebred Polled Hereford breeding stock at Hawkeye Buffalo Ranch. They've been in the breeding stock business since the 1950s, while Dan added the bison business in the 1990s. After college, Martha left to see the world, teaching English in China, then Colorado throughout her 20s. Since coming back, Martha has built on the farm foundations laid by her dad, adding the knowledge she gained when living away from the farm. While most of the farm has always been in perennial vegetation, she has looked to incorporate practices like rotational grazing, bale grazing and silvopasture to produce better forage and heal rough spots on the land.

**Photo:** Martha unrolls some hay bales for her bison on an early autumn morning on her farm near Fredericksburg, Iowa.







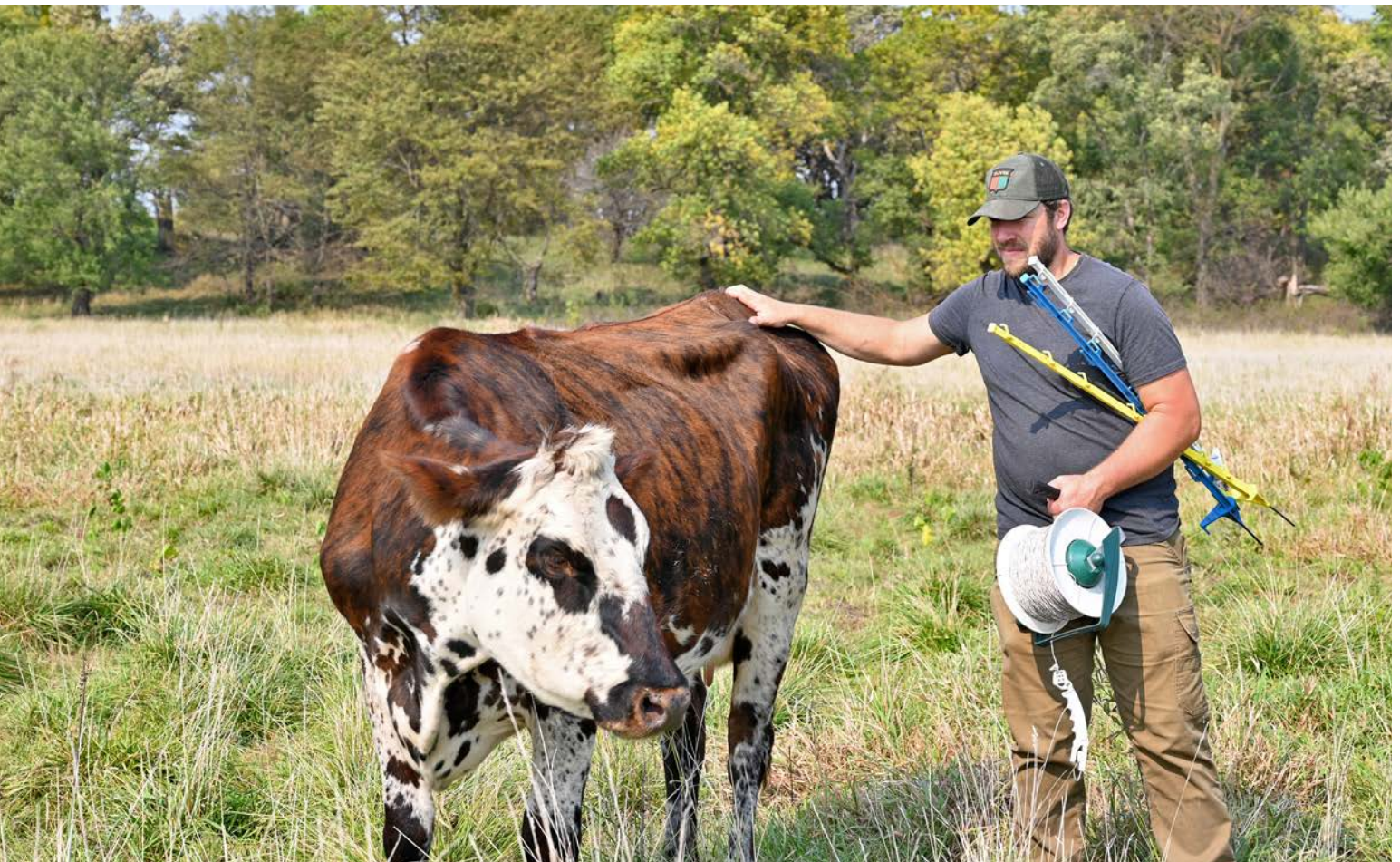
## Kevin Dietzel

Kevin Dietzel and his wife Ranae run Lost Lake Farm near Jewell, Iowa. They not only manage a 100% grass-fed dairy herd, they have built an on-farm cheesery where they produce artisan cheese, the majority of which is sold within 60 miles of the farm. Kevin spent time learning the craft of cheesemaking in Europe, where the flavor of the place – terroir – is an important element of food culture, and consumers are willing to pay the farmers and cheesemakers for it. By carefully tying the needs of the cattle to the needs of the land they farm, the flavor of central Iowa is expressed in the cheeses the Dietzels produce. More importantly, this value-added enterprise allows them to farm the high-value farmland near Ranae's family with a small-sized operation.



**Above:** Maytag isn't the only blue cheese in Iowa! Kevin's Lost Lake Blue has become a customer favorite. Here, he sorts through wheels that are bound to be injected with the blue cheese mold.

**Below:** Kevin sets up electric fencing on his pasture, which sits in the now-dry lake bed of Lake Cairo and served as the inspiration for the name of their farm near Jewell, Iowa.





## Nick Wallace

Nick Wallace's vision for Iowa is inspired by the thriving Keystone, Iowa, main street of the 1950s and '60s his dad grew up around. On Saturday nights, Main Street – which included a grocery store, theater, bowling alley, restaurants and a community hall – was bustling with kids and adults, who came into town to see friends and family. Nick is a farmer who lives with his family near Keystone, but he's an entrepreneur at heart. In the early 2000s, he started a grass-fed beef marketing and distribution company that taught him the ins and outs of the business world, and opened his eyes to large shifts in consumer demand.

Nick is also a fighter who has channeled personal adversity to keep him focused on working toward what he believes in: At just 43 years old, he has already fought through cancer and a snowmobile accident that nearly killed him. Nick's next business idea is his biggest yet: He aims to help farmers capture more of the agricultural value chain by investing in meat, market farmers, mills and main streets across the state. He calls it 99 Counties, and hopes it can be a healthy path forward for Iowa farmers and communities struggling for a way to stay on the farm.



**Top:** Nick heads back home from doing morning cattle chores. The sun is partially obscured by smoke from California wildfires on this otherwise clear September morning. **Below:** Nick watches his cattle graze on an early autumn morning.

***Don't miss the opportunity to hear and see some of these stories, and more, with your PFI family on the opening night of the PFI conference, Jan. 21, 2021.***

## A Costly Gamble

Dick Sloan's on-farm research finds neonics don't boost yields and aren't worth the environmental toll

Many non-farmers are surprised to learn that the vast majority of “conventional” (that is, non-organic) corn and soybean seed sold to farmers comes pre-coated with a range of seed treatments. One of the most common of those are neonicotinoid (neonic) coatings designed, manufacturers say, to protect plants at their most vulnerable growth stages, as well as later on throughout their lifecycle.

But as more research into the efficacy and impacts of these seed coatings becomes available, farmers across the Midwest are starting to question whether these expensive seed treatments are achieving the intended goals.

A PFI lifetime member from Rowley, Dick Sloan is one farmer who has questions about neonics. In true PFI fashion, several years ago Dick decided to test the efficacy of neonic seed treatments in his soybeans. He wanted to see if he actually realized higher yields from the neonic-treated seed compared to non-treated seed. His motivation was two-fold. The first was economic: he wanted to make sure he wasn't paying for an add-on treatment that didn't result in higher soybean yields. But he also had growing concerns over the environmental impacts of neonics, especially when the pesticides were used as seed treatments.

“I first saw some stuff in the farm literature about potential neonic impacts on insects,” Dick says. “That got my attention. I've spent a lot of time fostering soil life and diversity, and I was worried I was shooting myself in the foot using neonics.”

Dick also took issue with the way the neonic coatings were being sold to him. “I'm kind of anti-fear,” he explains. “I was tired of the fear-mongering, tired of these things being sold on the principle of fear and protecting you from bogeymen. I wanted to test whether I was addressing a real risk – was the seed treatment necessary to see higher yields?”

### What Are Neonics?

Neonicotinoids are a class of insecticides that are widely used across the globe. Many individual chemicals belong to the neonic group – imidacloprid, clothianidin, thiacloprid, thiamethoxam – and even more

trade names (Poncho, Gaucho, Admire and Cruiser are a few). When these chemicals were developed in the early 2000s, the intent was to create a less harmful alternative to existing pesticides. And in fact, neonics are far less immediately toxic to vertebrates, including birds and mammals, than older classes of insecticides, like the infamous DDT, an organophosphate. But for invertebrates, like bees and other insects, the effects of neonics are especially lethal. As the name suggests, neonicotinoids are related to nicotine, and they work in a similar way by affecting the central nervous system. Birds and mammals are less sensitive to this mode of action. But for insects, the effects prove lethal even at low doses.

As with other pesticide seed coatings, neonics are designed to be water soluble. The chemicals dissolve in the soil and are absorbed by and distributed throughout all the tissues of the plant, becoming systemic – a quality that theoretically confers protection against pests. But according to the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation, neonics are many times more soluble in water than previous classes of chemicals.



They are also persistent, maintaining their integrity in plants, soils and water well beyond the annual agricultural cycle.

“Anything that feeds upon that plant is going to get a dose of that insecticide,” says John Tooker, a professor of entomology at Penn State University who spoke at PFI's annual conference in 2020. “The only details are whether that animal gets enough of the insecticide to matter and whether that animal is sensitive to the insecticide.”

Those who sell neonic seed coatings claim the chemicals protect yield by providing the plant lasting protection against pests. But whether neonic seed coatings actually protect yield is still up for debate among researchers and farmers alike. While neonics are incredibly effective pesticides, John says farmers will only see yield benefits if the pests are actually present in the fields.

“They can certainly protect yield,” he says, “but the pests that are being targeted aren't very common.”

### Environmental Impacts

Beyond the uncertainty over whether seed treatments result in better yields, Dick also has questions and concerns about the environmental impacts of neonics. He's not alone. More research, including a peer-reviewed study by Spyridon Mourtzinis et al., published in the journal “Nature” in 2019, is revealing that neonics are linked to a host of unintended environmental harms. Like most chemicals, neonics are not selective. When they find their way into plants, soils and water, they don't differentiate between beneficial and harmful insects. For Dick, this is a major concern. A firm believer in integrated pest management, he has spent many years working to expand the biological and ecological integrity and health of his soils. He was concerned that, by using neonic seed treatments, he was countering those efforts by killing the beneficial insects he has worked to foster in his fields and soils.

Neonics also do not stay in one place. Because they are water soluble, neonics tend to accumulate in water bodies and aquatic

“I have to be able to identify when there’s a problem and treat that problem specifically. I can’t just go out and decide I have to protect myself against this bug that might be there. A lot of times, those prophylactic treatments aren’t very effective.”

– DICK SLOAN



**Above:** Dick Sloan loads treated corn seed into his planter in May 2018. Dick still plants corn that’s been pre-coated with a seed treatment primarily because he says it’s really difficult to buy untreated corn seed.. **Opposite:** Soybean seeds coated with a seed treatment, photographed by Dick.

systems, and potentially even in groundwater. Wetlands and other aquatic ecosystems host tiny invertebrates that form the bases of many food webs. According to the Xerces Society, even small concentrations of neonics in waterbodies can decimate these invertebrates, destroying ecosystems and sending ripple effects up the food chain.

Another problem with neonics is their potential to become systemic in any plant, not just crops. Conservation-minded farmers often have perennial plant communities like riparian buffers, prairie strips or filter strips at the edges of their fields, designed in part to slow down water and cause it to infiltrate before it leaves the farm. When neonics are transported through these buffers, the insecticides are absorbed by the plants growing there – which are often native grasses and wildflowers planted specifically as habitat for beneficial insects. When the insects feed in these areas, they receive often lethal doses of pesticide from plants that were intended to nurture these species.

### Examining Seed Treatment Effectiveness

In 2014 and 2015, after his concerns around neonics kept growing, Dick decided to test

whether he actually saw higher yields from neonic-treated soybeans. He did so by comparing the yields of untreated and treated seeds of the same variety through a series of replicated strip trials.

“At the time of my original trial, I had been involved with PFI and the cooperators program for a few years,” Dick says. “I was learning how to do research on my farm that would help me make decisions on my farm, so it made sense to test the seed treatments myself.”

In his original trials in 2014 and 2015, Dick saw no differences in yield between treated and untreated seed. In other words, the soybean treatment he had paid extra for at the dealer did not result in any increased income. The results prompted Dick to seriously consider whether he should be using soybean seed treatments at all. “I understand the concept of risk insurance,” Dick says, “but this doesn’t seem like a good way to go about it, especially since we don’t know all the impacts.”

Dick still plants neonic-treated corn seed, primarily because he says it’s really difficult to buy untreated corn seed. But for other farmers concerned about either the

environmental impacts or the agronomic value of soybean seed treatments, Dick encourages them to set up trials on their own farms.

In the meantime, Dick will use other methods besides neonic seed treatments to manage pests in his soybeans, namely the principles of integrated pest management. “I have to be able to identify when there’s a problem and treat that problem specifically,” Dick says. “I can’t just go out and decide I have to protect myself against this bug that might be there. A lot of times, those prophylactic treatments aren’t very effective.”

The bottom line, Dick says, is that “neonic soybean treatments just don’t work for me.” Still, to make sure he didn’t miss anything the first time, Dick is running new trials this year on soybean seed treatments. And while he doesn’t expect any new results, he acknowledges that other farmers might have different experiences. “Everything is different farm to farm,” Dick says. “The biology may be different, the timing, weather, whether you use cover crops or not – someone else might see benefits, but I haven’t.” ■

# Small Grains Afford Cover Crop Options and Benefits

Because small-grains crops like wheat or oats are harvested in mid-summer, farmers have a wide window before winter arrives to consider a panoply of cover crop options. Noah Wendt and Caleb Akin farm together near Cambridge in central Iowa. Among other reasons, they use small-grains crops in their rotation to facilitate cover crop mixes that can be used as high-quality forage for grazing cattle while boosting soil fertility.



**Top left:** June 20, 2020: Winter wheat that was planted on Oct. 15, 2019.

**Top right:** June 20, 2020: A mix of vernal alfalfa, medium red clover, rapeseed, hairy vetch, sorghum-sudangrass, turnips and kale was underseeded to the wheat on Apr. 6, 2020.

**Bottom left and right:** Aug. 28, 2020: Cattle graze the underseeded mix that grew up following wheat harvest on July 7, 2020.





**Top:** June 20, 2020: Spring wheat that was planted on Apr. 18, 2020.

**Right:** June 20, 2020: Vernal alfalfa and medium red clover were co-seeded with the spring wheat.



**Bottom:** Sept. 15, 2020: The alfalfa and clover are both legumes that fix nitrogen from the atmosphere with the help of soil bacteria. After wheat harvest on July 20, 2020, Noah and Caleb chose not to allow cattle to graze these cover crops. Instead, Noah and Caleb are letting the alfalfa and clover grow as a green manure cover crop to boost soil fertility – they're estimating a nitrogen credit of 80–100 units for next year's corn crop. The pollinators enjoy the clover blooms, too!



## Restoring Soil and Community

Landowner Tom Wind's quest to restore soil and community has connected neighbors and generations

Tom Wind grew up on his family's farm south of Jefferson. The 160-acre farm has been in Tom's family for about 150 years – it was the first farm his ancestors came to when they were settling down in the area.

This long family connection with the land, and the fact that he has spent so much of his life there, is a source of pride for Tom. "All you have to do is plant a seed and it will grow," Tom says of Iowa's fertile farmland. "I'm lucky that my ancestors settled in Iowa 145 years ago, and to have inherited a little of this lush, green, verdant farmland. That puts me in a very exclusive club in the world. I figure I am not in the top 1%, not in the top 0.1%, but in the top 0.03% of people owning something as precious as the best farmland in the world."

### Leaving a Legacy of Healthy Soil

Around 30 years ago, Tom farmed conventionally for six or seven years. After that, he left the farm, worked in the wind industry as an engineer in Iowa and paid little attention to the farm. As he got closer to retirement, he realized he needed to stay healthy and get some exercise and fresh air. About 10 years ago, those concerns led Tom to start the process of reconnecting with his family farm. He started getting more involved with corn and soybean production on the farm, alongside his sister, Janet Dewan. But as he got more involved, Tom started thinking more about the legacy of land stewardship he'd leave. He had heard many farmers express their wish to leave the land better than they had inherited it, and he felt an obligation to take care of the farm that had been so productive for multiple generations of his family. But he says he started to think more about what it actually meant to leave the land in better shape.

For Tom, the condition of his farm's soils provided a meaningful gauge, and he started paying more attention to the soils in different areas of his farm. "I noticed that the

less productive areas were made of very thin soils, and they produced very little crop," Tom says. "The soil was poor, exposed and could easily be eroded." Being a natural tinkerer and eager to experiment, Tom started exploring what he could do in his lifetime that would make a difference in the quality of his farm's soils.

About seven years ago, Tom started getting involved with Practical Farmers of Iowa. He went to his first PFI conference in 2014, where he attended a session led by Gabe Brown, a renowned integrated crop and livestock farmer from North Dakota widely regarded as an innovator and expert on

**"A lot more people come to my farm because of what I am doing here. It has enriched my soils and has also enriched my life."**

– TOM WIND

cover crops and soil health. "Gabe was the first person who said 'Yes, you can put carbon back into the soil much quicker than a hundred years,'" Tom recalls. "And his secret was incorporating livestock onto the farm." The advice immediately resonated for Tom. "The problem," he says, "was that we hadn't had livestock on the land in probably 50 or 60 years."

### Restoring Cattle and Community

Though Tom didn't have livestock or expertise in animal husbandry, he knew that one of his neighbors, Jim Funke, had some cattle. About four years ago, Tom approached him with a proposition: What would Jim think about an arrangement where he grazed his cows using cover crops planted on Tom's land and moved them based on the soil needs of different areas? Jim agreed, and the neighbors have been working together since, closely monitoring the soil.

Tom explains that the five principles of soil health include putting "armor" on the soil – meaning, keeping it covered; having

diverse types of plants; having living roots in the soil as long as possible; integrating livestock; and minimizing soil disturbance. To adhere to these principles, Tom and Jim created a plan that would benefit both partners as well as the soil. Tom agreed to plant forage crops for the cows to eat, and Jim agreed to run his cattle over Tom's land a few times a year. With their sustained presence, the cows would hopefully improve the soil through manure, urine and hoof impact.

During their first year, Tom took his land out of corn and soybean production and instead planted annuals for the cows to eat. "We were really disappointed in the forage that year," Tom says, "but kept mob grazing a couple times a year." Tom and Jim have continued this practice for about four years now, and Tom says 2020 has been the first year they have seen a difference in the soil. Both men are excited to see how areas with formerly poor soil are now producing all types of forage. "I realize that it would be easier for everybody just to keep on doing corn and soybeans on that land," Tom says. "But it wouldn't be fulfilling the pledge I made to leave this farm better than when I inherited it, when I came on this Earth."

Tom is not the only one benefiting from the arrangement. Jim needed a place to run his cattle, which Tom's land provides, and Tom is able to help manage and move the cattle, easing some of the burden on Jim.

"Ever since I've had cattle, I've always had to rent pastures here and there – and pasture demand is really high," Jim says. "Everybody that's got a few cows wants to rent pastures, and it's hard to keep a pasture for very many years before somebody else either sells the land, or there's a lot of land that changes every year. Just to stay in one place is really nice. That's the biggest thing. It seems like we're going to have a longstanding relationship that'll work out for both of us."





From left to right: Conner Allender, Jim Funcke, Jon Merrill and Tom Wind pose on Tom's farmland near Jefferson, Iowa. Conner, Jim and Jon are neighbors with whom Tom has been working to integrate cattle, sheep and poultry into his farm's production system to help improve the quality of the farm's soils.

## Adding a New Generation With Poultry

Tom wanted to integrate other kinds of livestock on his land, too. Last winter, he approached another of his neighbors, Conner Allender. A senior at Greene County High School, Conner raises pastured poultry that Tom thought could further benefit the soil on his farm. She agreed and now keeps 38 chickens in a mobile coop on Tom's crop ground, moving the poultry to areas recently grazed by Jim's cattle. Working with Tom has really kick-started her farming career: not only has Conner been able to expand her chicken flock, she teaches her fellow National FFA Organization classmates how to raise layer and production hens.

"It's been a fun learning experience," Conner says. "I built a pretty decent egg production business off of it. We sell 10 to 12 dozen eggs right now, and get about three dozen eggs per day. I am hoping within the next few years we will be able to improve Tom's soil with the poultry, and we should have

**"Every since I've had cattle, I've always had to rent pastures here and there – and pasture demand is really high . . . . That's the biggest thing. It seems like we're going to have a longstanding relationship that'll work out for both of us."**

– JIM FUNCKE

about a hundred more chickens by the end." Conner took part, along with Jim, in the virtual PFI field day Tom hosted in June that highlighted how the neighbors started working together. Tom also explained during the field day how he has been working with neighbor Jon Merrill to integrate sheep.

For Tom, the journey to leave his land better than he inherited it – while keeping active and healthy – has been long but worthwhile. "I am accomplishing my goal of improving my soils. We have a lot of activity around the farm, and I've gotten a lot of exercise

out of doing this, which is great at my age," Tom says. "I've gotten to know my neighbors better and there is a lot of activity going up and down my driveway."

He adds: "If I was conventional corn and beans, I would have my tenant here three or four times a year. He would be here on the farm three or four hours, maybe, and gone to the next farm. So [this approach] has brought life to my farm in terms of soil life, plant life and the community. A lot more people come to my farm because of what I am doing here. It has enriched my soils and has also enriched my life." ■

## Paving the Way for Diversity

### Niman Ranch creates markets for farmers to raise pastured pigs and start farming

In the late 1990s, many pig farmers in Iowa were losing money. Over the preceding decades, the hog industry had become far more efficient and productive than previous generations of farmers had experienced.

The scale of pork production had been increasing, and many farmers couldn't compete with the low prices and profit margins. Nearly overnight – from 1997 to 1998 – hog prices dropped from \$46 per hundred-weight to \$17 per hundred-weight. Many smaller farmers simply got out of the business.

#### Preserving Pork Production at a Smaller Scale

"The industry was holding meetings and telling us to get bigger or get out," says Paul Willis, who raised pigs near Thornton at the time. "It was all about things like pigs per sow per year. If you asked them about eating quality, they would look at you like, 'What are you talking about?'" Paul noticed that there was a market for free-range chicken, for which consumers were willing to pay a premium. Paul started to pursue this on his own, but found out that people didn't realize he was raising whole pigs, not just

pork chops. "I had to find someone willing to buy the whole animal," Paul says.

While in California visiting his sister, Paul met up with Peace Corps friend Jeannie McCormack, who had found a good market for her lamb through Bill Niman. Bill was supplying meat to San Francisco Bay-area restaurants. Jeannie arranged for Paul and Bill to have lunch. Over a burger made from Bill's beef – the best hamburger Paul says he'd ever had – Paul learned about Bill's cattle operation and small processing and distribution company, Niman Ranch. Bill was lacking a good pork supply and asked Paul to send him a sample. "I went home, took some pork out of the freezer and shipped it to California," says Paul.

Bill circulated Paul's pork to his chef clients, including the acclaimed Chez Panisse chef Alice Waters, and it was a hit. "They loved the sample," Paul says. "I was raising farmers' hybrid hogs. They were hardy outdoor pigs with a great eating quality." His pork contrasted with most other pork available on the market at the time, which had moved away from eating quality to efficiency and competing with chicken as "the other white meat." From there, the pork branch of Niman Ranch – and a new market for small- to mid-scale hog production –

was born. Paul shipped 30 pigs in February 1995 to California. In a couple of weeks, they wanted 30 more. Incrementally, demand crept up and the market required continuous supply. Paul first branched out to his neighbor, Glen Alden. Niman Ranch has a numbering system, and Paul is producer #1. Glen was #2. "Glen did some winter farrowing and summer farrowing," Paul says. "He was able to fill in when I didn't have supply."

Rex Thompson of Boone, son of PFI co-founders Dick and Sharon Thompson, was #3. Dan and Lorna Wilson, of Paullina, were #4. In 1998, Niman Ranch Pork Company, LLC, officially formed. Half of the business was owned by farmers. "When you sold a pig, you would invest a penny a pound into the company as equity and Niman Ranch matched it," Paul explains. By doing this, the company raised operating capital. When farmers retire, they are able to request their money back and receive 100% of what they invested.

Today, there are more than 600 farmers selling to Niman Ranch Pork Company. The premium price the company pays – which has always attracted producers – started at the beginning of Paul and Bill's relationship. "Bill asked, 'What do you want for your pigs?' Nobody had ever asked me that before," Paul says. Together, they came up with a price that worked for the farmer. During the hog crisis that drove so many out of production, Niman's prices were able to keep farmers in business. "Many farmers tell me if it wasn't for Niman Ranch, they certainly wouldn't be raising hogs, and in many cases they wouldn't be farming at all," Paul says.

Paul envisions an Iowa countryside filled with diversity and farmers: "Diversity is healthy. What evolved here is the tallgrass prairie, loaded with species of plants and animals. Monocultures are bad for the soil, for pest pressure and for rural economies. Niman Ranch creates an opportunity for diversified agriculture. It also creates a place where you can get into farming without much startup costs. We need more farmers, which requires viable opportunities to enter into farming."

---

"Niman Ranch creates an opportunity for diversified agriculture. It also creates a place where you can get into farming without much startup costs."

- PAUL WILLIS

---



“Niman’s vision of raising pigs on pasture is what Dan’s dad had done for generations. Their whole concept meshed with our values of how we wanted to raise animals. We were really connected to their philosophy of treating animals with respect.”

- LORNA WILSON



Paul joined PFI in 1995 and used the network to connect with many hog producers. “After I found the market, I had to look for farmers to increase supply,” he says. “Where do you find them? PFI was one of my top sources from the beginning.”

### One Family’s Experience

One family Paul connected with through PFI was the Wilsons of Paullina. Dan and Lorna Wilson credit Niman with keeping them in pig production. “We met Paul through PFI in September of ‘98, right at the bottom of the hog market,” Dan says. “Paul called and asked if we had any pigs ready.” Lorna was skeptical at first because the bottom had dropped out of the market and it seemed too good to be true. But the Wilsons pursued the opportunity, sending pork chops to Bill Niman for quality testing. The chops passed snuff and the Wilsons sold Niman 12 pigs. “Niman was paying forty-three-and-a-half cents a pound, when we were getting 8 to 10 cents a pound from our normal market,” Dan says. “We were ecstatic that this was even a possibility.”

“Niman’s vision of raising pigs on pasture is what Dan’s dad had done for generations,” Lorna says. “Their whole concept meshed with our values of how we wanted to raise animals. We were really connected to their

“Without the diversity we have with our livestock and crops, there’s no way we could have four families full-time on this farm.”

- DAN WILSON

philosophy of treating animals with respect.” The Wilsons’ systems was already set up in hoop houses. “We met all the protocols and it was an easy transition,” Dan says.

If Niman hadn’t come into the picture when it did, Lorna says, “We would have just quit producing hogs. Niman’s the reason we were able to stay in.” Additionally, Dan says, “Niman is the only reason that [our daughter] April was able to come back and farm with us.” Five-and-a-half years ago, having the Niman enterprise provided income for April to come back. “Our pork enterprise provides April with a sense of ownership,” Lorna says. “She gets all the communication and makes her own decisions.”

Pigs, of course, are only part of the story. Dan credits the diversity of their farm as a whole in allowing their kids to come back. “Without the diversity we have with our livestock and crops, there’s no way we could have four families full-time on this farm,” he says. “If we were just straight corn and beans on our 720 acres, there wouldn’t be enough income for our kids to come back and farm as well, even with organic crops and prices.”

### Advice From Long-Time PFI Members

Diversity is exactly what Paul was envisioning when he started Niman Ranch’s pork division. Reliable markets for a range of crops are key to paving the way for farmers to be able to diversify, and Niman is providing just that. Niman’s average farmer age is 42-43 years old, compared to Iowa’s average farmer age of 59. “I feel that the average age of our farmers is a good indicator of creating health in the rural environment,” Paul says. “You have younger people coming back because there’s an opportunity.”

The Wilsons and Paul both challenge farmers to work toward diversity. Lorna invokes an old adage to explain the philosophy: “Don’t put all of your eggs in one basket. Having multiple enterprises and plans is key to being able to continue to farm, and to bring family members back.” That’s not to say it’s easy. “There are days where your brain is tired from keeping it all afloat,” Dan says, “but diversity works.”

Paul agrees: “Think outside the box a bit, and specialize in things like organic, fruits and vegetables, different kinds of livestock, or even small grains. Diversity provides opportunity. Diversity means you don’t have to have thousands of acres to make a living in agriculture. That’s where I see agriculture heading in the future.” ■

**(Above):** Dan and April Wilson on their farm near Paullina, Iowa. Raising hogs for Niman Ranch has allowed April to return to the farm. **(Left):** Paul Willis helped start the pork branch of Niman Ranch on his farm near Thornton, Iowa. *Photo courtesy of Niman Ranch.*

## Sharing Soil to Heal the Land

Bart VerEllen and Shirley Waite are working together to restore her family farm

Shirley Waite reflects on her youth fondly. “In the winter, I helped toss bale flakes out for the livestock,” she says. And once she was older and stronger, she recalls how she “threw a lot of bales during hay season.” Talking to her, you sense the enduring connection to her farming life and roots.

The Reinhard side of Shirley’s family has farmed around the Blakesburg area in southwest Iowa since the 1850s. When she and her first husband, Duane Howk, purchased 10 acres from Duane’s parents in 1977, they combined their family farming legacies to build their own farming future together. Over the years, they contract-farmed the Howk family land and bought it as they were able. They raised cattle and had 40 acres in row crops. The farm’s history was also peppered with pigs, sheep and chickens.

When Duane died unexpectedly in his 40s, Shirley encountered pressure to step away from farming to focus on their three children. She wasn’t going anywhere. “I had just as much invested in the farm,” Shirley says. She continued to farm the Howk farm and in 2009, married her current husband, John Waite. Shirley and John were eventually able to purchase the remaining 35 acres of the original farmstead. Today, the farm is a total of 188 acres.

Bart VerEllen has similar memories working on a dairy farm near Port Hope, Michigan, saying he had “an early inclination” that farming suited him well. For Bart, however, the path meandered far from home – and for a time, far from farming. As Bart was graduating high school in the 1980s, the farm crisis was in full swing. Feeling that his farming dreams were squashed, he enlisted in the military and eventually went on to own a welding business. Bart grew his welding business in Florida and eventually maintained a small herd of cattle for stress relief on rented ground. Then in the late 2000s, he decided it was time to close shop and move to Colorado to pursue ranching. But managing someone else’s cattle on someone else’s land didn’t cut it for him.

When he seriously started “putting the pencil to his dreams,” southern Iowa and sheep appeared on his radar.

In 2013, Bart and his wife Trish moved the family to Centerville, Iowa. Bart secured a lease and started a familiar operation of calving and selling pairs. All the while, he was sitting on the fence about switching to sheep. That’s when Shirley chanced to call him about the possibility of farming her land. For Bart, the timing felt like divine intervention.

---

“There used to be rivers of soil flowing off the land during storms, and the ponds were all muddy. They were losing water, but now they’re holding it and the ponds are full and clear.” – BART VERELLEN

---

### Finding a Land Match Through PFI

Before this felicitous encounter, just as Bart and his family were adjusting to farming in Iowa, Shirley and her husband John had been in the midst of their own big decisions. By this time, Shirley had become a member of PFI and her perspectives on farming and farm transitions were changing. “After some reflection, we decided the land needed some rest,” Shirley says. “It was a hassle to

farm 40 acres and we thought it might be better to seed it down and get some sheep or goats.”

Shirley and John had felt increasingly limited in their ability to keep up with the farm. They started thinking long-term and determined that renting would take a substantial burden off their shoulders. In the event of their deaths, they also reasoned the farm could continue generating income while estate matters were dealt with. Shirley created a profile on PFI’s Find-A-Farmer website, which helps connect land-seekers with landowners. Within six months, she found Bart’s profile on the site and they started corresponding about a potential rental agreement.

“We met twice before I even looked at the land,” Bart says. “It was important for me to understand what their goals were.” Bart was ready to make the switch to sheep and Shirley and John were able to help him purchase a portion of his 220 ewe flock in 2015. Bart finished selling his remaining cattle and, after the first lambing, was able to repay the Waites. Every year since, the flock has increased by 100 ewes and Bart expects 600 ewes this fall.

Bart is now in his fifth year at Shirley’s. He still drives 40 minutes one-way from Centerville to tend to the flock, but their arrangement allows Bart to rotate the flock around 180 acres of the property and access the outbuildings and equipment. As part of the deal, Bart also helps with maintenance around the property.

### Land and Vision Transformed

Keeping livestock on the land is important to Shirley for soil health and biodiversity, but also for emotional reasons. In recent years, family moved back to revive the Reinhard farm homestead, and Shirley and John were able to purchase back the last 35 acres of the original Howk family farm, land that had been overgrazed. “It’s exciting to see it – the transition,” Shirley says, “and for the kids to see it too.”

Shirley and Bart both admit their journey together hasn’t been without their fair share of bumps but the arrangement has been



---

“Bart showed up just in time. There were sections of clay on the property that had been overworked and were nearly barren, but now they’re thriving.”

- SHIRLEY WAITE

---



mutually beneficial. Bart has access to land and is successfully building his flock and Shirley has found someone to steward her land while generating rental income. “Bart showed up just in time,” Shirley says. “There were sections of clay on the property that had been overworked and were nearly barren, but now they’re thriving. There are still weeds, but the sheep like them.”

They have both noticed a decrease in run-off on the property. “There used to be rivers of soil flowing off the land during storms and the ponds were all muddy,” Bart says. “They were losing water, but now they’re holding it and the ponds are full and clear.”

“With the increase in vegetation, the rain is soaked right up,” Shirley adds. “It’s cool to see.”

The wildlife on the property has also changed. Bart wasn’t familiar with bobolinks, a grassland bird once ubiquitous in Iowa,

---

**(Above):** From left to right: John and Shirley Waite, and Trish and Bart VerEllen, pose together on the Waite farm. **(Left):** A bobolink perches on a fence post at the Waite farm. These once-ubiquitous grassland birds have returned to the Waite farm since the land was converted to a pasture-based livestock operation.

until he started seeing them on John and Shirley’s property. Even though it wasn’t his initial aim to increase the land’s habitat and biodiversity, Bart describes himself as a “conservationist at heart.” He says, “To start seeing that change confirms we’re doing something right.”

### Plans for the Future

Bart is still scaling up and hopes in another year to quit his town job to farm full-time. The expected 600 ewes this fall will surpass his projected tipping point to reach the next level in growth. Once he knows he’s making money at that stage, he’d like to get another lease for more land and add stocker cattle to the operation. Stocker cattle have a short turn around and are typically purchased in the spring and sold in the fall after a summer eating grass. Diversification helps with parasite control and risk management. “Being easy to sell would let us use them as a drought management tool. Lots of grass- buy stockers. Short on grass- sell them and save the flock,” Bart explains.

Shirley is equally hopeful that Bart will bring back some stocker cattle and maybe even some pasture-raised chickens to follow. Moving forward, she’d like to see continued diversification on the farm.

At this point in life, Bart wants to be outside with his livestock. Not only is he hoping to have more time to be on the farm when he transitions to full-time, he wants to allocate more time to his community and church. The lease arrangement and early support from Shirley and John have allowed him to work steadily toward that goal.

For Shirley, Bart’s management of the property has given her freedom to tend to other aspects of life. For instance, she’s hopeful her grandchildren will get some livestock or small animals so she can guide them through what’s involved with animal husbandry. The arrangement has also broadened her perspective on what’s possible on the property. She and John have started a small orchard and are looking forward to the day it begins producing fruit.

Bart and Shirley both believe that properly managed livestock can heal the land. They also strongly feel that providing opportunities to new or beginning farmers benefits the community – from gaining another invested farm family; from cleaner water and healthier environment; and from the connections forged in the sharing of soil. ■

## Review of: “Red Meat Republic: A Hoof-to-Table History of How Beef Changed America”

When I realized that “Red Meat Republic” was an edited version of Joshua Specht’s doctoral dissertation, I braced myself for what I thought might be a challenging task.

It was a pleasant surprise to find the book was very readable, packed with anecdotes and references, and presented a picture of the cattle industry from the time of cattle replacing bison on the plains through the time of the rise and fall of the giant meat packers in Chicago.

Joshua describes a timeline from post-Civil War until pre-WWI. He breaks the era into four periods. The first is the slaughter of the bison and the concentrating of the plains Indian tribes onto reservations. The book documents the influence of foreign investment, particularly Scottish and English, in massive land and cattle companies. Next, he describes the life of the cowboys and drovers and the beginning of the cattle drives from Texas and Oklahoma. The development of the rail system, and the resulting competition to become trailhead towns for cattle drive destinations, was intense. The incentives offered by today’s communities to attract Google and Amazon are dwarfed by the scale of tax incentives and outright bribes offered by competing Kansas towns for railhead status.

The railroads invested heavily in railcars to haul live cattle from trailheads to eastern cities. After refrigerated cars were developed, railroad executives resisted the idea of building slaughter facilities nearer the cattle, as well as the idea of moving refrigerated meat to the population centers. The struggle between the railroads and the growing stockyard and packing house behemoths was bitter, and involved violence and massive government lobbying and bribery. By the beginning of the 20th century, the industry had evolved into a hub of five or six cities with huge slaughter capabilities – by far the largest being Chicago – and a network of stockyards where cattle were gathered to be shipped to the slaughter facilities. The working conditions of these facilities were exposed by Upton Sinclair in “The Jungle.” Disease concerns resulted in the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Federal Meat Inspection Act of 1906.

The author includes 60 pages of research notes and a bibliography, so there is ample opportunity to delve into or fact-check his observations. His conclusion section begins to reveal his opinions and his value-judgement of the industry. But for the most part, the

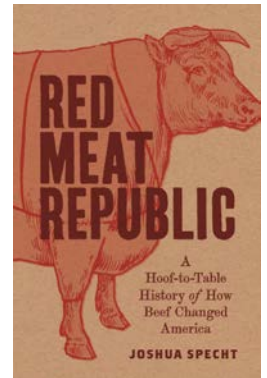


book is a narrative and timeline of an industry, and leaves value judgements to the reader.

This reader came away with the strong feeling that we are seeing the second chapter of the same book in several instances in today’s meat packing industry. The author describes turn-of-the century packers using predatory pricing and corrupt government actions to force local butchers out of business. Is this not happening to small packers and local lockers today? The “Big Four” packers of 1900 used the lack of organization and market control of small ranchers to dictate live cattle prices, much as we see with vertical integration today. The conditions of the central European packing house workers described by Sinclair in 1900 are similar in many respects to the conditions Hispanic workers face in many packing plants of 2020.

I found “Red Meat Republic” a worthwhile read for those wanting to better understand the development of the beef industry in the U.S. ■

**James West spent 40 years as a bovine veterinarian. Currently, he consults with ranchers and dairy farmers on bovine reproductive issues, biosecurity and animal welfare. He and his wife, Mary, are lifetime PFI members who live in Ames.**



Author: Joshua Specht

368 pages

Published: May 2019

Synopsis: “By the late 19th century, Americans rich and poor had come to expect high-quality fresh beef with almost every meal. Beef production in the U.S. had gone from small-scale, localized operations to a highly centralized industry spanning the country, with cattle bred on ranches in the rural West, slaughtered in Chicago and consumed in the nation’s rapidly growing cities. “Red Meat Republic” tells the remarkable story of the violent conflict over who would reap the benefits of this new industry and who would bear its heavy costs.

Specht brings to life a turbulent era marked by Indian wars, Chicago labor unrest and food riots in the streets of New York. He shows how the enduring success of the cattle-beef complex was a consequence of the meatpackers’ ability to make their interests overlap with those of a hungry public, while the interests of struggling ranchers, desperate workers and bankrupt butchers took a backseat. America – and the American table – would never be the same again.

## Exciting PFI Staff Growth and Changes

New position added as two current staff members step into new leadership roles

Late summer and early autumn have ushered in some exciting changes to the PFI staff, as we added the new and much-needed position of data analyst and restructured part of Practical Farmers' leadership team. As we have grown, adding staff to accommodate expanded funding and our capacity to make a greater impact on Iowa's farming landscape, we realized we needed to reorganize some internal leadership and supervisory roles to more efficiently manage our grants, staff and some of our ambitious strategic goals.

To that end, we decided to promote two staff members – Alisha Bower and Liz Kolbe – to new leadership positions. Both have been key to the growth and success of Practical Farmers over the last few

years, and with the restructuring of our leadership team, it was the right time for them to take on new and expanded roles.

Alisha is now PFI's operations director, while Liz has transitioned to the role of education and engagement director. We are delighted these two highly qualified staff applied and were hired for these positions. We are also excited to have a new part-time office assistant, two new Green Iowa AmeriCorps members and to have hired Maddie Mueller, our summer intern, for a part-time position as a digital media assistant. Learn more about these new additions, and the new roles Alisha and Liz have taken on. ■

### Michael Borucke – Data Analyst

Michael Borucke joined the PFI staff in August 2020 as a data analyst. Michael originally hails from the Chicago suburb of Orland Park, Illinois, and has been working at the nexus of science, technology and the environment for close to 20 years.

Michael obtained his bachelor's degree and first master's degree in environmental engineering from MIT in 2002. Since then, he has had a plethora of experiences, including teaching high school science in Massachusetts; working on an organic vegetable farm in Florida; engaging in soil remediation in New Orleans after Katrina; and working as an environmental analyst with the New England States for Coordinated Air Use Management in Boston, the Environmental

Defense Fund in San Francisco and the Global Footprint Network in Oakland, California.

In 2016, Michael obtained his second master's degree in natural resources and agroforestry from the University of Missouri-Columbia. He enjoys international travel, playing trumpet in a brass band, community gardening, cooperatives of all types and getting his hands dirty in the (worm) compost. ■



### Alisha Bower – Operations Director

Alisha Bower joined the PFI staff in early 2017, serving as our strategic initiatives manager. In that role, she helped to deliver and expand PFI's cover crops and small-grains programs, including our cost-share initiatives, to farmers in Iowa and the Midwest. On Oct. 1, Alisha transitioned to her new role as operations director. In this leadership position, Alisha will oversee staff recruitment and performance, grant planning and management and office administrative capability. ■



### Liz Kolbe – Education and Engagement Director

For the past seven years, Liz Kolbe has served as PFI's horticulture and habitat programs manager. In that role, she crafted programming for our specialty crop farmers and helped deepen our understanding of their needs. In mid-September, Liz transitioned to her new role as our education and engagement director. She will oversee strategy and operations for PFI's educational events, outreach and community and farmer engagement. ■



### Rachel Findling – Office Assistant

Rachel Findling joined the PFI staff in August as the new office assistant. She is currently a student at Iowa State University studying agricultural education. Her duties at PFI include helping with mailings, membership database updates, virtual event support and general office support.

Rachel is from the small town of Royal, Iowa. She grew up working with cattle, sheep, pigs and chickens. She joined 4-H and the National FFA Organization right away, and competed in and attended every competition and conference she could. Through these opportunities, Rachel saw the impact the agricultural industry

can make in the lives of youth, which inspired her to go to college to become an agricultural instructor. Since attending ISU, Rachel has enjoyed planning events for different university organizations, such as Animal Learning Day and Bacon Expo, and giving tours of Iowa State's various farms. In her free time, you can find Rachel spending time with friends and family, cooking something new, visiting Iowa State's Swine Teaching Farm or cruising around the back roads of Iowa. ■



## Meet Our New AmeriCorps Members

Two service members will work with PFI over the coming year

In summer 2019, we worked with our first batch of Green Iowa AmeriCorps members, a community service program operated through University of Northern Iowa's Center for Energy & Environmental Education. The experience was so positive for both PFI and the service members, we created service opportunities for two Green Iowa AmeriCorps members to work with PFI from autumn 2019 through summer 2020. We're excited to again host two new Green Iowa AmeriCorps service members for a year-long term.

### Emma Liddle

Emma joined Practical Farmers of Iowa in September 2020 through Green Iowa AmeriCorps. Before coming to PFI, Emma graduated from Grinnell College with a Bachelor of Arts in biology and a concentration in environmental studies. Emma will be working with Practical Farmers' communications, membership and



Cooperators' Program staff during her service year. She's thrilled to learn more about farm resilience!

During her time in college, Emma was involved in biological and environmental research. In Fall 2018, she studied in the Australian rainforest through the School for Field Studies, a non-profit that specializes in environmental study abroad programs, conducting research on biome boundaries (and avoiding giant spiders). Her experience informed her work at Grinnell as a mentor for students interested in off-campus study,

especially on non-traditional programs like SFS. Emma also performed an independent research project on gecko genetics at Marquette University in Milwaukee. She brings her passion, knowledge and analytical skill to her work at PFI.

Emma is originally from Bloomington, Minnesota, and will work there remotely until the local PFI office re-opens. In her free time, she enjoys doing craft projects, taking long walks outside with an audiobook, listening to music or hanging out with her two cats, Ike and Minerva. ■

### Megan Sweeney

Megan Sweeney joined Practical Farmers of Iowa in September 2020 as a member of Green Iowa AmeriCorps. She graduated from Ohio University in the spring of 2020 with a degree in environmental biology with departmental honors, with certificates in environmental studies and geographic information science. Her duties with PFI



include working with the communications team and the Cooperators' Program, along with assisting the membership team.

Native to Ohio, her love of the environment and agriculture stems from her childhood spent camping in Indiana during the summers, and her family's history of farming in northwestern Ohio. These interests led Megan to volunteer weekly for the Brukner Nature Center's wildlife rehabilitation program throughout high school. She was also able to work in a biological research

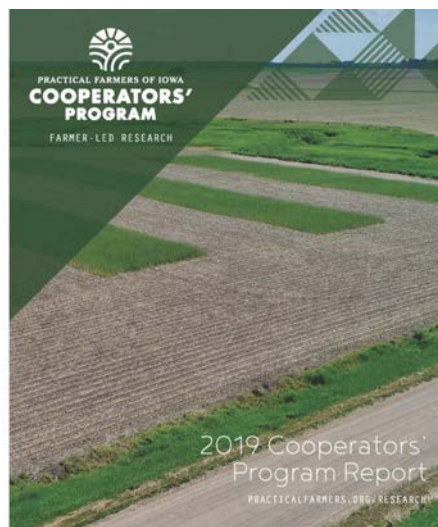
laboratory at Ohio University where she completed her thesis studying the impacts of the insecticide, imidacloprid, on the wood frog tadpole.

In her free time, Megan enjoys being outdoors doing activities such as camping, hiking and kayaking. She also loves spending time with friends and is an avid reader of fiction and non-fiction. She is excited to increase her knowledge of agriculture through her time at PFI and hopes to have a hobby farm in the future. ■

## Read Our 2019 Cooperators' Program Report

If you haven't yet seen it, our 2019 Cooperators' Program report is available online (or let us know if you'd like us to mail you a hard copy). The annual publication highlights some of the many farmer-led on-farm research projects conducted by PFI members.

This year's report details the results of interseeding 60-inch corn; cabbage variety trials; the effects of apple cider vinegar in dairy cattle; and more. These trials are just a few of the 72 on-farm research projects conducted by 50 PFI members in 2019. Read the full report at [practicalfarmers.org/2019-cooperators-program-report](https://practicalfarmers.org/2019-cooperators-program-report). ■



## View Missed Field Days Online

Did you miss a virtual field day this summer or autumn that you wanted to see? All events have been recorded, and there are a few different ways to view them:

- **Check back on the field day webpage** of the event you missed. View the list here: [practicalfarmers.org/field-days](https://practicalfarmers.org/field-days)
- Watch in **our video library** ([practicalfarmers.org/video](https://practicalfarmers.org/video)) or **on Facebook** ([facebook.com/practicalfarmers/videos](https://facebook.com/practicalfarmers/videos))
- **Watch on our YouTube channel** ([youtube.com/user/pfivideos](https://youtube.com/user/pfivideos)). You can also subscribe to this so you know when new videos are posted



## COVID-19 Resources for Farmers

Links on our site are updated as needed

Throughout the spring and summer, both the federal and state government unveiled a range of programs to support farmers, families and workers as the COVID-19 pandemic has stretched on and upended markets, jobs, work routines and farm operations.

To help you sort through all the information, we created a page on our site, "COVID-19 Resources," that compiles several some resources we have found particularly useful. We have gathered the links from reputable

sources that are frequently updated with current information. With the overwhelming amount of COVID-19 resources, we have attempted to keep our list pared down to the essentials. If you have suggestions for additions or are unable to find something you need, please contact any of our PFI staff and we will do our best to assist you. From the main menu on our website, hover over "Resources" and click on "COVID-19 Resources" ([practicalfarmers.org/covid-19-resources-for-farmers](https://practicalfarmers.org/covid-19-resources-for-farmers)). ■

## Join PFI's Facebook Group!

Did you know we have a Facebook group where you can have conversations, share resources, ask questions and build community? Members and non-members are welcome to join. Keep informed, share events, meet other farmers, landowners and non-farmers interested in diverse agriculture – and get the support you need to make practical food and farm decisions.

To join, visit [facebook.com/groups/feed](https://facebook.com/groups/feed) and search for "Practical Farmers of Iowa." We pop right up! ■

## Apply for Small Grains Cost-Share

Farmers in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin are invited to apply for cost-share on small grains harvested in 2021 and followed by a legume-containing cover crop. Small grains include barley, oats, rye, triticale or wheat. A legume cover crop could be under- or co-seeded clover or alfalfa, or a summer-planted cover that includes hairy vetch or field peas. To learn more and determine your eligibility, visit [practicalfarmers.org/programs/small-grains-cost-share-sign-up](https://practicalfarmers.org/programs/small-grains-cost-share-sign-up). ■

## Derecho Relief Funds Available From IFU

Iowa Farmers Union is accepting applications for derecho storm disaster relief grants to help farmers and families recover from the powerful Aug. 10 storm that produced hurricane-force winds as it traversed six states and more than 700 miles. Full details are available at [iowafarmersunion.org/covid-19-relief-center](https://iowafarmersunion.org/covid-19-relief-center). ■

The advertisement features a map of Iowa with a tractor icon and the text: "FARM AID Keep American Growing!", "DERECHO STORM DAMAGE RELIEF GRANTS For Iowa Family Farmers APPLY NOW", and "Iowa Farmers Union Applications available at www.iowafarmersunion.org".

## Seeking Oat Growers for Feedback on Decision Tool

Practical Farmers is piloting an online decision tool to help farmers choose oat varieties based on their location and end market. The tool is powered by a genotype-by-environment model that predicts yield performance of oats varieties across the Midwest.

We're looking for a group of farmers who can serve as the initial set of eyes on the website and provide feedback to staff about its utility. If you're interested in participating in one of these initial focus groups, please contact Lydia English at [lydia@practicalfarmers.org](mailto:lydia@practicalfarmers.org). You'll be compensated for your time. ■

The screenshot shows the "Small Grain Variety Selector Tool" interface. It includes a "Your ZIP Code is: 50010" field with a "Change" button, a statement "We have data for oats in your ZIP code.", an "OATS" category icon, and a "What end market are you targeting?" section with four radio button options: "Food Grade", "Feed Grade", "Cover Crop or Other Seed", and "Keeping My Options Open".

The advertisement features the Practical Farmers of Iowa logo and the text: "Registration Open! COVER CROP BOOT CAMP December 3-4, 2020 | 9 a.m. - Noon", "Join other row crop and livestock farmers for a virtual cover crop boot camp in December. We'll hear how cover crops can improve soil health, weed suppression and opportunities for livestock grazing. Come and advance your understanding of how cover crops can work for you.", "This event is FREE. Register at practicalfarmers.org/cover-crop-boot-camp (register by Nov. 13 to receive a goodie box to enjoy during the boot camp)", and "Wishing you a safe harvest and fall cover cropping season!"

# Welcome, New Members!

## DISTRICT 1 - NORTHWEST

- Steve Anthofer – Carroll
- Duane and Mindy Boyle – Danbury
- Avé Organics, Stan Buman – Carroll
- Doug Ferneding – Carroll
- Eric Hoiem – Spirit Lake
- Robert and Rhonda Hoting – Little Rock
- Sam Irlmeier – Manning
- Troy Johnson – Odebolt
- John Klocke – Carroll
- Tom Loughran – Manning
- Daniel Meister – Lake View
- Larry Nilson – Hawarden
- Adam Sibbel – Carroll
- Keith Sporrer – Templeton

## DISTRICT 2 - NORTH CENTRAL

- Matt Abbas – Latimer
- Hiedi Ackerman – Slater
- Schyler James Bardole – Churdan
- Peter Bardole – Jefferson
- Anothony Battazzi – Stratford
- Mallory DeVries – Charles City
- Tyler Evans – Osage
- Mike Fitz – Melbourne
- Larry Fleshner – Dysart
- Steve Freund – Floyd
- Foster Garrison – Pilot Mound
- Todd Harrison – Ogden
- Mike Holden – Scranton
- Michael Jacobson – Story City
- Michael Johnson – Ames
- Jeremiah Koch – Wellsburg
- Adam Kohler – Scranton
- Andy Krieger – Jefferson
- Dave Kuhl – Beaman
- George Levereton – Ackley
- Otto Oathout – Jefferson
- Benjamin Peckumn – Jefferson
- Skyler Rinker – Ogden
- Bud Robey – Nevada
- Zack Smith – Leland
- HavestGrab.com, AJ Sorenson – Jefferson
- Nathan Stein – Clare
- Jeremy Swanson – Harcourt

## DISTRICT 3 - NORTHEAST

- Christopher Leibold – Epworth
- Jack Ollendieck – La Porte City

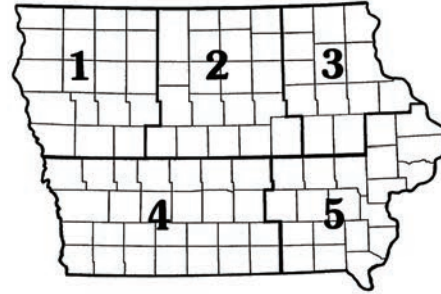
## DISTRICT 4 - SOUTHWEST

- Craig Altes – Mingo
- Rody Bennett – Russell

- Dennis Bronholdt – Atlantic
- Matt Busing – Logan
- Sam Carney – Adair
- Thomas Carroll – Walnut
- Doug Carter – Audubon
- Amanda Davis – Des Moines
- Tamara Deal – Panora
- Troy DeJong – Bussey
- Dennis Dewitt – New Sharon
- Luke Dinkla – Casey
- Kasey Downing – Creston
- Doug Erlbacker – Dow City
- Adam Harder – Avoca
- Jeff Harder – Walnut
- Donavon Huysen – Newton
- Philip James – Des Moines
- Danny Kaufmann – Harlan
- Mel Konrad – Cumming
- Kelly Kopaska – Guthrie Center
- Cody Larsen – Guthrie Center
- Jennifer McMillen – Des Moines
- Jason Monson – Irwin
- Zachary Moorman – Carlisle
- Tom Paulsen – Exira
- Rob Rains – Pisgah
- Rex Rinker – West Des Moines
- Rick Schafer – Prescott
- Pat Skinner – Winterset
- Owen Smith – Psigah
- Skyle Sneller – Bussey
- Dan Sneller – Bussey
- Sean South – Cumberland
- James Swanson – Marne
- Len Thompson – Knoxville
- Brandyn Van Zante – Pella
- Chris Wilson – Creston
- Blooming Prairie Nursery LLC, Tessa Wubben – Carlisle

## DISTRICT 5 - SOUTHEAST

- Cory Brand – Searsboro
- Kayla Carter – Coralville
- Kyla Christensen-Szalanski – Iowa City
- Jackson Drost – New Sharon
- Tom Drost – New Sharon
- Curtis Jager – Eddyville
- Carly Matthew – Bennett
- Ann McGlynn – Davenport
- Jackson McNally – Iowa City
- Merrill Mitchell – Davenport
- Roger Ockenfels – Oxford Junction
- Marlene and Steve Otte – North English
- Bryan Sievers – Stockton
- Justin Starr – Bloomfield



- Gina Swift – Iowa City
- Duane Van Veldhuizen – New Sharon

## DISTRICT 6 - OUT OF STATE

- Chadd Alexander – Alexandria, IN
- Thomas Anderson – Bulter, IL
- Lauren Asprooth – Bartlett, IL
- Ian Becker – Jacksonville, IL
- Chad Bell – Viola, IL
- Van Boyette – Washington DC
- Stephen Chatt – Tekamah, NE
- Brian Colberg – Freeport, IL
- Matt DeBlock – Aledo, IL
- Hungry World Farm, Karla Detweiler – Tiskilwa, IL
- Brad Dorsey – Moro, IL
- Jared Dressman – Fort Calhoun, NE
- Richard, Keven and Austin Duerfeldt – Fall City, NE
- Michael Dueth – Polo, IL
- Bryan Evans – Vandalia, MO
- Justin Ewing – Seaton, IL
- Bruce Fields – Turtle Lake WI
- Jeremy Flikkema – Mount Carroll
- Eric Ford – Ottawa Lake, MI
- Kimberly Hagen – Barre, VT
- Ben Hagenbuch – Mendota, IL
- Cheryl Harvey – Newark, IL
- Claire Hassig – New Orleans, LA
- Jeff Hawkins – North Manchester, IL
- Stanley Hoffman – Beardstown, IL
- John Hopkins – Polo, IL
- Ryan Iest – Moline, IL
- Saddle Buttle Ag Inc., Kathi Jenks – Shedd, OR
- Jeff Kirwan – New Windsor
- Doug Linker – Lanark, IL
- Charleen Lyon – Cincinnati, OH
- Jackson Menner – Washington DC
- Mathew Nelson – Oakland, NE
- Eric Niemeier – Powell, OH
- Ed Olson – Craig, NE
- Joseph Peterson – Raymond, NE
- Brian Pojar – Dodge, NE
- Larry Pojar – Scribner, NE
- Jodie Reisner – Temple, TX
- Dan Rohde – Hubbard, NE
- Dalton Sanson – Carlinville
- Dan Schmitt – Polo, IL
- Jeff Shaner – Fort Calhoun, NE
- Tracy Skaar – Hayward, MN
- Tom Small – Lasalle, IL
- Sylvia Spalding – Honolulu, HI
- Trent Steiner – Tremont, IL
- Alex Stisser – Galva, IL
- Mikes Stites – Kokomo, IN
- Amy Williams – Morse Bluff, NE
- Steven Willits – New Boston, IL
- Brian Witt – Lanark, IL
- Robert Woodrow – Sherman, IL
- Reggie Dowell – Sherman, IL
- Austen Etherton – Sherman, IL

Thank you

to our newest lifetime members!

Seth Watkins

Clarinda

Karl and Carissa Palmberg

Larchwood

Lifetime membership is open to anyone, and confers the same benefits as regular membership – without any renewal notices! Learn more about this option at [practicalfarmers.org/lifetime-membership](https://practicalfarmers.org/lifetime-membership).

## Practical Farmers Events

Note: Full details about all events are available at [practicalfarmers.org/events](https://practicalfarmers.org/events).

### October

#### Oct. 20: Farmland Owner Legacy Award Presentation

7–8:15 p.m. | Online

To learn more, visit [practicalfarmers.org/farmland-owner-legacy-award](https://practicalfarmers.org/farmland-owner-legacy-award)

#### Oct. 27: Raising Sheep for Wool – Sheep Facilities

2–3 p.m. | Online

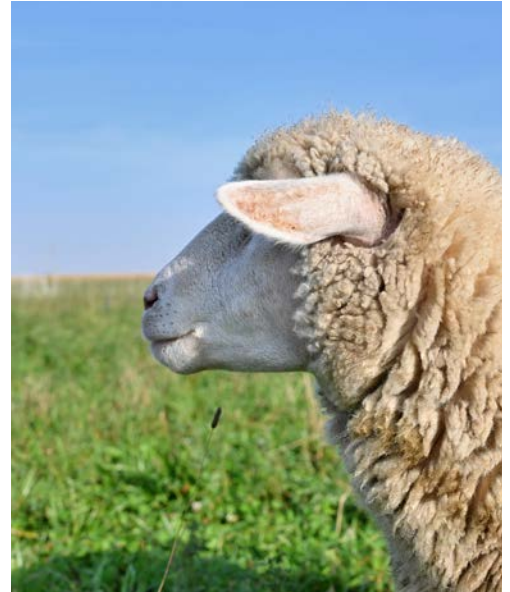
To participate, visit [practicalfarmers.org/field-days](https://practicalfarmers.org/field-days)

### December

#### Dec. 15: Raising Sheep for Wool – Shearing & Processing

2–3 p.m. | Online

To participate, visit [practicalfarmers.org/field-days](https://practicalfarmers.org/field-days)



# Beginning Farmer Retreat & Series

## Virtual Retreat: December 11–12, 2020

If you are starting a farm, or thinking about starting one, you should plan to attend one of these training series this winter. Both series will begin at our annual Beginning Farmer Retreat. This year, the retreat will be held virtually on Dec. 11–12. In addition, to networking with other farmers, you will make progress on defining your purpose in farming. You will also establish a foundation toward setting goals and creating a business plan.

Following the retreat, attendees will choose one of two trainings to keep the momentum toward crafting an action plan.

### Explore Farming Series

Aspiring farmers should look to the Explore Farming training to take their ideas and vision into reality. This series will feature three virtual workshops followed by opportunities to connect with landowners seeking new farmers for their farmland.

#### Thursday, Jan. 14

Place: Understand your land access needs and resources

#### Thursday, Feb. 11

Product: Determine what you plan to produce and how to sell it

#### Thursday, March 11

People: Build your network and increase your connections

Registration opens in October, find out more details at [practicalfarmers.org](https://practicalfarmers.org).

### Establish Farming Series

Beginning farmers who have started to farm and are working to build their business plan should attend the Establish Farming series. Three virtual workshops will lead you through the process of using decision-making to build a farm plan. Between workshops, you will have activities to complete and opportunities to connect with mentors to further your understanding of your farm direction.

#### Tuesday, Jan. 5

Planning Your Enterprises: Take a deep dive into what enterprises you currently raise and ones you anticipate adding

#### Tuesday, Feb. 2

Looking at the Whole Picture: Look at all the pieces of your plan together to make decisions towards your farm plan

#### Tuesday, March 2

Crafting Your Farm Plan: Take all you have evaluated and put it into an action plan for the following year





**SEPTEMBER 16, 2020:**

A young calf waits to be reunited with his mama amidst a lush paddock of grass and clover on Wallace Farms near Keystone, Iowa.

# GROW YOUR FARM WITH PRACTICAL FARMERS. JOIN OR RENEW TODAY!

Want to join or renew online? Visit [practicalfarmers.org/join-or-renew](http://practicalfarmers.org/join-or-renew).

## MEMBER INFORMATION

Contact Name(s)\*: \_\_\_\_\_

Farm or Organization Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP: \_\_\_\_\_ County: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone 1: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone 2: \_\_\_\_\_

Email 1: \_\_\_\_\_ Email 2: \_\_\_\_\_

\* For Farm or Household membership, please list names of all persons included. For Organization membership, please list one or two contact persons.

## JOIN OR RENEW

### 1. THIS ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP IS A:

- New Membership
- Renewal

### 2. I AM JOINING AT THE LEVEL OF:

- Student – \$20
- Individual – \$50
- Farm or Household – \$60
- Organization – \$110
- Lifetime Member\* – \$1,000

\* See details at <http://bit.ly/PFI-lifetime>

### 3. I AM JOINING OR RENEWING AS:

- An Aspiring Farmer
- A Farmer or Grower
- Non-Farmer

### 4. HOW DID YOU HEAR ABOUT PFI?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## EMAIL DISCUSSION GROUP SIGN-UP

When you join our email discussion groups, you can network, build community and exchange ideas from anywhere, at any time. Sign up for as many groups as you'd like (and be sure to include your email address above)!

- Field Crops
- General
- Horticulture
- Livestock
- Perspectives

## SUSTAIN PRACTICAL FARMERS WITH AN ADDITIONAL DONATION

For the sake of the long-term health and vitality of Practical Farmers of Iowa, we ask you to consider making a donation above and beyond your membership fee. Practical Farmers of Iowa is a 501(c)3 organization. Your gift is tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.

I would like to make a one-time, tax-deductible donation to PFI in the amount of:

- \$1,000
- \$500
- \$250
- \$100
- \$50
- \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Or, make a recurring monthly or quarterly donation. This will be automatically charged to your credit card on the first day of each month or quarter.

- Yes, I would like to give \$ \_\_\_\_\_
- per month
- OR
- per quarter

## PAYMENT

Membership Level .....\$ \_\_\_\_\_ per year for \_\_\_\_\_ year(s) = \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Additional Donation ..... = \$ \_\_\_\_\_

TOTAL AMOUNT ..... = \$ \_\_\_\_\_

- Check or money order is enclosed (Please make payable to "Practical Farmers of Iowa.")
- Credit card (Visa, MasterCard or Discover only)

Name on card \_\_\_\_\_ Number \_\_\_\_\_

Exp. Date \_\_\_\_\_ CVC# (3 digits) \_\_\_\_\_  Please automatically charge this credit card annually for membership

Office Use Only: Check # \_\_\_\_\_ Check date \_\_\_\_\_ Total amount \_\_\_\_\_ Notes \_\_\_\_\_



Adam Ledvina's goats crowd eagerly around him to enjoy some affection and treats on his farm near Chelsea, Iowa, in mid-September.

# PRACTICAL FARMERS *of Iowa*

1615 Golden Aspen Drive, Suite 101  
Ames, IA 50010

Non-Profit  
Organization  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
Waterloo, IA  
Permit No. 901

## Coming Home

John Rafkin and Wendy Johnson pose in front of the farmhouse Wendy's grandparents lived in, which Wendy and John now live in, as they enjoy a relaxed moment on their farm near Charles City, Iowa.

