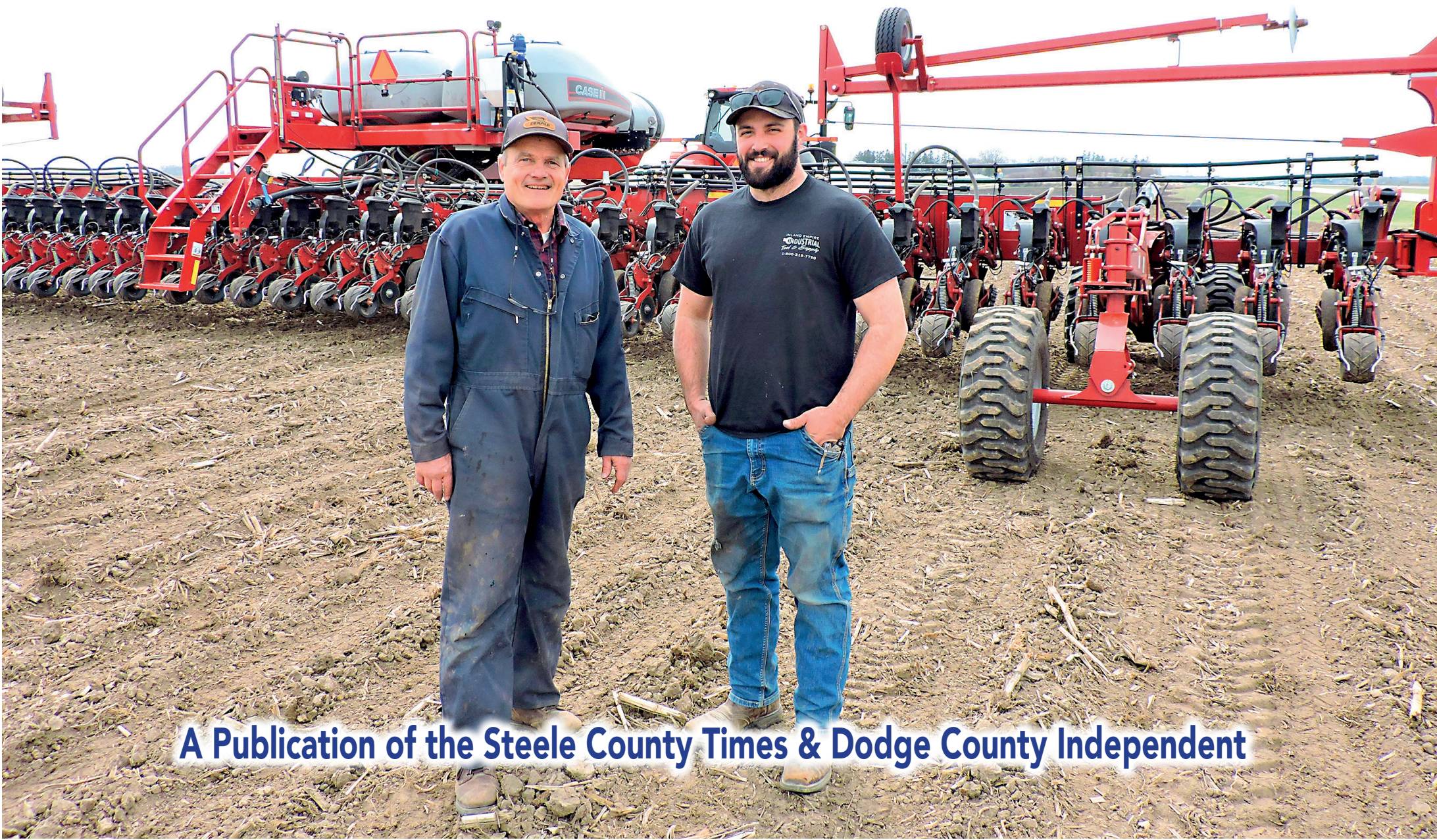


SPRING 2025 **FARM LIVING**



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Trackers aim to produce solar energy

Claremont area farmer attempts to harness earth's energy



A solar tracker is on the grounds of Lakeview High School in Cottonwood, Minn. Mark Oeltjenbruns of Claremont is looking to install more of the systems with his new company, Agrisun Energy and Repair.



"There is nothing like it across the world. It's the largest in the industry."

Mark Oeltjenbruns
Agrisun Energy Owner

Mark Oeltjenbruns is owner of Agrisun Energy and Repair by Claremont.

BY RICK BUSSLER

As increasing technology demands more power, Mark Oeltjenbruns is ready to step in with an innovative way to help supply more electricity.

The Claremont area farmer and another business partner have devised the sky max dual axis solar system. Oeltjenbruns' company Agrisun Energy and Repair, is focused on installing solar trackers instead of the usual ground mount systems that have popped up across rural America in recent years.

Oeltjenbruns took a leap of faith last July when he quit his full-time union job as a crane operator to dedicate his time to this new solar concept. He has

teamed up with Maximum Solar Solutions, known as SkyMax, of Montevideo, to bring renewable energy solutions that meet real-world needs.

"There is nothing like it across the world," said Oeltjenbruns. "It's the largest in the industry."

Specifically, Agrisun will offer 2,700-square feet (45 by 60 feet) of solar perched on a single 5-foot diameter cement pedestal. The system allows for farmers to use the space underneath to farm or mow the lawn. For example, when the system is flat, a combine or tractor can fit under it. "They are up above your head, out of sight, out of mind," he said.

"It makes a lot of power on a small footprint," Oeltjenbruns said. "Ours is designed to create the smallest footprint of solar available on Earth and so See **SOLAR ENERGY** on 23 ►



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Want a horse?

Hollandale farmer to sell dozens of young stock

BY KAY FATE

Ann Bowman probably couldn't have imagined as a 15-year-old girl living in Austin that someday, she would be surrounded by horses.

She saved the money she earned as a babysitter for the children of Richard Knowlton, who would later become the CEO of Hormel Foods – and bought a horse.

Did she grow up around horses, or was she a part of a farm family? Was it a gift?

"None of the above," said Bowman, who is now 80 years old.

"I just took my babysitting money and bought a Paint," she said. "I got a good price on her, because she tried to buck me off when I tried her out."

Her name was Girl, a 2-year-old American Paint horse.

"I was just a 10th grader," Bowman said, "but I didn't tell my parents anything, because they would've said 'no.' Then I had to find a place to keep it."

She ended up talking to an area farmer who agreed to board the horse for Bowman in exchange for labor.

There was never an obstacle, Bowman said. "I just knew I was going to

"I want to spread my beautiful horses to other people."

Ann Bowman

Hollandale Horse Farmer

(have a horse); any horse would work."

She has some admittedly unique ideas about how horses – and people – work.

"I believe in epigenetics," Bowman said. "I believe you can pick up interests and desires from your ancestors. My father's mother died when he was a kid, and she loved horses. I just think you can pick things up from past generations, and horses do the same thing."

After buying Girl, there was no looking back.

Bowman now has about 70 horses on her properties around Hollandale and Hayward, but she's looking to thin the herd a bit, if you will.

She has 35 brood mares, "and lots of young stock, too," 3-year-olds and younger. All are Quarter Horses.

But it was what she called "an accident" that has her most enthused.

"I accidentally bred a colt" several years ago to

a brother-sister pair, "and right away, their colts were amazing," including the first foal.

"I figure God gave him to me, because he was born on Valentine's Day," Bowman said. "I'd had horses for 60 years, and I've never had a horse born in the winter. Ever. I think I was supposed to get him – and now, every single one of his colts is like him."

She said he and his offspring were born – and remained – calm, comforting animals, without training.

"I think I have therapy horses," she said. "I think they're just born that way. I want to produce horses that are beautiful, talented and can do anything for people – but are safe."

Bowman would like others to experience and appreciate them.

She's selling them, but they have to go to "somebody that isn't going to mistreat them, because

See **FARMER** on 7 ►



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Ann Bowman bought her first horse, Girl, in 1959. She has loved horses all her life – but is now ready to sell off some of the 70 horses she owns. They are all Quarter Horses.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

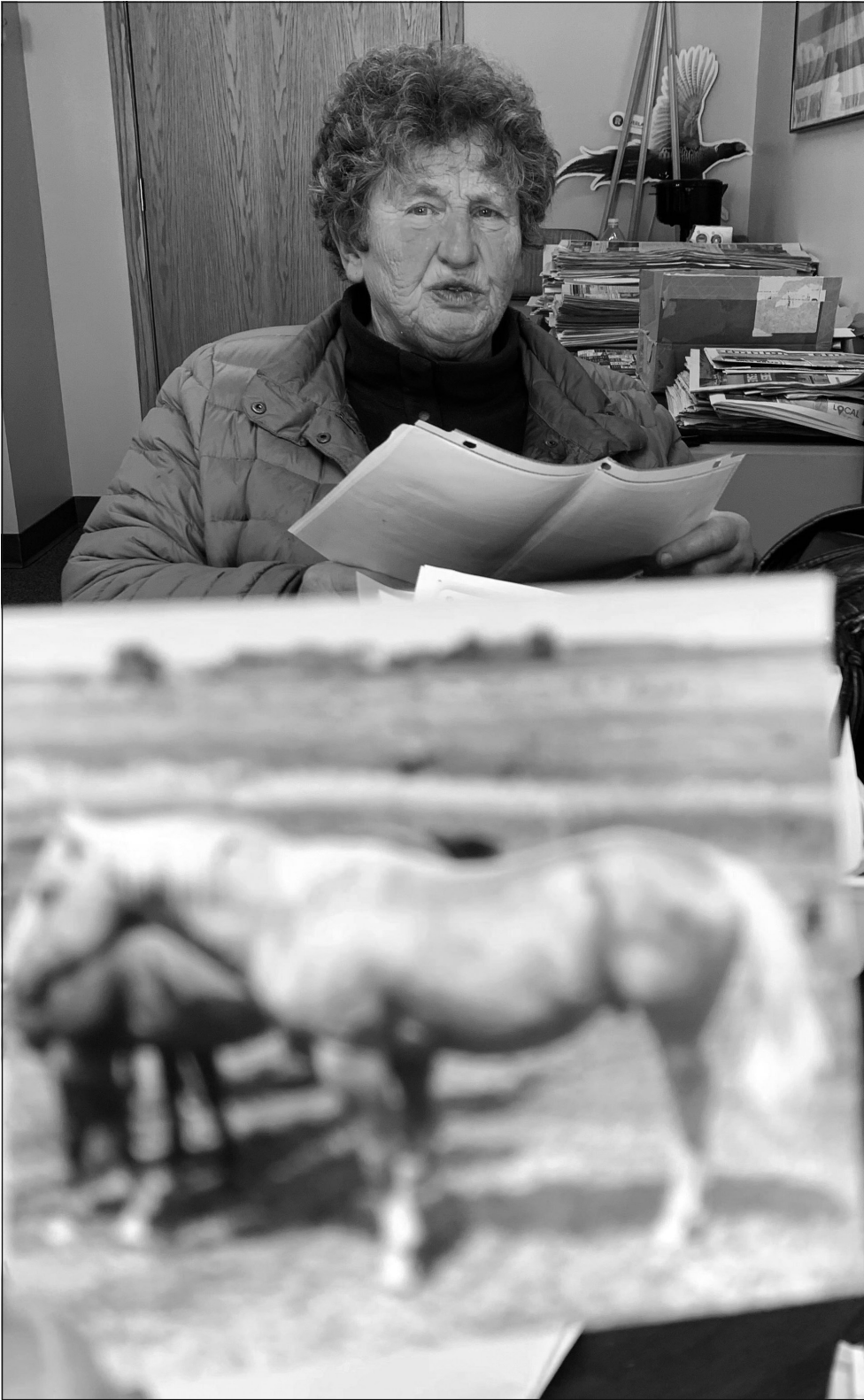
This photo of some of Ann Bowman’s horses shows the variety she has achieved in her breeding of the animals. She plans to sell about half of her herd – or about 35 young horses.

Hollandale farmer to sell dozens of young stock

◀ **FARMER** from 6
I breed trauma-free horses,” she said. “If I get a mare or a stud that’s mean, I get rid of it. Anything with a bad disposition is gone.”
Bowman said when it’s time to bring the horses in from the pastures, she lets them see her, then walks back to the corral, “and they follow me, in a line, because they trust me totally.”
But at age 80, when will it become too much for her?
“Never,” she said. “I was doing all the chores myself, but I got hurt last October.”

Bowman tried to stop a stud from running a mare out of the pen, “so I got between them, and I got hit in the shoulder” and knocked down.
“I still do some chores,” she said, “and during the summer, I walk the pastures and I check the pastures. I built all my own fence, but now I have a grandson and granddaughter-in-law, and my son helps – and I have a hired man.”
Bowman hasn’t ridden since knee replacement surgery but is eager to get back on.
A school teacher for 44 years, she has also prac-

ticed law, in addition to caring for the animals.
Her late husband Robert was a custom harvester – so did he love horses, too?
“No,” Bowman said emphatically. “He loved me, though, and he tried really hard to like them.”
Now she’d like to “make it a profitable business, because I’m planning on my grandson taking it over – so I’d like it to be a good business.”
“It’s not that I’m trying to get out of horses,” Bowman said. “I’m trying to spread my beautiful horses to other people.”



STAFF PHOTO BY KAY FATE

Ann Bowman holds the pedigree of one of her horses, pictured here more than 40 years ago. She has bred horses for decades; “his bloodline is in most of my horses,” she said of the Quarter Horse in the front of the photo.



On The Farm

RYAN LERMON

Ifigure if I say drought now, and we plan for it, then hopefully we won't need to worry about it this year. On the other hand, I am not wishing for an excessively wet spring and flooding like last year either. Taking the time to create an emergency plan is worth the effort. Here are some steps to keep in mind when creating an emergency plan for your operation.

Assess current situation

Emergency plans will vary based on where you are and what kind of operation you run. A row crop farmer in southeastern Minnesota will have different priorities than a cow-calf operator in the northern part of the state. Start by identifying your essential needs throughout the year—whether it's mineral for livestock or filters and parts for equipment.

If the COVID-19 pandemic taught us anything, it's that supply chains can be unpredictable. While there's no need to stockpile excessive amounts of supplies, having a clear understanding of what you need is important.

Preparing for uncertainty: Creating an effective emergency plan

Setting early trigger points for when to stock up can help you stay ahead of potential shortages.

Monitor weather

Weather patterns and forecasts should be closely monitored. Most producers are already doing this, but the critical piece of an emergency plan is knowing when to act. Each operation's trigger points will vary based on soil type and health as well as annual precipitation for your location. If you haven't done so already, make a list of average precipitation by month and track how much rain you receive throughout the year. Then ask yourself:

- If drought conditions persist into May (set a date based on your plan), should you reduce herd size or avoid taking on additional stockers for this grazing season?

- If you run a crop farm, do you have triggers in place to reconsider which fields to plant with certain crops? Keep in mind which fields perform better in wet or dry conditions, and don't be afraid to change your rotation. Many farmers pre-purchase seed, so flexibility may be limited, but having a contingency plan is crucial.

Water management strategies

How you manage water will be an essential part of your plan.

- Installing additional water tanks and pipelines to better distribute livestock and preserve pastures during a drought.

- Implementing cover crops or conservation tillage to help retain soil moisture in row crop operations. As you build soil organic matter, the water holding capacity of the soil increases as well.

Review and adapt

Even a basic emergency plan is better than having none at all. At a minimum, review and adjust your plan annually or whenever major changes occur in your operation. Keeping records and notes throughout the year will help you make informed decisions when updating your plan.

The past few years have provided valuable lessons—whether dealing with excessive moisture and flooding or prolonged drought. By reflecting on these experiences, you can refine your approach and be better prepared for whatever challenges arise.

Ryan Lermom is the University of Minnesota Extension's agriculture and natural resources educator for Steele and Rice counties. He may be reached at 507-330-0447 or lermo004@umn.edu.

Triton grad returns to teach ag science

BY KAREN
M. JORGENSEN

When Katie Fitzgerald began her first job as a high school teacher, one thing she did not have to worry about was finding her way around the school. Katie, a 2024 graduate of South Dakota State University, had returned to her high school alma mater, Triton.

She was now home, in the same building, with many of the same teachers she had known four years earlier, except now she was working with them as a colleague.

Katie grew up on the family farm in West Concord, daughter of Ann and David Fitzgerald. During her years at Triton, she was a member of both FFA and 4-H. In FFA, she earned her State and American Degrees, participated in Beef Entrepreneurship and was a Star Farmer.

She graduated with a degree in animal science, and going into teaching was not necessarily the plan. With her agriculture degree, she said, she did not need a teaching license for her position, at least not initially. She has five years to complete the teaching specific coursework, she said.

"I knew the other (FFA) advisor was leaving," she said. "I wanted something near home." She wanted to stay in the local area, she said, until her fiancé, who is now serving in the Navy, is discharged.

Her fiancé, she said, is Trenton Kruger, a 2019 graduate of Kasson-Mantorville High School. The two met in



Katie Fitzgerald has returned home to Triton High School to be an ag science instructor.

4-H, she said, and have dated since she was a sophomore in high school, and he was a junior. He is now an aviation electrician stationed in Jacksonville, Fla.

They are planning to be married in September 2026.

"It's been going really well," she said of her first year as a teacher, though she admitted it took a while to get used to being back with the same group of teachers only this time as an equal. And some of her students, she said, knew her from when she was a Triton student.

"It was weird getting in the groove," she said, "making plans for classes and the workload." She had to learn how to balance, coming home from school and putting away work and taking up her other duties, including taking care of her herd of 20 purebred Angus cattle, she said.

The classes she teaches, she said, are varied, including Exploring Agriculture for middle school students, small animal veterinary science, fish and wildlife. As Triton does not have a FACS (Family and Consumer

Science) teacher this year, she is also teaching a foods class. Her food class, she said, deals primarily with nutrition, including food labels, healthy foods and food choices.

She is also the co-advisor for the Triton FFA along with Robert Ickler.

The Triton FFA had a number of seniors graduate in 2024, she said, so this year, it is a very young group with only three seniors. A student can join FFA in the seventh grade, she said, so the new members have several years to gain experience. "We have a lot of young kids who are super excited," she said.

Katie said she will probably continue teaching and work to get her teaching license although she has not made a final decision. After she and Trenton are married, she said, farming is definitely in their future. Hopefully, she said, they can build a good enough herd where one of them can stay home.

For now, however, she is concentrating on "getting through the first year," taking care of her animals and planning her wedding.

Bushel Boy running full force with help from H-2A visas

BY JONI HUBRED

Since 1991, Bushel Boy Farms' Owatonna facility has grown to include 32 acres of "production under glass" that operates year-round.

"Our primary crop is tomatoes, and we grow a number of different varieties including vine-on tomatoes, beefsteak tomatoes, cherry tomatoes, and grape tomatoes," company president Chuck Tyson said. "We also produce strawberries. This is a newer crop for us and utilizes about 10% of our greenhouse space."

To grow all that delicious produce, the company employs around 80 full-time workers in Owatonna. About 40 employees work in a Mason City, Iowa greenhouse, built four years ago.

In addition to its regular staff, Bushel Boy Farms also brings in temporary contract workers "when production needs warrant it," Tyson said.

The company works with reliable farm labor contractors and, over the past four years, has utilized the H-2A visa program to supplement its greenhouse workforce.

"When we are at full production, these temporary workers make up one-third of our workforce that tends to the crops in the greenhouses," Tyson said. "They execute a variety of crop maintenance tasks from removing leaves on the plants, pruning the tomato clusters, and harvesting the fruit."

One of several visas offered, the H-2A program is specifical-



PHOTO COURTESY BUSHEL BOY FARMS

Bushel Boy Farms employs about 80 worker in its Owatonna facility. The company relies on full-time and temporary workers, brought in as needed to fill its production schedule.



PHOTO COURTESY BUSHEL BOY FARMS

Bushel Boy Farms grows a wide variety of tomatoes and recently added strawberries to its line. You can find the company's products locally at Hy-Vee and Cash Wise grocery stores.

ly for temporary workers in the agricultural industry. Other temporary visas cover non-agricultural businesses and jobs that require a higher level of education and expertise.

The challenge for Bushel Boy Farms is that H-2A currently allows workers to remain in the country for a maximum of 10 months.

"After that time, they return to their home country for a minimum of 60 days and then we must apply for another season with the US Department of Labor," Tyson said. "The biggest change that our industry is working towards is to have it available year-round without interruption."

Last month, MPR News reported that about 400 farmers in Minnesota depend on the H-2A visa worker program—and experts say the demand is growing. Despite the Trump administration's focus on immigration changes and enforcement, they also feel the H-2A program won't be impacted.

Tyson said any policy changes that affect tariffs and immigration will impact his business and the ag industry overall.

"If there is any contraction of the H-2A program, it will have a direct impact on how much fresh produce is able to be grown in the U.S.," he said.

Tyson pointed out that Owatonna is one of the few areas in the country that is home to a large, high-tech tomato greenhouse – Bushel Boy Farms – and a large, high-tech leafy greens greenhouse – Revol Greens. Both are "operating year-round in one of the coldest areas of the country, providing consumers in the Midwest with locally grown, nutritious, delicious products."

How does the H-2A visa work?

The U.S. government offers seven general categories of visa for non-immigrants looking to work here for a limited period of time.

Non-immigrant visas generally fall into several categories based on job types:

H-1B – for those working a specified professional or academic field or with special expertise, who have a college or advanced degree or equivalent work experience

H-2A and H-2B – for seasonal or peak load temporary workers in agricultural or non-agricultural settings, respectively.

H-3 – for those who want training here but will be pursuing their careers outside of the U.S.

Bushel Boy in Owatonna employs workers using the H-2A visa, which requires employers to show there aren't enough U.S. workers who are able, willing, qualified, and available to do the temporary work.

Employers must also show that employing H-2A workers won't adversely affect the wages and working conditions of similarly employed U.S. workers.

H-2A visas are good for up to a year and can be extended, but workers must leave the U.S. for at least 60 days to reset the clock.

The spouse and children (under 21) of a worker can apply for H-4 nonimmigrant status but then aren't eligible to work in the U.S.

H-2A workers may owe U.S. federal income taxes but aren't required to pay Social Security and Medicare taxes. Also, employers in Minnesota, with the exception of "family farms," are generally required to provide workers' compensation.



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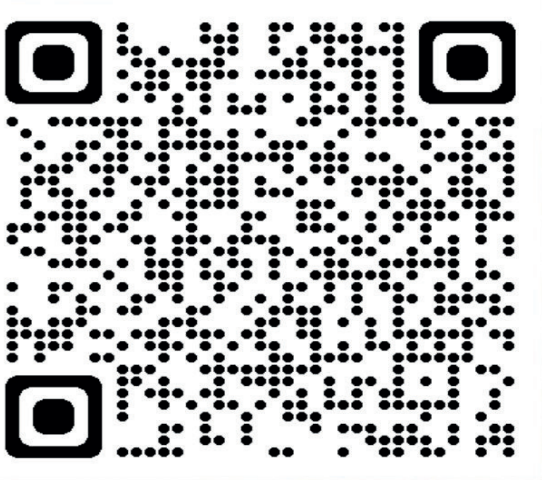
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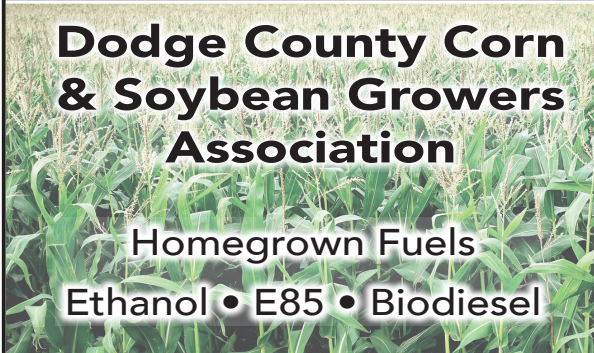


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Wednesday, April 23, 2025

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6:15 pm – Buffet Dinner / Golden Corral Restaurant – Over 185 items to choose from.

Thursday, April 24, 2025

Breakfast - hotel
9:00 am – BUS 2 – Ozarks, "Legacy & Legend" Film / IMAX Complex
Enjoy this heartwarming film about the history of the Ozarks and one of the first families to the area.
10:00 am – BUS 1 – Branson Redneck Tour / Redneck Comedy Bus Tour
Explore Branson like no other on the Redneck Comedy Bus (an old school bus repurposed). Featured sites are Smith Creek Moonshine and Branson Landing. Find out the difference between Redneck and Hillbilly.
11:30 am – Lunch BUS 2 –McFarlain's Restaurant
Located inside the IMAX Complex. Choose from loaded baked potato and soup, half sandwich and soup or hot beef sandwich w/mashed potatoes and gravy.
12:00 pm – BUS 1 – Lunch on own
3:00 pm – New South Gospel with dinner / Grand Country Music Hall
This Southern Gospel extravaganza takes you from the early roots of southern gospel to the hand-clapping gospel hits of today. From the Jordanaires to Bill Gaither, this show leaves you walking a little higher.
7:30 pm -- Dutton's Show / The Dutton Family Theatre
Internation touring and performing family spanning 3 generations showcase their love of bluegrass, country, classical music and every-thing in between. Their show features a variety of instruments, vocal

talent and wholesome fun.

Friday, April 25, 2025

Breakfast - hotel
9:00 am – BUS 1 – Ozarks, "Legacy & Legend" Film / IMAX Complex
Enjoy this heartwarming film about the history of the Ozarks and one of the first families to the area.
10:00 am – BUS 2 – Branson Redneck Tour / Redneck Comedy Bus Tour
Explore Branson like no other on the Redneck Comedy Bus (an old school bus repurposed). Featured sites are Smith Creek Moonshine and Branson Landing. Find out the difference between Redneck and Hillbilly.
11:30 am – Lunch BUS 1 –McFarlain's Restaurant
Located inside the IMAX Complex. Choose from loaded baked potato and soup, half sandwich and soup or hot beef sandwich w/mashed potatoes and gravy.
12:00 pm – BUS 2 – Lunch on own
2:00 pm – Music Fest Show / Clay Cooper Theatre
Music Fest will offer a taste of what Branson has to offer. Experience some of Branson's best featuring at least 9 to 11 different shows.
5:45 pm – Sit-Down Dinner / Uptown Café
Entrée choices will include pot roast and mashed potatoes, Hawaiian chicken w/wild rice, jumbo fried shrimp w/baked potato or country fried steak w/mashed potatoes. Includes garden salad, roll, coffee or iced tea and dessert.
7:30 pm – "David" – Preferred Seating / Sight and Sound Theatre

Music Fest will offer a taste of what Branson has to offer. Experience some of Branson's best featuring at least 9 to 11 different shows
5:30 pm – Dinner / Fall Creek Steak & Catfish House
Choices include sirloin steak w/baked potato, country fried steak w/ mashed potato, shredded beef SOS w/mashed potatoes and crispy onions or southern fried fish w/fries and coleslaw. Includes home-made rolls, salad, water, tea or coffee
7:30 pm – The Haygoods / Clay Cooper Theatre
The Haygoods bring the house down night after night with incredibly tight harmonies, innovative, energetic choreography, incredible special effects and amazing performances on over 20 different instruments.

Sunday, April 27, 2025

Breakfast - hotel
9:30 am – Spend a day in the 1800's / Silver Dollar City
Spend the day in the 1800's as Silver Dollar City brings you live entertainment, fabulous food, unique shops and world class craftsmen.
1:00 pm – Lunch on your own with meal voucher – Silver Dollar City
You will be given a meal coupon and may eat at any of the restaurants located at the park (except Rivertown Smokehouse & Buffets)
7:30 pm – Clay Cooper's Country Express / The Clay Cooper Theatre
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Monday, April 28, 2025

Breakfast - hotel
Depart for home

Saturday, April 26, 2025

Breakfast - hotel
11:00 am – Lunch with a Meet & Greet / Venue to Be Determined
2:00 pm – Music Fest Show / Clay Cooper Theatre

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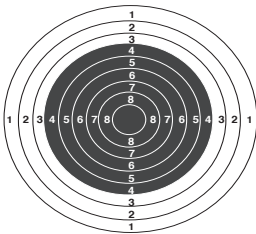
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EVOLVING EDUCATION

Ag education at high schools has changed over the years

BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

Agriculture education at high schools has undergone some substantial changes over the years. Where in the past it was geared primarily towards students who lived on farms and intended to make farming their career, it has now expanded to the general student population. Classes offered in area high schools cover the range of topics from traditional agriculture to food and natural resources.

At Byron High School, agriculture teacher and FFA advisor Alison Newman says most of the students in her agriculture classes will not choose an agriculture related career.

An example of a class she teaches is Plantopia, which teaches the students about growing both plants and vegetables in the school greenhouse. Students learn the basics including plant structure, she said, and as spring approaches, they learn the prep work that goes into planning and planting a garden, such as filling pots and trays for planting. About the second week in March, plants will be arriving at the schools, and the

students will begin the actual work of planting flowers, veggies and herbs.

By May, the flowers will be ready to sell just in time for the annual plant sale held yearly on the Friday and Saturday before Mother's Day.

The students who take Plantopia will probably not own a greenhouse one day, Newman said, but they likely will someday have a lawn or a garden.

The same holds true for the students who take the small animal veterinary courses, she said.

While some of the students who take the classes are interested in veterinary science as a career, others take them more to learn about pets.

The high school veterinary classes are important though, she said, because of the shortage of veterinarians for small animals and an even larger shortage of large animal vets.

The situation is similar at Triton High School. Triton has two agriculture teachers and FFA advisors, Robert Ickler and Katie Fitzgerald. Like Byron High School, they have classes in animal science and also in fish and wildlife. Since Triton does not currently have a FACS (Family

and Consumer Science) teacher, Fitzgerald also teaches food science classes.

Triton has also developed what Ickler labels the "plant room." The room allows the students to grow plants and herbs indoors using drip hydroponics. It was a 10-year process to get the funding for the equipment, he said, which was raised by donations and the fund-raising activities of the FFA Chapter. An unused boiler room was repurposed for the equipment, he said.

While the students have raised some herbs, basil and cilantro, they have found that lettuce grows the best. Last school year, he said, the students sold \$600 worth of produce to the school cafeteria.

"It was a very successful learning experience," he said.

The project, he added, required no school district or grant funding.

Hayfield also has a wide variety of ag classes including large animals, small or companion animals, plant science, horticulture and wildlife and natural resources. A full range of agriculture classes is also available at Kasson-Mantorville High School.



PHOTO BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

The types of information taught in agriculture classes has changed in recent years from classes geared primarily for students who are growing up on traditional farms to all those interested. The Triton High School FFA Chapter raised funds to help purchase this hydroponic growing system that is allowing students to raise lettuces which they have sold to the school food service department for lunches.

An eggs-ellent tradition

Krell boys learn lessons from raising chickens

BY HOWARD LESTRUD

With egg prices soaring to all-time highs, the Krell brothers—Leo, 3, and Layne, 6—of Blooming Prairie might have found the perfect business plan.

The Krell family lives on a small farm in Dodge County. The boys displayed their basket of perfectly shaped eggs while participating in an interview with their mother, Kelly, and father, Steven.

Steven said he raised chickens when he was around the boys' ages. Leo and Layne ordered the baby chicks and then placed them in a kid-sized swimming pool.

The Krell boys now own more than 20 laying hens. The chickens each lay one egg a day. The hens produce under a red bulb. It is Leo's responsibility to count the eggs daily.

Asked about a chicken that died, Leo said, "Yeah, she wasn't laying any darn eggs anyway."

Steven said the boys raise chickens of different breeds. For example, they have colorful Plymouth Rock and Rhode Island Red breeds.

Watching egg prices increasing to over \$7 a dozen, Layne and Leo



A family photo includes Steven and Kelly Krell and their children, Leo and Layne, two of the family's 20 chickens, a cat named Peaches, and a donkey named Buster Reno.

Krell are comfortable selling their eggs at \$3 a dozen. They have regular customers, too.

Tim Wurst and Israel Wacek buy eggs from the Krell boys. Of course, Grandma Denise and Grandpa Doug are also regular customers.

"The boys usually get treats from their customers," Kelly Krell said.

Both boys love scrambled eggs, especially with crispy hash browns, Layne said.

"And with ketchup," added Leo.

The boys take turns doing chores. They also help with the cows. Layne and Leo feed silage to the cattle and help clean the barn.

"Living on a farm

teaches the kids responsibility," Steven said.

Chickens and cows aren't the only animals on the Krell farm.

"Would you like to see Buster Reno?" asked Leo.

Steven brought the donkey to the garage for photos. The Krells also have Peaches, a beautiful peach-colored cat, and two dogs, Lindy and Maverick.



STAFF PHOTO BY HOWARD LESTRUD

Layne and Leo Krell love their kitty named Peaches.



STAFF PHOTO BY HOWARD LESTRUD

Leo Krell 3, gets ready to color some Easter eggs. He and brother Layne raise chickens.

BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

BACK INTO CROP ROTATION

Southern Minnesota farmers want to bring oats back again

There is a movement underway in southern

Minnesota and surrounding areas to bring small grains, in particular oats, back into crop rotation.

Oats used to be an important crop in the Midwest, but now that small grain has all but disappeared in the United States. Agriculture changed in the second half of the 20th century, and corn and soybeans became the major crop.

But now a group of farmers in southern Minnesota, including Dodge and Olmsted Counties, as well as northern Iowa, have started to look again at the crop. And some of them have joined together to work with Landon Plagge

of Latimer, Iowa, to build a plant specifically for processing oats. Construction is expected to begin this spring on the oat processing plant in Albert Lea.

Plagge was among the speakers at a January workshop in Albert Lea hosted by the Land Stewardship Project.

Plagge said he has been growing oats for about 10 years. Oats, he said, are beneficial for both soil health and economics. Used in crop rotation, he said, they can help improve soil health and reduce nitrates in water. They also have been seeing an increase in popularity with

consumers in recent years.

Plagge told the group at a recent meeting in Albert Lea that he first noticed the interest in oats in Europe, and that interest has now expanded to the U.S.

Europeans, he said, currently consume an average of 30 lbs. of oats per capita, per year. In Canada that number is 27 lbs. per capita. The U.S. currently comes in at 5.2 pounds per capita but that figure has grown from four pounds per capita per year a decade ago.

More people, he said, are becoming more concerned about what they are eating and where it was produced.

The increased interest

in growing oats because of sustainability and soil health, the fact there is a growing market for food grade oats, and the fact it can be profitable led to the development of Green Acres Milling processing facility in Albert Lea by the group of about 70 farmers.

One of the reasons a facility in Albert Lea can be profitable, he said, is that today most of the oats consumed in the U.S., about 92%, come from Canada. They are then transported to the United States by train. Minnesota and Iowa are at the southern end of the North American oat growing region. Trans-

portation costs of oats to the rest of the U.S. are less expensive than if they are transported from Canada. He said shipping a product from Canada can add up to 25% to the cost of the final product as well as the increased carbon footprint.

There is also an advantage when the crop is delivered direct to the mill. Buyers want traceability in their food and Green Acres Milling will be able to provide that so the buyer will know exactly what farm the product came from. The large mill facilities currently operating are not able to offer that traceability, he said.

A brand-new facility with state-of-the-art equipment will also operate at an efficiency rate of 64% compared with the 58% efficiency of most of the current mills.

More and more consumers are now concerned about gluten and allergies, and since Green Acres Milling will only process oats, there is reduced chance of cross-contamination. Also, oats produced in the U.S. are not desiccated for glyphosate/roundup as Canadian oats are, he said.

Because of all the positives, those involved with Green Acres Milling see now as the time for the project.

Construction is scheduled to begin this spring, and it is anticipated that the Albert Lea facility will be in operation in 2026.

CFD aims for bin rescue training for farmers

BY KAY FATE

Though the odds of surviving entrapment in a grain bin are not good – a Purdue University study puts it at about 40% – it is possible, especially with proper rescue training.

Casey Dahl, chief of the Claremont Fire Department, has had a 50% survival rate in the eight years he's been a firefighter. Admittedly, he's only been on two grain bin rescue calls, "but if you save just one life, it matters," he said.

Dahl led the Feb. 26 rescue of a 60-year-old employee of CHS/Greenway in Claremont; the man was

waist-deep in soybeans in a 250,000-bushel bin.

The man was freed within an hour, then taken by ambulance to a Rochester hospital, where he was treated and released. He remained conscious and alert throughout the rescue.

The fire chief is himself a former employee of CHS, so "when I heard the page, I knew exactly what they were doing and where we were going," he said of the call.

"The company did everything they should have," Dahl said. "When we got there, the company was very calm, they had

everything moved out of our way so we could get up there, and had gotten as much grain out of the door as they could so we could get in the door easier."

Perhaps most importantly, CHS had also purchased a grain rescue tube for the Claremont Fire Department some years ago.

In addition, several members of the Claremont Fire Department have received the necessary training on bin rescues from Jack Volz, of Safety and Security Consultation Specialists.

"The people who went in (the bin) have been

through the training, so we knew what we were doing," Dahl said.

But he has several new firefighters who have not been trained, so Dahl said he was on the phone with Volz the same afternoon.

"I'd like to plan another training," Dahl said, "and open it up to more (fire) departments."

It's a passion for Volz, who lost a family friend in a bin entrapment about 30 years ago. He now travels across the Midwest and beyond, making sure first responders are as prepared as possible.

"Jack said he would come in an hour early," Dahl said,



"and do a grain bin training for the farmers to learn how to prevent things from happening. That's at no charge; he has that as an option for the local farmers."

The very nature of farming – rural locations often served by volunteer fire and ambulance crews

– means minutes count.

"Once (the training) is scheduled, I'll get the word out, so we can get more farmers, and they can protect their workers," Dahl said.

"They all want to go home at the end of the day, too."

Farmers often don't seek help for mental health issues

BY RENEE BERG

When farmers struggle with their mental health, they often don't reach out for help.

"That is one of our biggest concerns that they are not reaching out for help," said Mary Harders, mobile response program manager for Spero, which serves Waseca, Steele, Dodge and Mower counties. "Across the board, one might not know what the resources are, and there's still a lot of stigma around getting help for mental health."

What's more, farmers have unpredictable jobs that depend on the economy and weather. Those elements fluctuate and are out of their control, she said.

"That causes stress," she said. "And then we see the product of that, which is anxiety and depression," Harders said. "There's a lot of pressure and with that pressure comes anxiety."

Farmers also must get their work done on a timeline, which "doesn't coincide with taking a break and going on a vacation and doing some self-care," she said.

If a farmer is struggling with their mental health, they can call or

text 988 or reach out to the mobile response phone line at 844-274-7472. The mobile response team can do an assessment and connect the farmer with resources to get them additional help.

"If something is happening, we can come to the site and address the crisis in real time," said Michele Merxbauer, Spero CEO. "We can provide services."

Merxbauer said farmers are working with a lot of variables, including the weather and economy as well as government subsidies.

"They experience real stress that affects their business and home and livelihood in a different way than your typical 8 to 5 job," she said. "If we recognize that some of their needs are more specific than others, we can help provide resources for those things."

People are getting more comfortable talking about mental health, but with populations like farmers "there's still a long way to go with social acceptance and social awareness," Merxbauer said.

MENTAL HEALTH HOTLINE

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Trackers aim to produce solar energy

◀ **SOLAR ENERGY** from 4 that farmers can work underneath it," he added.

Oeltjenbruns expects to have a display model in his neighborhood within the next couple months. He hasn't decided yet if it will be on his farm or at a neighbor's. Currently, the closest solar tracker is located at Lakeview High School in Cottonwood, Minn.

The solar tracker would produce energy of 110,000 kilowatt hours per year, according to Oeltjenbruns. In comparison, a normal residential house produces about 25,000 kilowatts. Agrisun's system would be able to power four houses for a year.

Oeltjenbruns is a little hesitant to talk about the cost of the system. While there may be an initial sticker shock of \$180,000

to \$200,000, he reminds people that there are so many variables that pretty quickly bring down the cost. Grants are available, but there is a lot of legwork over 12 months to get approved. There are also 40% Federal tax credits available for solar systems. Local utility companies also offer much smaller rebates.

There is a bill that has been introduced at the Minnesota Legislature to reform the net metering policy in the state. Oeltjenbruns said SkyMax is proactively working on a residential size tracker to conform to the changes in law. "This will allow for a very affordable dual-axis solar tracker for residential and small commercial businesses that need to only offset a small amount of power," he said.

For now, Agrisun is targeting three key markets: agriculture and agribusiness, utility-scale solar farms and commercial and industry.

Agrisun has a couple competitors with the solar trackers, but Oeltjenbruns said his system is "half to two-thirds lower than the other systems." Agrisun's cost is about \$3 per watt while competitors are from \$5 to \$6 per watt, he said.

Oeltjenbruns pointed out that electricity costs likely won't come down in the foreseeable future, while at the same time power demand will keep going up. He said technology is creating the need for more power, including electrical appliances and electric vehicles. "As technology develops, we have to supply it," he said.

His push into renew-

able energy came about a year and a half ago, during what Oeltjenbruns calls "crane time." As he performed his job as a crane operator, he spent countless hours sitting in the crane thinking about solar energy. Since that time, he has spent thousands of hours researching, traveling and making phone calls to learn more. "The internet is so resourceful," he said.

"God has closed doors and opened up other ones," Oeltjenbruns said. "It has been incredible. It's amazing the journey we have gone through," he added.

He has his eyes set on not only growing Agrisun to be a national provider but also international. "This is an American-made product. We hope to make a name for ourselves," said Oeltjenbruns.



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