

2026

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A Publication of the Steele County Times & Dodge County Independent

SEED DEALER EXTRAORDINAIRE

Janning helps area farmers with their seed

BY RICK BUSSLER

As spring rolls around the corner, there are quite likely many long-standing traditions that await area farmers. One of them may be the services of a man who has become known as the seed dealer for almost the past three decades.

Ron Janning of rural Blooming Prairie has been providing seed to dozens of farmers throughout the region since 1997. And this spring will be no different.

"I'll be hitting it hard with seed in the coming weeks," said Janning on his way home from Florida where he was been wintering over the past month. Spring is the busiest time of the year for seed dealers as they deliver seed to farmers anxiously awaiting to get into the fields to plant mostly corn and soybeans.

Even though Janning is 87 years old, he's not about to quit doing something he's enjoyed doing for so many years. While it's physically demanding to pitch heavy bags of seed around, he leaves the heavy lifting to Gary Jirele, one of his neighbors who helps with the seed business.

"I don't throw 62-pound bags any more or my back would be out of joint real quick," Janning said.

Prior to delivering, Janning receives large pallets of seed at his farm located in Blooming Prairie Township north of Blooming Prairie. He then has his work cut out for him with separating all the bags of seed by the various numbers that farmers have ordered to plant in their fields.

While Janning deals mostly with bags of seed, he also sells plastic boxes of seed. The boxes hold seed, equivalent to about 50 bags. One bag of seed corn contains 80,000 kernels and plants about 2.5 acres. One seed box holds 4 million kernels of seed and plants about 125 acres.

Industrywide, it's estimated that about 50% of farmers use the traditional seed bags and the other half use seed boxes.

Janning estimates he sells equivalent to about 3,000 bags of seed every year. The average cost of seed ranges from \$260 to \$300 per bag, according to Janning.

He marvels at how much improvement has taken place with corn seed since he began selling. "Over the past 20 years, there has been at least 65% improvement in production," said Janning, noting the improvements are even more dramatic since he began farming in the 1950s. When he first began

farming, he found that "you were doing good" to get 80 bushels of corn per acre. Today, it's not uncommon for farmers to get 270 bushels per acre.

Another thing that has changed at different times over the years for Janning is the type of seed he sells, mostly because of different ownership changes of the major seed companies.

During his time, he has sold Asgrow, Fielder's Choice, Gold Country, Legend and for the longest and most current run of 17 years, LG Seeds. However, that will soon change once again for Janning. LG Seeds is undergoing a major transition following its acquisition by GDM in late 2025. While LG products are available for this season, the brand is being consolidated into AgriGold and Mustang Seeds for future seasons, with the LG Seeds name expected to be retired.

He scoffs at the notion that all seeds are equal. "Everybody says seed is seed, but it isn't," he said, noting that there can be 30 to 40 bushels difference between the varieties of seed. "It's really unbelievable," he added.

Janning said he got into the seed business at the encouragement of Loren Krause, who was forced to quit his seed business. Krause recommended that Fielder's Choice



Ron Janning of rural Blooming Prairie awaits yet another spring planting season of where he will be providing dozens of area farmers with seed. Janning has been in the seed business for the past 29 years.

"Everybody says seed is seed, but it isn't."

Ron Janning
Area Seed Dealer

reach out to Janning.

"I love it because I can talk to people," Janning said of his seed business. "It's rewarding to help farmers get the best they can get and to make sure it germinates correctly with the right amount of fertilizer."

He added, "It's nothing you're going to get rich on, but the best part is talking to farmers."

When Janning started selling seed, the work was more involved as he was out in the fields helping farmers. Now that interaction has been mostly replaced with farmers being able to attend seminars.

At 29 years, Janning is

believed to be the longest tenured seed dealer in the region. As long as he remains healthy, he doesn't foresee stepping away from the seed business any time soon. He acknowledges "one knee is bothering me," but otherwise he's good to go, though admittedly a bit slower than he once was.

Seed isn't the only thing Janning sells. Prior to seed, he got involved in 1991 with AgroLiquid, which is liquid fertilizer.

As farmers come off a tough year with prices and weather conditions in 2025, Janning is hopeful things will turn around this year.

He said the world tariffs have caused some problems for agriculture prices.

"My advice to every farmer is farm with the machinery that you can afford," Janning said.

In addition to selling seed, Janning continues to farm about 150 acres, down from the 900 acres he once ran back in the 1980s. He began farming in 1954 while still attending high school in Blooming Prairie. He has been on his current farm since 1963.

He is also an avid collector of old tractors, which now boasts a fleet of about 24 antique models.

When he's not farming, selling or tinkering with tractors, Janning loves to hang out with a group of eight or nine guys for morning coffee every day in Blooming Prairie to solve the world's problems.





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Local Farm Bureau member advances in young farmer competition

BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

A local Farm Bureau member has advanced in the organization's Young Farmers and Ranchers Discussion Meet competition.

Jesse Haarmann, an Owatonna resident who works as a research scientist for Syngenta Rochester, was named a finalist in the Minnesota competition held earlier this year in Bemidji. The final rounds will be held during the Minnesota Farm Bureau Federation's annual meeting in November in Minnetonka with the Minnesota winner representing the state

at national Discussion Meet in January.

Although he grew up on the family farm in Illinois, Haarmann said he "does not farm per se," but works as a researcher for Syngenta. His father and brother-in-law are still involved in farming in Illinois he said, growing corn, soybeans and raising hogs.

Haarmann got his undergraduate degree from the University of Illinois and both his master's and PhD. Degrees from Purdue University.

He does his research work for Syngenta remotely. His research is mostly in corn, soybeans, plant

pathogens and weeds.

He explained he rents he rents small acreages in the area, including Steele County, Claremont and Byron to conduct his research. This time of year, he said, he spends more time at his desk but from April to October he is generally in the field.

Haarmann's family has been involved with the Farm Bureau, he said, and it was suggested to him a couple years ago to get involved.

The Farm Bureau, he said, is a lobbyist and outreach organization to lobby for farmers and get agricultures' message to the public.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Jesse Haarmann in his spray suit as he researches applying chemicals to crops.

When he joined the local Farm Bureau, he said, it was partly for fellowship with other people in agriculture but also to learn more leadership skills.

Within the Farm Bureau organization, he said, the Young Farmers and Ranchers group is for those 35 and younger. He added that his sister met her husband through the Illinois Young Farmers and Ranchers group.

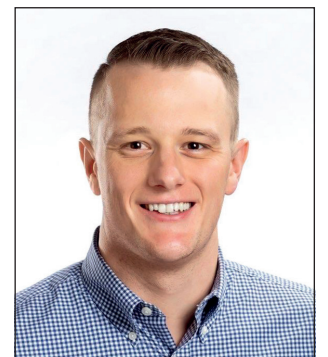
The Discussion Meet contest is designed to simulate a committee meeting where discussion and active participation

are expected from each participant. It is a goal that participants will cultivate their public speaking skills.

It's to get people thinking about policy issues and discussing them, he said.

Contest participants, he said, first see the topic for discussion about two hours before it starts. An example of a discussion question, he said, might be "How can Farm Bureau help get more USDA certified meat processors."

The program, he said, "helps me do my job."



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Jesse Haarmann, who lives in Owatonna and works for Syngenta as a research scientist, was named one of eight finalists in the Minnesota Farm Bureau's Discussion Meet competition.



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ONE TOUGH ANIMAL

Northland Farms picks up Bobcat dealership

BY RICK BUSSLER

Something new is in the air this spring at Northland Farms in Owatonna as the long-time equipment dealer is showcasing a new line from a well-established and familiar manufacturer.

In November, Northland became a full line dealer of Bobcat, one of the top three sellers of skid loaders in the country.

"We have all the Bobcat products," said Joshua Katzung, whose family owns Northland. "Bobcat is a very well known."

Katzung expects the best sellers to be skid steers, track loaders and mini excavators. Other Bobcat products available include compact tractors, utility products, telehandlers, mowers, attachments, implements and parts.

Bobcat's primary, iconic slogan is "One tough

animal," emphasizing the durability, agility and versatility of their company equipment.

Over the past three months, Northland has already sold more than 20 pieces of Bobcat equipment, according to Katzung. He expects Northland to pick up many new

customers because of the Bobcat dealership.

"We will be making a big push this year to sell Bobcats," Katzung said.

Currently, Northland offers primarily new Bobcats, but they are also taking trade-ins.

Since Bobcat began in 1958, it has become

a leading global manufacturer of compact equipment based in North Dakota. Northland joins a worldwide network of independent dealers and distributors offering Bobcat products.

Katzung said his family is thrilled to pick up the rich legacy of Bobcat.



Northland Farms of Owatonna has introduced a new line of equipment by recently taking on the Bobcat dealership. Northland Farms is family owned by Kelly and Shelia Katzung of Owatonna.

Cyril and Louis Keller, the brothers who invented the world's first compact loader, which was later named the Bobcat skid-steer loader, were inducted into the National Inventors Hall of Fame in 2023.

"Bobcat is very good quality and available at a more affordable price than people realize," Katzung said.

He expects the partnership with Bobcat to be a great fit for Northland. "The legacy of Bobcat is strong," Katzung said, adding "our legacy combined with theirs" will provide the perfect combination for customers.

While Northland began in 1978, the Katzung family became partial owners in 2001 before becoming sole owner in 2018. Over the past eight years, the Katzung family have focused on diversifying the operation by adding other equipment lines.

"We're not just farm equipment anymore," Katzung said, noting their customer base has broadened from farmers to also include homeowners with acreage, construction companies and landscapers. "Our clients are so much different now than they used to be," he added.

Northland has eight full-time mechanics and two full-time truck drivers to pick up deliveries for service work.

"Bobcat is very good quality and available at a more affordable price than people realize."

Joshua Katzung
Northland Farms Manager



"Anyone can sell a machine, but you have to be able to service it," Katzung said. "That's the big thing. The reason Bobcat picked us is because of our legacy and service."

To illustrate how strong a household name Bobcat has become, Katzung shared how owners with skid steers often get confused thinking they have a Bobcat when they really don't. "People call us all the time with a part number (for a skid steer) and it's not a Bobcat," Katzung said. "They'll tell us they need something for their Bobcat. They just have such a strong name."





STAFF PHOTO BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

Pat Duncanson, who farms near Mapleton, spoke about his journey from conventional farming to adding areas of the farm he converted to strip-tilling.



STAFF PHOTO BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

Greg Entinger explained the economic benefit to switching some acres from conventional farming to regenerative farming through strip-tilling and how it can save money especially when factoring in the farmers time and labor.

Soil Health tour makes stop in Owatonna

BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

The 2025 Soil Health Winter Workshop, sponsored by the Freeborn Area Soil Health Team, made a stop in Owatonna last month to discuss soil health with area farmers.

Speakers for the program included farmers Pat Duncanson and Randy Depuydt. Duncanson spoke about soil health as a whole and debunking myths that are often associated with strip-till, no-till and cover crops. Depuydt focused on strip-till as a key component in a regenerative ag system.

Also taking part in the program were Greg Entinger who talked about the economics of strip-till and Kristen Dieterman who spoke on the Rice Creek Project and how practices like strip-till and cover crops can directly affect the community.

Duncanson, who farms near Mapleton, said his is a fifth-generation farm where he practices no-till, strip-till and cover crops.

He said that before he started with the regenerative practices "I was convinced they would not work at my farm, not in my neighborhood." He had to prove it would not work, he said.

To prove his point, he

said, he spread some rye as a cover crop. Nothing happened, he said. But the next spring, he saw the field turning green.

He kept at it, he said, and it became his best area.

"I truly believe it's a better way to farm," he now says. It is leaving the farm in better shape and improving the organic matter in the fields.

Improving the organic matter, he added, is a win for profitability.

Duncanson said he does some conventional farming and some no-till.

A side benefit of the no-till, he said, is that he is already seeing more species of plants and wildlife on the farm.

"Take care of the soil, the soil will take care of the crops," he said.

Now, he said, he believes there is an advantage to the cover crops and economically the costs are not sky high. The costs, he said, are relatively comparable to the yields.

He said his son, who farms with him, is "maybe a little more excited about it."

Still, he said, "if I take care of the soil our soil will take care of us."

Entinger said that the economics of changing to strip-tilling was a major

factor for him. When making the changes, he said, it is important to find what works best for you.

Before making changes, he advised getting informed. That means talking to various people including the banker, people from the USDA, Soil and Water Conservation Districts. There are programs out there to help, he said, for conservation and land stewardship.

He also talked about investments at the beginning. In his case, he said, he started out using his father's planter and then upgraded after a couple years. There were better planters out there, he said, but he did not need them at the beginning. Look at every single bit of information, he said.

When he took over the family farm he said he wanted to be the top farm in yields. Now he has changed to wanting to be the most profitable and he has found that now the part of his land that he strip-farms is more profitable because of savings in equipment, the time involved, fertilizer savings and reduced labor costs.

"Your time is something of value," he said. "You have to look at the numbers."

'Beginning farmer' grants available from MDA

BY KAY FATE
STAFF WRITER

There's a reason you hear about Century Farms, or fifth-generation farmers: There aren't very many new farmers.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the number of farms fell by 15,000 in 2025; Minnesota accounted for 1,300 of those.

But the state is also doing something to combat those numbers, thanks to the Beginning Farmer Equipment and Infrastructure grant program, which is entering its second year.

The program was established by the Minnesota Legislature with a goal of supporting farmers by helping them access essential equipment and invest in on-farm infrastructure needed to support the future of their farm businesses.

It awarded 97 grants totaling more than \$850,000 across 45 Minnesota counties in its first year.

This year, it expects to provide funding of up to \$700,000 through a competitive review process.

Applicants may request between \$1,000 and \$10,000, with a 25% match required for requests over \$2,000.

As a reimbursement grant, awardees must pay for the full cost of the project upfront and provide documentation of



eligible expenses incurred after the grant contract is fully executed to receive reimbursement.

"This remains one of the most in-demand grant programs in the MDA's portfolio," said MDA Assistant Commissioner Patrice Bailey.

"The strong interest we saw last year highlights how important access to affordable equipment and infrastructure is for beginning farmers," she said. "Even small grants can make a meaningful difference as new farmers work to overcome early

barriers and establish their operations."

Though legislators created the statute allowing MDA to offer the grant, there is not designated funding, said Emily Toner, a senior grant specialist who works for the MDA's Emerging Farmers Office.

That means it is "an internal decision-making process at MDA to find funds to support the program for any future rounds," she said. "The legislature could provide designated funding if they chose to do so."

Despite the support given last year, Toner

said, "the demand was far greater with 1,100 eligible farmers requesting \$18.6 million in support. This round, we have less funds available."

Through this grant, beginning farmers are able to pay for:

Agriculture-specific equipment needed to grow crops, raise livestock or store the related farm products

Farm infrastructure investments related to water access; irrigation; fencing; electricity; walk-in coolers; livestock handling; grain stor-

age; production-related structures such as barns, livestock buildings, and greenhouses; and other farm infrastructure.

Last year's recipients received help with bee hives, walk-in coolers, livestock chutes, hay balers and Christmas tree farm equipment.

Toner has some advice for anyone considering applying, including visiting mda.state.mn.us/beginning-farmer-grant for the online application, request for proposal requirements and FAQ about the program.

"If you are eligible and choose to apply, apply for something you need to buy in future, then wait on that purchase until you hear back from the grant program," Toner said. "You cannot be reimbursed for purchases made prior to receiving a grant contract from the MDA."

Finally, she said, "remember that this is a competitive grant program and only a percentage of applicants will be awarded a grant given the amount of funds available."

Applicants must be:

- * A beginning farmer, defined as a person who: Started farming within the last 10 years, AND
- * Is a principal operator on a farm, AND
- * Has some farming experience and knowledge.
- * Farming within the borders of the State of Minnesota.

* In good standing with the State of Minnesota.

Priority will be given to farmers with under \$100,000 in recent farm sales, and limited access to land as defined in statute.

"We expect to award between 70 and 95 grants," Toner said, but the final number depends on the size of the awards and will be determined through the proposal review process.

Applications are due by 4 p.m. March 26.

BY WAYNE
HENDRICKSON

In 2024 the Zumbro Valley Medical Society in partnership with the Minnesota Foundation for Agriculture and the Dodge County Farm Bureau started a Rural Health Initiative with first year students from the Mayo Clinic Alix School of Medicine in Rochester. The program focused on how to connect and meet the health and wellness needs of people living in rural communities. The Minnesota Foundation for Agriculture provided funds and resources, hoping to provide experiences to the students on what it might be like to practice medicine in our rural communities.

There is a real need for primary care doctors in rural areas. Even though the number of medical school students has increased more than 30% in a five-year period, during this same period, medical students serving rural areas have decreased by 28%.

One of the concerns is mental health issues and addiction challenges. Many farmers are reluctant to seek medical advice when they are facing mental health problems. Too often medical facilities are not located close to their farms and distance can be a problem.

Some of the activities for the students have included farm tours, as most of the students had never been on a farm. Jim Checkel, who lives

Farm Bureau focuses on Rural Health Initiative



Minnesota Farm Bureau President, Dan Glessing and Minnesota Foundation Director, Ruth Meirick receiving the New Horizon Award at the National Convention in January

in rural Kasson, and the Dodge County Farm Bureau President, is one of the farm sites these students have visited. Panel discussions with medical staff serving rural communities and farmers have been held to discuss challenges facing health care needs. The students visited an implement dealer to see the equipment used on farms today. They became aware of grain augers, power take off shafts, and grain storage bin dangers that cause deaths and severe injuries each year. Some of these medical students may face those types of injuries working in the emergency rooms during their medical career.

Along with the tours and panel discussions, students attend Breakfast on the Farm to see a working farms with livestock, especially a dairy operation. Students also attended the North American Farm and Power Show (NAFPS) in Owatonna in March where they held free healthcare screenings for individuals. At last year's NAFPS, one farmer being screened had not been to a doctor in over 30 years.

Students are also encouraged to attend county fairs, such as Dodge and Olmsted, which will have a variety of 4-H, FFA, and open class livestock being shown.

One of the key goals of the program is to work on building trust and conversational skills with farmers and medical professionals. The program

keeps a focus on that health not only affects the farmer, but also the family, and the farm. A healthy farm is nothing without a healthy farmer.

The first-year students are not just learning from medical books, they are immersed into multiple opportunities. Students have visited farms or worked with farmers from Dodge, Olmsted, Steele, Fillmore, and Houston Counties. This program is now working with their third group of first year Mayo Medical students, with the hopes of expanding to other teaching hospitals.

The Farm Bureau has put on farm safety camps for youth for many years, and volunteers are educated on what can happen in the presence of farm machinery and other farming dangers.

Ruth Meirick, director of the Minnesota Foundation of Agriculture, lives in Kasson. She feels we are very fortunate living in Minnesota with the various medical facilities we have available to us compared to states where people have to travel a long distance to receive care. She was very aware of this when her mother needed care. Ruth has also been directly affected with the death of a family member from a farm accident.

This program recently received national attention as it received the New Horizon award in January 2026, for the best new program in the past two years in their category. Farm Bureau has also been rec-

ognized for achievements in Consumer Education and Mental Health programs. Ruth Meirick and Jim Checkel were both at the national convention in California to receive the award on behalf of the Minnesota Foundation for Agriculture.

There are 30, 000 Farm Bureau members in Minnesota and 6 million members across the USA. As a grassroots farm organization, they are an influential organization when speaking to legislators with rural issues in St Paul and Washington DC. The Farm Bureau was organized in 1919 and helped deregulate electricity into rural areas as well as working to create the Extension Service.



Health Care Screening by Medical Student



Jim Checkel, Dodge County Farm Bureau President hosting a Farm Tour with Mayo students

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URBAN SPRAWL ERODING

Family fights to keep 5 generation farm intact

BY RICK BUSSLER

Jeanne Pichner isn't going down without a fight.

She is battling to save her five-generation farm spanning more than a century on the east edge of Owatonna from getting gobbled up from urban sprawl as the City of Owatonna and Steele County attempt to build the East Side Corridor right in the heart of the family's acreage.

She's likely living up to a wall banner hanging in her living room encouraging to "be strong and courageous, do not be afraid."

"I'm passionate about farming and being out in the country," Pichner said with tears in her eyes. "That's my love. I don't want to live in town."

The proposed roadway would impact 64 acres of farmland, including 7.5 acres of Pichner land located about a quarter mile east of their house.

In addition to the Pichners, 21 other property owners would be impacted by the East Side Corridor. "Ours is the biggest part of land it affects," said Pichner, whose family produces crops and raises beef cattle.

With emotion cracking into her voice, Pichner said, "It's heartbreaking. It's going to affect one of our primary parcels of land." She added the roadway would cut into their highest yielding field of corn and soybeans.

"Our yields are going to be forever lost," she says. Besides lost yields, Pichner is concerned about drainage issues that will likely result from the corridor expansion.

She calls the proposed project excessive, pointing to the \$2 million for curb and gutter and storm sewer. Pichner also wonders why additional trails are needed when the city already has 31 miles of paved trails. "Isn't that enough miles of trails?"

"It's heartbreaking. It's going to affect one of our primary parcels of land."

Jeanne Pichner

Owatonna Area Farmer



Saving a five-generation farm has become the focus for Jeanne Pichner of rural Owatonna as she attempts to keep it from being gobbled up by urban sprawl. Pichner and her family raise beef cattle and produce corn and soybeans in Owatonna Township.

FARMLAND?



STAFF PHOTO BY RICK BUSSLER

led up by urban sprawl involving the proposed East Side Corridor.

Let's just stick with the roadway," she said.

Steele County in general, she said, has some of the most prime farmland in the state. "The less we can take away from this farmland is what I am encouraging," she said.

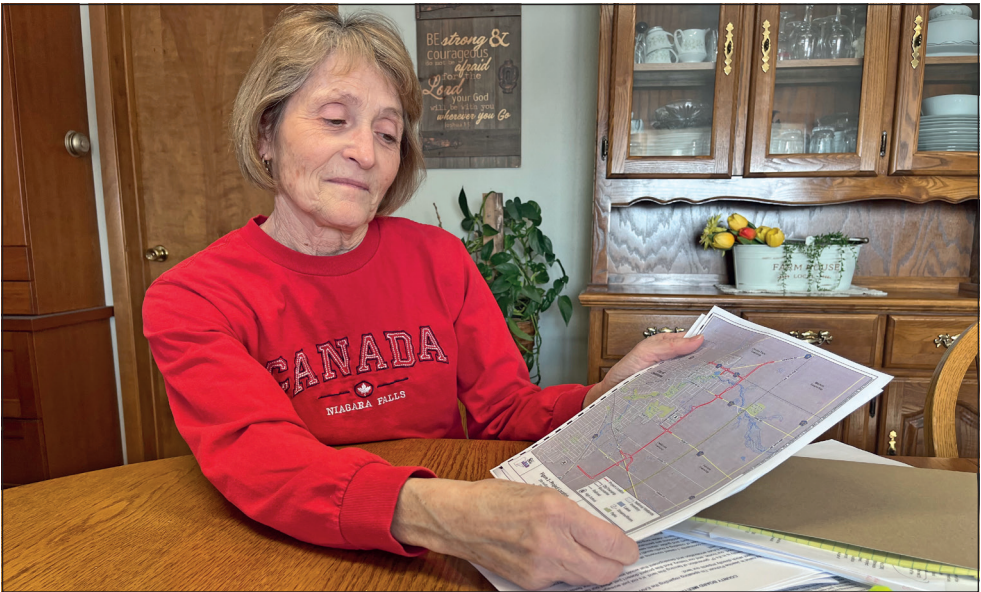
Pichner has taken her fight to public meetings regarding the roadway where she shows how passionate she is about what this means to their family. "I cried, and I still do," she said. "I got emotional (at the meeting)."

Pichner and others against the location of the East Side Corridor speculate there are future development plans tied to the proposed roadway that haven't been disclosed.

If the roadway ends up on the Pichner land, she pointed out how they will be hauling manure on it and semis would be utilizing it to haul grain and other commodities. "It would make things very challenging," she said.

While Jeanne and her husband, Doug, have lived on the farm for 49 years and continue to farm, their son, Matt Pichner, is the fifth generation to join in the family operation. At one time, there were five farm places occupied by the Pichner family. "When I married into this family, I called it Pichnerville. We were all related," said Jeanne.

Today the Pichners farm



STAFF PHOTO BY RICK BUSSLER

With a backdrop of a wall hanging encouraging to "be strong and courageous and do not be afraid," Jeanne Pichner holds a map of the proposed East Side Corridor, which shows a red line going through the heart of their farmland. Pichner and others advocate for the corridor to be moved about a mile east on an existing road, 34th Avenue (highlighted in yellow).

about 1,300 acres in Owatonna Township. During the summer months, cattle graze through pastureland going right up to nearby Bixby Road.

"I'm very proud of the Pichner heritage," said Jeanne Pichner. "They worked hard, and we work hard. This is history for us. It's affecting us on the Pichner farm."

Pichner, who grew up a few miles south of their current farm, loves the country lifestyle. "I love farming. I love this land. I love this farm. I just love being out in the country on this farm and that's what motivates me to be on this farm," she said.

She scoffs at the notion of building roads on their land. "I don't like concrete. I live in the country, and I want earth under me," Pichner said. "I just like the rural area," she added.



What's troubling to Pichner is the fact that an existing road, 34th Avenue, is less than a mile east of the proposed roadway. She pointed out how 34th Avenue had at one time connected to Highway 14. "Why build more roads when you have an existing road there," she said.

Pichner is alarmed about what cities and counties are doing to the rural areas. "It's just concerning that more and more of our farmland is being taken away on all these projects," she said.

She's not about to step away from fighting to keep rural land.

2026* Owatonna *2026

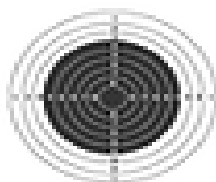
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Albert Lea oat mill construction on schedule

BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

Construction of an oat processing plant in Albert Lea is on schedule, according to a member of the facility's board.

Oats were once an important crop for Midwestern farmers but by the middle of the 20th century oats were being surpassed by corn and soybeans as the region's major crops.

That is starting to change however, as a still small but growing group of farmers, including some in Dodge and Olmsted counties, are reconsidering the growing of oats as a crop along with the corn and beans. It is also starting to gain some traction as a food, even though American oat consumption continues to lag far behind consumption in Europe and Canada.

Landon Plagge of Latimer, Iowa, was one of the first to see the possibility of growing oats and processing them in southern Minnesota. Used as a cover crop and in crop rotation, they can help improve soil health. Oats have also been gaining in popularity as a healthy food to consume and for the farmer they can also be an added source of income.

With that in mind, a plant to process the oats began to make sense and Plagge shared his ideas with others.

The result is Green Acres Milling, a processing facility in Albert Lea currently under construction and owned by a group of about 130 farmer investors.

"We're heavily into construction," said Brad Hagen, one of the investors in the facility. "The building is in place, and we are putting in the equipment. We're pretty much on schedule and hope to start milling in August."

The farmers who have already invested in the project, he said, will be delivering bushels of oats to the facility at the beginning. After the first year, Hagen said, the plant hopes to be purchasing from other southeast Minnesota farmers.

Oats, he said, are a crop that can be planted in early spring and be ready for harvest at the end of July or early August.

The Albert Lea plant, he said, will mill the oats into either flakes or flour. Oats, he added, are the only gluten free grain on the market.

About 92% of oats consumed in the United States are grown in Canada and transported into the United States by train. Minnesota is at the southern end of the oat growing region in North America. It is economically better if the oats are grown and processed in the United States. Shipping them from Canada can add up



to 25% to the cost as well as an increased carbon footprint.

Green Acres Milling is not looking into selling retail premium oats on its own. He said their target customer is the premium oat brands.

In January the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) announced it had partnered

with Minnesota to award \$9.5 million through the Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure Program (RFSI) to build resilience in Minnesota's food system, diversifying agricultural markets, creating new revenue streams for small and mid-sized producers and providing economic opportunities for local communities.

One of those receiv-

ing funding, the USDA announced, was \$1,500,000 to Green Acres Milling for cleaning and kilning equipment systems "for a new innovative oat milling facility that will enhance the local food economy and support rural development by filling a middle of the supply chain gap for oat processing infrastructure."

Green Acres Milling

will work with over 100 local farmers within a 120-mile radius known as the "Oak Shed" to source oats, offering them a reliable market with fair pricing, enabling production of an estimated 364,800 cwt of high-quality oat groats yearly, and meeting growing consumer demand for traceable, non-GMO, and allergen-free oats, the USDA release said.

Could camelina be a profitable crop for local farmers?

BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

If someone mentioned growing camelina as a crop that could be used to make biodiesel, most people who are not involved with agriculture would likely not know what they were talking about. But New Richland City Council member and businessman Jason Casey has started the conversation.

Camelina is gaining traction as a cover crop that can be grown after the cash crop is harvested and can help in improving soil health. It is a high-potential, low-input oilseed cover crop that also can be used to produce sustainable aviation fuel renewable diesel and biodiesel.

Healthy soil can result in reduced input costs of their crops and having a market for the product adds to its value to the grower.

The topic has previously come up in New Richland and last month Casey hosted a meeting of farmers and businesspeople at City Hall and online for an informal discussion concerning what is involved in financing and supporting a biofuel plant in the community.

There are currently farmers in the area growing camelina as a cover



crop, but the question raised is whether local farmers would devote acreage to growing the plant until it fully matures rather than as a cover crop. Money would also be an issue, since constructing a local plant would likely require an eight-figure amount for planning and construction of a plant

which would take several years, according to financial information presented at the meeting.

Tina Wilson, the Waseca County planning and zoning administrator, attended the meeting online and said the first step before seeking funding would be a feasibility study. The results of the

study could be used when applying for possible grants.

After the meeting, Casey reached out to participants via email and said that as far as next steps are concerned he would like to gauge whether there is enough interest to consider establishing research plots that could

support the development of a feasibility study.

“We need reliable data to determine whether camelina offers the economic incentive to pursue it further,” he said.

So far, the discussions about camelina are just discussions but Casey also asked for feedback from those who attended the

meeting to see what steps, if any, need to be taken.

Proponents of camelina as a biofuel say the crop does not compete with food crops as it can be grown as a rotation crop between major plantings, as a fuel it can be used in existing jet and diesel engines without modification, it is a hardy, short-season crop that thrives in dry land conditions with low water requirements of four to six inches rainfall, as a cover crop it reduces soil erosion and improves soil health, it has a high yield/efficiency and one ton of camelina seeds can produce 200-300 liters of aviation fuel that translates to nearly one gallon of fuel per gallon of oil and the meal that remains after fuel processing is a high-protein component used in livestock feed.

Researchers at the University of Minnesota have said that camelina is “showing exciting potential as a new cash cover crop that can provide both ecosystem services and economic benefits to farmers in the Upper Midwest.” Industry is showing interest in a wide range of end-use and co-products for the crop including healthy edible oils, biodegradable packaging materials, lubricants and biofuels, according to university researchers.

CFS rolls with farm app

Local farmers embracing technology

BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

Farmers and rural residents often get portrayed as being slow to embrace new technologies. That is not the case, at least not with the customers of CFS, said Dylan Barth, vice-president of talent development and customer equipment for the company.

CFS has developed an app for the customer portal, he said, that is helping the customers conduct their business faster and from any location at any time of day and night. “A lot of farmers embrace technology,” he said.

CFS research showed, he said, that farmers wanted to be able to interact with the company 24/7. CFS worked with a partner, Barth said, to develop an app to help them do just that.

The app, he said, gives the customer the ability to see what business they have done with CFS and to interact with the company.

It is simple to use, he said. Once the app has been downloaded to the cellphone, he said, and connected to the account, all a person has to do is open the CFS app and it connects the customer with their account, agron-

omist and data. It’s a great way to stay connected to all the information that is available, he said. They can log in and check all their previous purchases. They can get quotes for something they need. They can receive real-time agronomic updates, view statements and invoices, pay bills via ACH, find out about financing and credit information. If a farmer is driving his tractor home from the field at midnight and decides he will need fuel in the morning, Barth said, they can use the app to convey that information to the company and it will



be delivered in the morning without the farmer having to remember to call the office.

Of course, he added, customers can still call the office to speak directly with an employee.

Barth said that CFS was one of the earliest users in their field to develop the app technology.

MDA launches biofertilizer innovation and efficiency program

Helps area farmers improve nitrogen management to protect water quality and enhance soil health

The Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) is introducing the Biofertilizer Innovation and Efficiency Pilot Program, an initiative designed to help farmers improve nitrogen management and adopt innovative technologies that protect water quality and enhance soil health.

Applications for the 2026 growing season

opened March 2 and will close on May 1. They are being accepted on a first-come, first-served basis. Farmers who participate can receive \$15 per acre for reducing their commercial nitrogen fertilizer application rate by the lesser of 15% or 30 pounds per acre when using a qualifying biofertilizer product.

“This program is about supporting farmers who want to try new approaches to nutrient management while main-

taining productivity,” said MDA Commissioner Thom Petersen. “By incentivizing the use of biofertilizers and precision technologies, we can reduce nitrogen loss and protect Minnesota’s water resources.”

Program Details

- Available for the 2026 and 2027 growing seasons.
- Farmers can enroll 40 to 3,000 acres of eligible farmland in participating Minnesota counties. The MDA reserves the right to

limit the number of acres enrolled per applicant.

· Eligible counties:

Becker, Benton, Carver, Cass, Crow Wing, Dakota, Dodge, Douglas, Fillmore, Goodhue, Houston, Hubbard, Kandiyohi, Lincoln, Morrison, Mower, Murray, Nicollet, Nobles, Olmsted, Otter Tail, Pipestone, Pope, Rock, Scott, Sherburne, Stearns, Swift, Todd, Wabasha, Wadena, and Winona

- Open to all crops with a University of Minnesota-recommended nitrogen

fertilizer rate.

- Qualifying biofertilizer products must be registered with MDA and provide nitrogen through microorganisms such as bacteria or fungi.

How to Apply

1. Register in the State of Minnesota’s SWIFT system to obtain a vendor number

2. Submit the electronic application form

Applications will be accepted until 4 p.m. May 1 or earlier if program capacity is reached.

Grant agreements must be signed by May 29. Farmers will receive payment after submitting documentation verifying nitrogen reduction and biofertilizer use by Nov. 30, 2026. Applications for the 2027 growing season will open next year. A total of \$500,000 will be split between the two growing seasons.

More information can be found by visiting mda.state.mn.us/biofertilizer-innovation-efficiency-pilot-program.



On The Farm

RYAN LERMON

Most farmers in Minnesota and across the Midwest already use treated seed in their fields to protect young plants from insects. Many of these seed treatments contain a class of insecticides called neonicotinoids. These products help guard seeds and seedlings from early season pests but also come with important safety and environmental considerations.

Neonicotinoids are a group of insecticides that

work inside the plant. They move into the plant with water and nutrients as the seed grows. Preliminary research is showing a high percentage of the neonicotinoid is staying in the soil and not being absorbed into the plant. Common neonicotinoids used to treat seed include imidacloprid, clothianidin, thiamethoxam, and acetamiprid. These products are widely used on crops like corn, soybean, sugar beet, and potatoes. Because neonicotinoids are very common, most treated seeds you buy will contain one of these chemicals.

Always check the seed tag label before use. The label lists any seed

treatments applied and tells you what safety precautions are required. Farmers should take time to understand these labels. Handling treated seed safely protects you, your family, your livestock, and the environment. Follow these key practices when working with treated seed:

Wear protective clothing. Most treated seed labels recommend wearing long sleeves, long pants, and chemical resistant gloves when handling seed. This protects your skin from contact with the treatment.

Clean up spills right away. Any seed that spills should be picked up or covered with soil to prevent

exposure to wildlife, water sources, and people. Treated seed can be hazardous if birds or other animals come into contact with it.

Minimize dust during planting. One main risk with neonicotinoid treated seed is the dust that can come off seed during planting. This dust may carry small amounts of insecticide that can travel in the air and affect nearby plants or pollinators like bees. Use dust reducing products and follow planter manufacturer guidance to reduce this risk.

Avoid planting near areas where bees forage. Wind can carry dust toward flowers and other plants where pollinators

are active. If possible, choose calm planting days and avoid windy conditions where dust might drift to sensitive areas.

Dispose of leftover seed properly. If you have seed left over after planting, do not leave it where children, pets, or wildlife can access it. Follow label instructions for burying or disposing of leftover treated seed. Do not compost treated seed or use it for feed or food production.

Know what treatments are on your seed, handle it carefully, and take steps to reduce the risk of neonicotinoids moving off target. Neonicotinoids are one tool in the toolbox; they have a time and place

where their use makes agronomic and economic sense. Make sure you are selecting the right tool for the job and applying it when it is needed and will be effective. Increased awareness, proper stewardship, and responsible management practices help protect pollinators, safeguard water quality, and keep farming safer and more sustainable for everyone involved.

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

LSP shares hopes for 2026 legislative session

Group's 'Lobby Day' was March 11 at Capitol

BY KAY FATE

For the past 20 years, the Land Stewardship Project has held its annual lobby day at the Minnesota Capitol; this year's event was March 11.

"It's an opportunity to bring (together) farmers, rural residents and supporters of a more sustainable farm and food system," said Laura Schreiber, government relations

director of the LSP.

"Most legislators now are at least one to two generations removed from agriculture, even though it is a system that impacts everyone," she said, "so this is a day to educate, build relationships, and move our legislative priorities forward."

About 60 people met with legislators and the agriculture committee chairs.

Typically, Schreiber said, lawmakers "are grateful to learn more about the challenges facing current and aspiring farmers, hear what types of policies can support soil health, build out local markets for farmers ... and challenges of an increasingly consolidated and concentrated agriculture industry."

Minnesota is one of the few states where local government control of development is still strong, she said.

"One of our top priorities this year is to make improvement to the Farmland Down Payment As-

sistance Program – which helps farmers purchase their first farm – and share our strong support for this program that helps support the next generation of farmers," Schreiber said.

"Because this is a policy year, we are focused on setting the table for future years, so we can have increased investment in local purchasing programs, beginning farmer equipment and infrastructure grants," she said, as well as soil health programs.

Other work will include bolstering supply chains that support the processing and marketing of

soil-friendly "continuous living cover" crops, like kernza.

Nitrate pollution of groundwater continues in southeastern Minnesota, said Schreiber, who called the Olmsted County Groundwater Protection and Soil Health Program "innovative."

"It has shown great promise for reducing fertilizer runoff by rewarding farmers for putting in cover crops, diversifying rotations and using regenerative grazing systems," she said.

The expectation, she said, is that "lawmakers

will spend much of their time responding to actions at the federal level," figuring out how to deal with a myriad number of program cuts, including to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and health care subsidies.

LSP will also push for the introduction of a bill that directs the state to create an action plan for increased farmland access, especially for beginning and emerging farmers.

This legislation should identify policy solutions and investigate alternative land holding mechanisms.

Planting into the headwinds: 2026 outlook for Steele County growers

BY JORDAN WIERSMA

As the snow begins its slow retreat from the ditches of Steele County, farmers across Southern Minnesota are preparing for a spring season that feels all too familiar—and yet increasingly complex. While the warmth of a projected mild April offers the possibility of an early start, the economic landscape for 2026 is demanding a “sharpened pencil” approach to every acre.

Between shifting global trade policies and a stubborn gap between input costs and cash prices, the 2026 season is shaping up to be a test of resilience for our local agricultural community.

Market squeeze: Record supplies vs. lean prices

The primary challenge for 2026 isn’t a lack of grain, but rather an abundance of it. Coming off record-breaking national yields in 2025, the market is currently “heavy” with supply.

Early projections suggest corn prices may not move much over the next four months. With large carryover stocks from last year, significant price rallies are unlikely without a major weather

shock or a shift in biofuel policy. While changes to biofuel policy could occur, the effects of transitioning to E13-15 blends will take time to materialize.

Soybeans saw some price recovery in February, but trade tensions remain a wild card. While new domestic crush capacity is helping demand, uncertainty regarding export deals continues to keep local elevators—and lenders—on edge.

The cost of the crop

The “input squeeze” remains the biggest hurdle for Steele County operations. While some inflationary pressures have eased, the cost of putting a seed in the ground remains historically high.

Nitrogen remains a major expense, with prices linked to volatile natural gas markets and global supply demands. While potassium prices are stable, phosphorus remains above economic thresholds. Rising global demand for agricultural use and manufacturing—specifically for batteries—has pushed phosphorus prices up so significantly over the last few years that many growers are not replacing as much as they are taking out of the soil. This “mining” of nutrients will likely turn



into a problem in the near future.

Creating ROI: Navigating the 2026 season

Despite these headwinds, there are tools available to help bridge the gap. Federal safety nets, like ARC/PLC revenue guarantees and FBA Payments, continue to be a much-needed support for the farmers.

Success this year will also depend on strategic marketing. A good marketing plan is written down, based on your specific costs and goals, and

spreads sales across time to take the emotion out of decisions. Remember: You cannot control the market, but you can control your plan. The goal isn’t to hit the “top tick”—it’s to make a profit and sleep well at night.

Efficiency over expansion

Farmers can increase bushels per acre through precision agriculture technology, such as variable rate applications and yield mapping. Selecting the right hybrids for specific soil environments,

optimizing NPK with split applications, and investing in long-term improvements like tile drainage are key.

For some, 2026 is a year to bolster working capital and manage existing debt rather than bidding up cash rents or investing in “new iron.”

Resilience of Steele County

Farming in Southern Minnesota has always been a gamble against both Mother Nature and the global economy. As we look toward the 2026 planting season, the focus

is on “tightening the belt” without sacrificing productivity.

Local growers have always said: “When prices are high, you want bushels; when prices are low, you need bushels.” The tractors will still roll, the seed will still go in, and Steele County farmers will continue to do what they do best: feed the world, even when the math is hard.

Jordan Wiersma is the agronomy sales manager at Central Farm Services based in Owatonna.

Planning Grain Site Expansions? Don't Forget About Your Propane Setup

BY TRAVIS SMITH

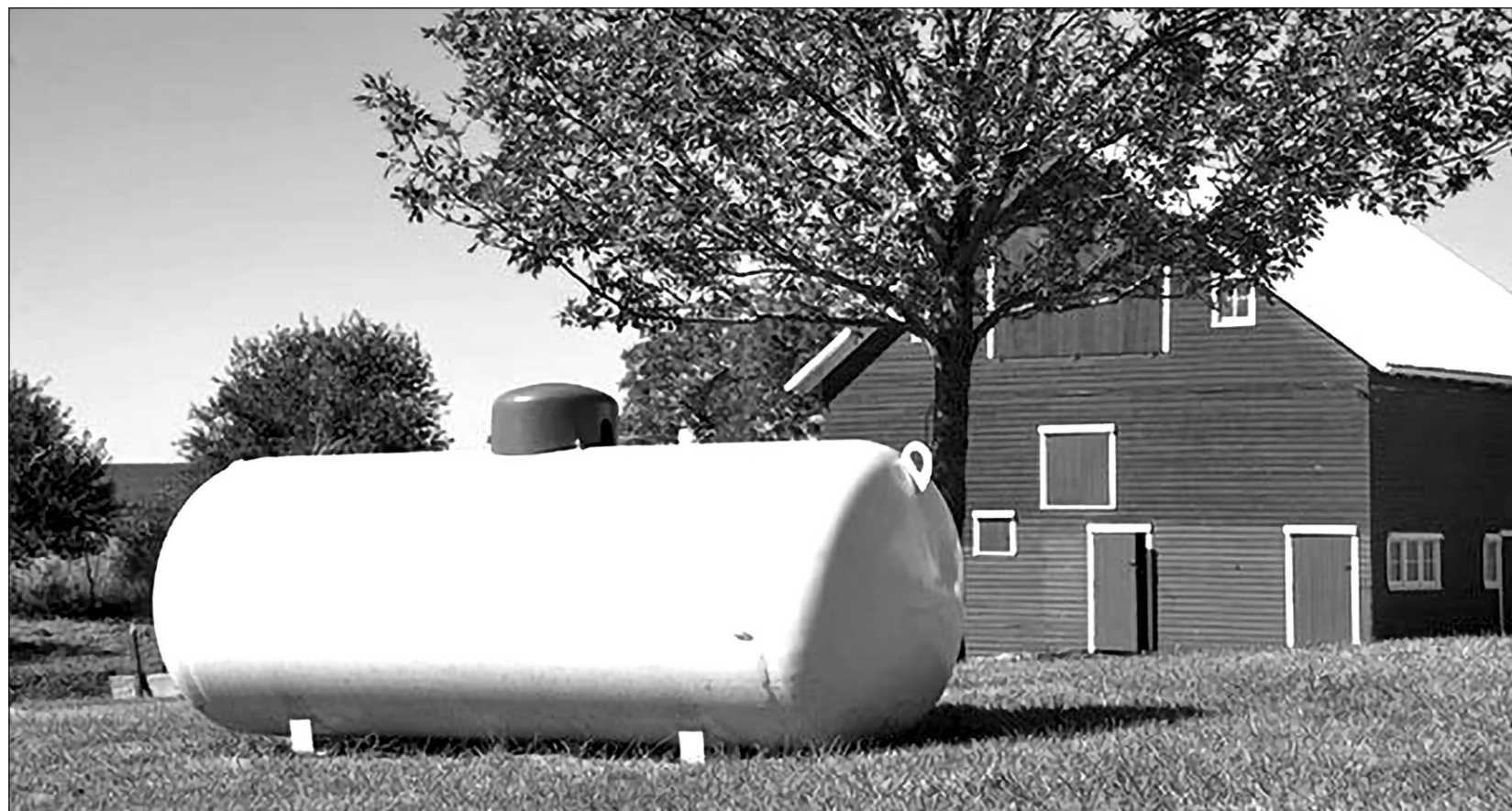
If you've put money into a modern grain system, you already know they're a big investment and a big upgrade for your operation. More capacity equates to a smoother harvest and less stress. But whether you're adding a new dryer, moving bins, or expanding the whole site, there's one piece that often gets missed in the planning process:

Your propane system.

A lot of the time, the propane supplier isn't brought into the loop early enough. By the time we get called, concrete is already poured, structures are in place, and suddenly there's no good spot left for tanks or supply lines without disregarding codes or bending the budget. A quick headsup early in the project makes a world of difference.

Why It Pays to Call Ahead

Getting your propane supplier involved before construction starts isn't just for safety (though that's a big part of it). It also makes the piping simpler, keeps costs down, avoids delays when you're counting on that dryer come fall and helps you avoid redoing things that



were already installed. A 15minute conversation can save a whole lot of headaches later.

At CFS, we're always happy to walk the site with you, look at the plans, and make sure everything is set up right the first time.

A Few Propane Codes to Keep in Your Back Pocket

Here are some of the key spacing requirements that farmers run into

most often when updating their grain systems:

-When tanks are being filled, they **must be at least 50 feet away from any airhandling equipment**. This includes fans on bins and the dryer. Basically, anything moving air that could pull propane vapors toward ignition sources.

-If you're running multiple 1,000s, they need to be at least **25 feet away from any structure** and

3 feet between each tank. This spacing catches a lot of folks by surprise, especially when squeezing tanks between bins, pads, and driveways.

- If you utilize larger bulk tanks for transport deliveries you need to remember that bigger tanks come with bigger spacing rules. Tanks with 2001-30,000 gallon capacity must be **50 feet** from structures and tanks with 45,000-gallon capac-

ity need to be at least **75 feet**.

If you plan for expansion in the future, we can help you pick a spot now that works later, too.

Let's Plan It Before You Pour It

Whether you're adding capacity or building a brandnew site, bring your propane supplier into the conversation early. We can help make sure the system is laid out safely, efficiently, and in a way

that won't slow you down when the grain starts coming in.

At CFS, we're more than happy to meet on-site, talk through the options, and get everything lined up so your dryer is ready to roll come fall. Just give us a call, we'll take care of the rest.

Travis Smith is the energy operations manager at Central Farm Services based in Owatonna.

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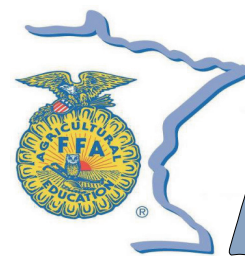
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