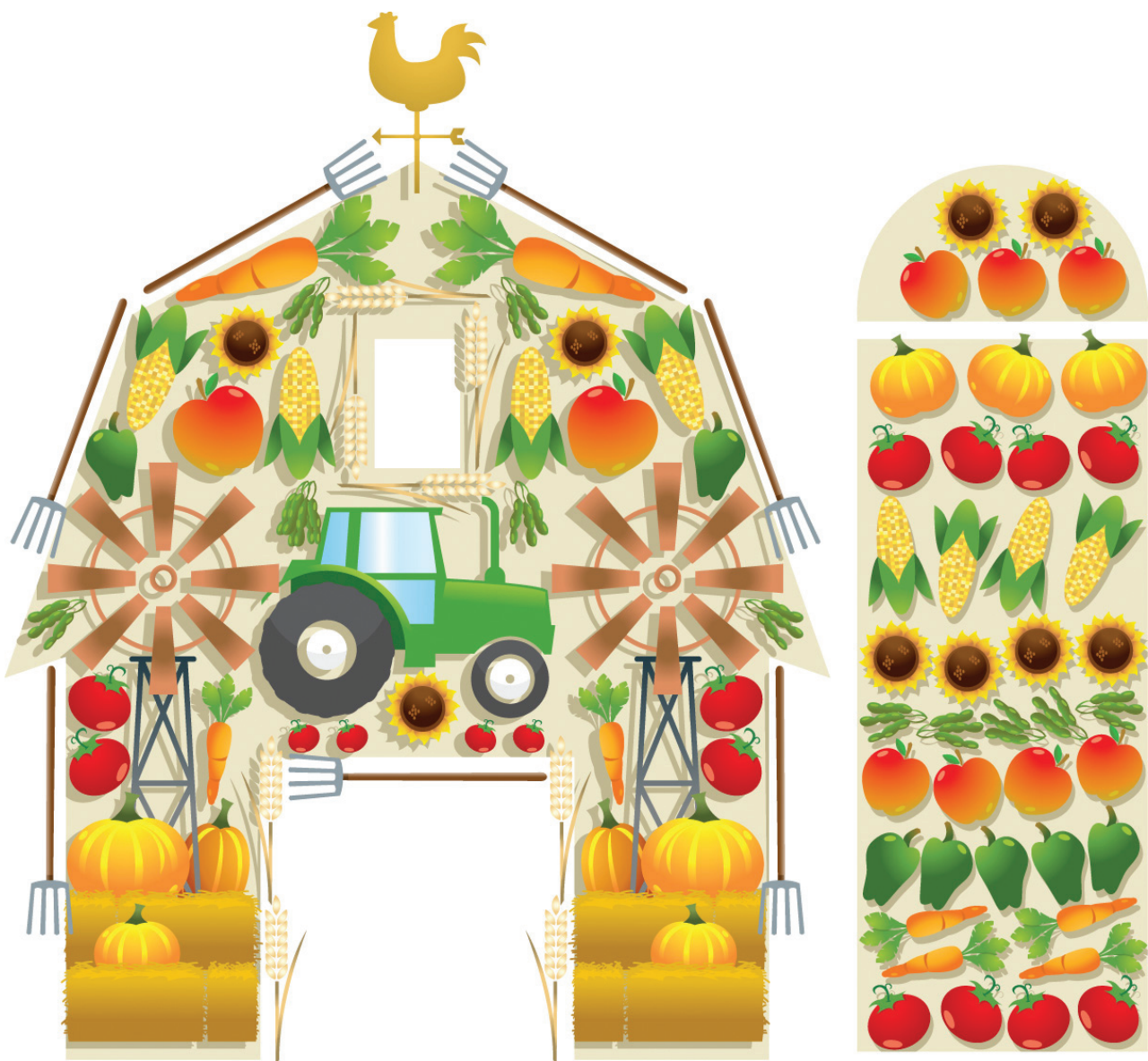


# Finding Your Niche



## County Plays Key Role In Ag Issues

BY RANDY DOCKENDORF  
randy.dockendorf@yankton.net

Whether it's roads, 4-H or a proposed grain facility's impact, Bruce Jensen and his fellow Yankton County commissioners work extensively with agricultural issues.

Agriculture continues to drive the local economy and development, Jensen said. With that in mind, the commissioners and county officials look for ways to serve and promote the farm sector, he said.

Those decisions impact not only rural residents but also agribusinesses, such as grain elevators and trucking firms, he said.

"In South Dakota, we're nothing without agriculture," he said. "If agriculture hurts, we all hurt." Jensen acknowledges that 14,000 of Yankton County's 22,000 residents live in Yankton. However, the commission remains aware of rural residents and their concerns, he said.

"I used to live on a farm," he said. But Jensen, the commission chairman, also sees rural concerns as embracing more than what's happening down on the farm.

"We're concerned about small towns and rural areas, and that includes emergency services, first responders and fire departments," he said.

"Those services are just as vital to (rural) lives and property. As county officials, we want to reach out and be supportive to all of those things, which are important parts of those residents' lives."

The commissioners pay a great deal of attention to the county's infrastructure, which includes farm-to-market roads necessary for the local economy, Jensen said.

"So much of our county is rural, and good roads impact every aspect of our farms and businesses," he said.

The effort to maintain roads and bridges remains an ongoing process, Jensen said. The commissioners look at both short- and long-term needs, within fiscal realities, he said.

"We are blessed as a county that, even with our tight budget, we have done well in maintaining our roads and bridges," he said.

The commissioners keep that same fiscal discipline in mind when working on other county services, Jensen said. He noted a number of county services are crucial to rural residents even though the service or building may be located in Yankton.

"The government center and the jail are both assets, and we used bonds for those projects," he said. "These are good structures, and they should be here in good shape for a long time."

Continued maintenance will remain crucial parts of keeping those structures in good shape, he added.

The Yankton County commissioners have gone forward on an issue where a number of other counties have stayed away: drainage. Some counties instead allow other entities to act on drainage issues, which can become contentious and complicated.

Jensen acknowledged that drainage has become a hot-button issue in recent years. He noted the rising farmland value and the increased use of drainage tile as factors that have raised the interest and controversy in such decisions.

However, Yankton County has adopted a drainage board and ordinance as pre-emptive measures, Jensen said.

"Drainage is a big deal, and we have gotten a policy in place before we're backed into a corner when someone comes to us and asks, 'What are you going to do?'" he said.

With changing conditions, Yankton County can always revisit its drainage policies, Jensen said.

"We can critique things and learn from



Jensen

## Producers Eye Niche Crops To Tap New Markets

BY DEREK BARTOS  
derek.bartos@yankton.net

When people think of agriculture in South Dakota and Nebraska, they likely think of corn and soybeans.

However, many farmers within the region have turned their attention to crops that are a little more special.

Specialty crops, such as fruits, vegetables and nuts, are becoming extremely marketable products, said Rhoda Burrows, SDSU Extension horticulture specialist.

"People don't realize how high-value these crops are," Burrows said. "For an acre of land, we could be talking anywhere from \$5,000 to \$10,000 production off that acre, or even more if it's under high tunnels."

According to the most recent census of agriculture, South Dakota farms sold \$3,876,000 in fruits and vegetables in 2007, with Nebraska farms selling \$66,434,000.

Burrows said demand throughout the region continues to drive sales upward, as people seek the products based on their quality and the wide selection available.

"Vegetables, in particular, that we get from other areas of the country go through a system of selection for shippability and are picked for optimum shipping and storage, rather than eating quality," she said. "By growing them locally, we can retain a lot of the nutrients and can select a variety that may not ship well, but have more flavor."

Burrows said locally grown fruits and vegetables, which are typically sold at farmers markets, also provide more options for consumers, as selections at local grocery stores can be fairly limited.

"If you have somebody growing it locally in your area,



NATHAN JOHNSON/P&D

Tim Nissen of Nissen Wine pours a beverage last Fourth of July weekend during a groundbreaking ceremony for the Nissen Winery and Outlaw Trail Center that is being built eight miles north of Hartington.

you can grow varieties that reflect local preferences," she said. "What a grocery store is going to get in is likely whatever their supplier has available."

Burrows added that locally grown products also have a positive effect on the local economy.

"The dollars that we spend for those locally grown foods go directly back to the producer and circulate in the communities," she said. "So much more stays in the local

economies instead of being transported out of state."

Along with being sold at farmers markets, Burrows said locally grown fruit is also used by many wineries. By using cold, hardy grapes and other fruit from the region, these wineries can create unique products that aren't available elsewhere, she said.

"I'm pretty sure that there are no California wines that use buffalo berries, and probably not too many that use chokecherries either," she said.

"We can come up with some unique products that really put South Dakota forward."

Burrows said one of the advantages to growing specialty crops is that anyone can do it, from people looking for supplemental income to those who want to farm full-time.

"It works well for anybody, from school teachers to farmers who grow commodity crops," she said. "You can start out with very little input, and then expand as you find out what works for you."

Specialty crops are also a way for many farmers to combat the rise of corporate farms in the region, which have made it more difficult for smaller farms to survive, said Chuck Hassbrook, executive director of the Center for Rural Affairs. He said that there are many opportunities for businesses that cater to people looking for a quality local food product and experience.

"We just celebrated the groundbreaking of a winery in Cedar County, Neb. It's an innovative new operation," he said. "While the number of opportunities for growing soybeans are fewer, there is a whole new generation of opportunities in agriculture."

With more opportunities becoming available and more people interested in nutrition and high-quality produce, Burrows said she doesn't see the business of specialty crops slowing down any time soon.

"The push is definitely there, and anyone interested in the health of South Dakotans is trying to help us find ways to increase consumption of fruits and vegetables," she said. "I think the best way to help that increase is to introduce people to farm-fresh produce. It's much more inspiring to eat fresh tomatoes grown by one of our neighbors than one that was trucked in from thousands of miles away."

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### Helping Our Local Economy

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