

Center

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ers through the drought. Frass said a lot of irrigation is being used to accommodate the problem.

“For a long time, we’ve pressured land owners about taking care of their resources,” he said. “The push right now to cash in on high land prices is not necessarily in the best interest of the resources for the people in the long term. We can use up our water and we can cause excessive soil erosion if those things are not done correctly. We know that a lot of the land that is being turned into cropland right now is land that was not plowed for a

long, long time for good reason. So, we’re concerned about that and we’re going to be doing more to help people take good care of their land.”

Although working through the drought has been a challenge, Frass said this year has provided a learning opportunity for years to come.

“For several years, we’ve had programs that have helped people figure out what to do in times of drought and what is there for them. When a bad year happens, there’s never enough preparation that could go into preparing us, but there are lots of things that can be done,” he said. “Right now, it’s too late to prepare for this year, but it’s not too late to prepare for coming years. We’ve been

aware of that, we’ve tried to help people prepare and we’re still helping to provide resources for people to figure out what their options are for drought management and making it less severe.”

No matter what the current issue may be, Hassebrook said the organization still works to advance the spirit and necessity of family farming.

“The common good in rural America depends on having family farms,” he said. “There was a study that was put out about three years ago by a researcher that looked at the impact of how we farm on the rural community. I’ll never forget a sentence from that study presenting their conclusion. They said all the serious studies reached the same

conclusion: communities that are surrounded by farms that are bigger than a family can operate have few wealthy elites, a majority of poor laborers and virtually no middle class.”

Hassebrook said what happens to rural communities affects all rural people, making it more important than ever to focus on the rural areas.

“We’re working for all people — we’re focused on the rural areas, but all of our people have access to genuine economic opportunity that enables them to live a good life,” he said. “We also strive to make sure we fulfill our responsibilities: to give back and take care of the land so when we leave it to the next generation.”

County

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our mistakes. It’s not like this (policy) is just taking a shot in the dark,” he said. “There are situations that are going to happen, and it’s better to have a policy intact before rather than after the fact.”

In the same manner, Yankton County has passed zoning laws in the past, he said.

Jensen would rather be pro-active on any issue than wait until other parties step in and make a decision for the county.

“Local control is the best thing,” he said.

The commissioners have also taken steps to promote — and protect — 4-H and agriculture, Jensen said.

The county invested in the Kiwanis 4-H Ice Center, which has provided office space for the 4-H/youth development advisor, administrative assistant and county meetings and functions. The ice arena has also been converted during the off-season into a horse arena and livestock facility for Achievement Days and other events.

Yankton County faced a major decision last year when South Dakota State University announced a massive reorganization for its Cooperative Extension Service and its 4-H program. The county-based system of Extension agents was eliminated and replaced with eight regional centers. In addition, the 4-H program was structured so that counties determined their level of financial participation — if at all — in the state program.

The Yankton County commissioners maintained local offices even though Yankton wasn’t selected as an Extension regional center. And in a unique move, the county continued funding its own 4-H/youth development advisor while still participating in the state 4-H program. The move ensured that Yankton County could continue to receive state resources as well as access to the South Dakota State Fair and other state-sponsored activities.

Taking it a step further, Yankton County formed a partnership with Bon Homme and Clay counties for sharing a state-sponsored 4-H advisor.

Yankton County could have received its own advisor. However, the joint effort allowed Bon Homme and Clay counties to meet the required minimum youth population for participating in the state 4-H program. Under the current agreement, Bon Homme and Clay counties each receive the state-provided 4-H advisor two days a week and Yankton County one day a week, but the schedule remains flexible to meet programming needs.

The Yankton County 4-H/youth development director pursues some programs locally and works with the state 4-H advisor jointly on other projects and activities.

“We support 4-H because we care about the futures of our kids and agriculture. I commend the kids, parents and leaders for the work they do,” Jensen said. “As far as the county, the dollars were there, and we knew it was important (to fund the program). We are molding young people for future leadership.”

Looking to the future, Jensen acknowledges the county may face tough decisions.

For example, the commissioners are looking at the impact should the Napa Junction rail line re-open for use in Yankton County.

The commission has been approached by Dakota Plains, which is interested in building a grain facility alongside a re-opened rail. The commissioners are weighing the possible economic benefits of Dakota Plains’ plans against the county’s anticipated costs of upgrading roads to handle the expected heavy truck traffic. The commissioners are also looking at the proposal’s impact on grain elevators and other businesses in Yankton County.

No matter what happens, Jensen predicted the commissioners will continue “to think outside the box” in looking for compromises and solutions.

Jensen remains optimistic about the future, even with the often-unpredictable nature of agriculture and its rapid changes.

“I’m very proud of the commission,” he said. “We don’t always do everything right, but we take the attitude that we’re trying to do what’s best for Yankton County. We want to be helpful in making things better, even 20 years down the road.”

Farm

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think the processes that we have gone through have really changed a lot and greatly affected how we do research.”

For example, precision agriculture and the Global Positioning System (GPS) have greatly simplified the laying out of plots. The research also benefits from monitors that provide yield data.

“The broad description of the research stays the same, but we are always trying to get more out of less,” he said. “There is more of the push with the world food needs to get more product out of the same acre.”

In the future, Sexton sees more research integrating livestock and crop production.

“We are looking more at grazing and how to squeeze the most out of the land in the most sustainable manner,” he said. “We are environmentally conscious and want to be good stewards.”

That’s why it’s important

to maintain a number of research stations across the state, Rops said.

“South Dakota is the land of infinite variety. We think having a number of stations across the state is vitally important, as you move from southeast to the northeast and then transition to the central and west,” he said. “We also have researchers from campus who set out plots at different stations. You are also spreading out your risk for weather catastrophes.”

With one round of fiscal cuts behind him, Rops remains hopeful the budget ax

won’t chop the Beresford station in the future.

“Of the cuts made, I guess I’m most concerned about the cuts at our ag research stations,” he said. “We do the best we can for programming and research at Beresford, but we closed two stations because there wasn’t enough money to operate them.”

The research centers should be seen as a benefit, not as a cost, Rops said.

“I think it’s time to invest in agricultural research,” he said. “The return on investment will be huge.”

Future

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were really built as sort of the linkage between the farmer, the land and the national economy,” he said. “Those communities were built to serve a large population of farmers, and as the number of farmers shrinks dramatically, there’s less and less people to do business in those communities. Fewer people are sending their kids to school and attending churches, and that’s had a profound impact on the rural community. There just isn’t the farm population there anymore to support those com-

munities, so those communities are struggling.”

Hassebrook added that as competition grows stronger, smaller farms have had to grow each year to make the same income. This has led many individuals to look elsewhere for opportunities.

“For a lot of families, it’s meant that they’ve encouraged their kids to look elsewhere for a livelihood,” he said.

Hassebrook also stressed that the structure of agriculture, not just the number of farms, can have a profound impact on the rural community. Referencing a report from approximately 30 years ago, he said that communities that are surrounded by farms that

are larger than a family can operate are made up of a few wealthy elites, a majority of poor laborers and virtually no middle class.

“That is not progress. That is social decay,” he said.

Despite the negative impact consolidation has had on the rural community, Hassebrook said there are opportunities for future generations in agriculture. However, it may require a change in strategy.

“There may be fewer opportunities in corn and soybean production, but there are more opportunities than there used to be for farmers to start new enterprises — like wineries — that cater to folks that are looking for a quality local

food product and experience,” he said. “There are also opportunities now for a small business in southeast South Dakota to sell their products or services nationwide on the Internet. So there is a whole new generation of opportunities in rural America. The key is we have to be entrepreneurial.”

With those opportunities becoming more abundant, Hassebrook said he is hopeful for the times ahead, but people must be willing to take the steps needed.

“There’s a clear path for a bright future for rural America,” he said. “It’s up to rural people to demand the right kind of policies and take local action to tap into those opportunities.”

Cost

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in the U.S., but the payments are often needed to make a living.

“Mechanization made farming easier,” Ikerd said. “But farmers still had to expect to put in full time on the job if they expected to make a full-time living. So, a full-time mechanized farmer had to have a lot more land and a lot more capital tied up in machinery and equipment just to make a living. With mechanization, farms became larger and it became more difficult to make a living on a small farm.”

Annual sales from commodity farming need to top \$100,000 a year at a minimum to cover all annual costs and hopefully glean at least a \$20,000 net profit to provide a living income, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which is actually below the poverty threshold.

“Is a farm with total sales of \$100,000 large enough to provide a decent living for a family?” Ikerd asked. “The answer depends on how, and how well, the farm is used. Four hundred acres of 100-bushel-per-acre corn at \$2.50 per bushel will generate total sales of \$100,000. However, at a return-over-direct costs of \$50 per acre, only \$20,000 in total will be generated to cover debt payments, taxes, depreciation, and other fixed cost. This may leave far less than \$20,000 as a return to labor, management, and the family’s equity in the farm — the return that family living expenses will have to come from.”

If a farm family is able to live comfortably on this net return, here is what various commodity farmers need in order to make a living wage farming full time for a family of three, specified according to enterprise, reports the University of Minnesota:

- Corn — 428 acres with a five-year average net (after expenses) return of \$280 per acre
- Soybean — 728 acres

with a five-year average net return of \$165 per acre

- Alfalfa — 561 acres with a five-year average net return of \$214 per acre
- Hog — 31,000 head finished per year with a five-year average net return of \$3.86 per head
- Beef feedlot — 148,000 head finished per year with a five-year average net return of 81 cents per head
- Cow-calf — 6,000 cows with a five-year average net return of \$19.96 calf.

Add to this: according to the Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society, farm businesses that start from scratch can take 10 years until they breakeven, let alone make a profit, which likely won’t be a livable amount for many more years. Plus, net profit can be quickly usurped by weather events such as hail, flooding, and drought or by market dips and widespread economic downturns.

“We finally broke even seven years into the business,” said one dairy farmer at an informal farmers gathering this summer near Lincoln, Neb., during a group discussion on beginning farmers, “but it was another three years before we were making any profit to speak of.”

In effect, the only safe way for a beginning farmer to take on the financial risk of starting a farm business is to go in with an experienced partner. This usually means a young person joining her parents after high school or college. On her own, without the option to transition the family farm, a young person’s only option is to buy a small acreage and settle for a lifestyle farm.

This doesn’t mean that all of those commodity-based, small family farms aren’t actually hobby farms in disguise.

“Can you make a living farming?” asked Ruth Chantry who farms on the Nebraska side of the Missouri River and who spoke at the 2012 Nebraska Healthy Farms Conference. “That depends on how you define ‘living.’ If you’re talking about \$40,000 a year, probably not. If you’re talk-

ing about \$20,000, well, maybe. For us, we depend on our off-farm income but our goal is that our farm contributes a significant portion to our family living expenses. And it does.”

According to Farm Aid, the majority of producers in 2011 did not make enough money from selling their crop and livestock, even though prices were up, because input costs rose too quickly. U.S. farm expenses in 2011 surpassed \$300 billion for the first time in history. In fact, reports the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service, the average total farm household income was \$54,000, all of which was derived from off-farm jobs; the income from the farm has actually been a negative number in the five-year average. Crops were more likely to contribute positively toward the household income total, although no more than \$25,000, whereas livestock producers tend to finish in the red. The farms that are making a livable net profit are corporate operations, not small family farms.

Common sense dictates that farming is indeed a poor choice for a career. Drastic changes are needed to how the agricultural industry works to change this perception, starting with the recognition that small family farms have value, Ikerd said.

“Most real farmers are small farmers,” he added. “Small farmers produce a much small proportion of total production than do large farmers. Large farms are important in terms of providing for the food and fiber needs of society, but farm families are a part of society also. Consumers, on the average, spend about 10 cents of each dollar for food, and the farmer only gets one penny of that dime. Certainly, we cannot ignore the responsibility to provide for the food and fiber needs of people, but neither can we ignore the needs of the majority of those who rely on farming for a living.”

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