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'It was kind of hard to walk away from'

■ Boettcher emerging as next-gen farmer

SETH BOYES
Dickinson County News

Emily Boettcher recalls her younger days on the family farm, collecting hen's eggs and sometimes falling asleep on the back of a milk cow named Emma. Today, the 35-year-old is in the process of building a home near her family's property and preparing to take the reins of the operation herself.

The family farm was founded in 1936, and Boettcher remembers her family raising hogs, chickens and milk cows when she was younger. The operation slowly transitioned to raising beef around 1997, and Boettcher herself eventually headed off to Northwestern College — earning a degree in sociology and criminal justice. But she said, when she returned from school, she and her father began talking about his retirement plans. Boettcher took a paid position on the farm in 2009 — she said it was to be just a one-year trial period, but the



Emily Boettcher, of Spirit Lake, and her father practice several erosion control methods on their family farm, which falls within the watershed of Big Spirit Lake — Iowa's largest natural lake. (Photo submitted)

BOETTCHER, Page 6

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BOETTCHER

From Page 3

experience literally called her home again.

“I think it was just realizing how many challenges and different things go into farming that intrigued me,” Boettcher said. “I started to realize I kind of had my dad’s mentality on how things need to be — problem solving, hard work, long hours. I think once I got a taste of it, it was kind of hard to walk away from.”

Nearly 14 years later, she’s still at it — raising cows of her own, gaining a closer relationship with her family and continuing to use crop farming methods which help conserve and protect the area’s natural resources.

The family farm lies within the watershed of Big Spirit Lake — the largest natural lake in Iowa.

Boettcher said her family’s farm has several significant hills — one with an elevation of about 70 feet — as well as particularly erodible soil, and her father started using strip till methods about 20 years ago. The process involves cutting single rows within a field and applying fertilizer to those rows, as opposed to traditional disc tilling, which mixes fertilizer throughout the soil and can contribute to increased erosion. Crops can then be planted using a GPS system to place the seeds within about an inch of where the fertilizer was applied.

The family also uses no till practices — in which the soil isn’t tilled at all — and cover crop — crops planted to combat erosion and improve soil. Boettcher said no till farming has become more common in the last five years or so, but few have taken up strip tilling. The necessary equipment can be a considerable cost, she said, and it can take three to five years before producers start seeing gains.

“You’re really taking a big risk,” Boettcher said. “If it doesn’t work, you’ve got \$100,000 worth of equipment.”

And Boettcher’s emphasis on conservation extends beyond the family farm. She was elected last year to fill a vacancy on the Dickinson County Soil and Water Conservation Commission, which she said was looking to bring in some younger members — Boettcher came away from the uncontested race with 6,426 votes.

“My biggest reason for being on that board was I’m trying to help show conservation practices in our area,” Boettcher said. “They’re not for everybody, but since we have been utilizing cover crops for seven years, doing strip till for over 20 and no tilling for probably the last 10, I feel like I’m a good person to talk to if they have questions.”

She also hopes her experience and knowledge can help the next generation of producers. She noted many local farmers are preparing to retire, and she says those who step in may face a variety of challenges, such as large entities buying up farmland,



Boettcher graduated from the Iowa Farm Bureau Ag Leaders Institute in 2021. She had been named a recipient of the Iowa State University Extension and Outreach “Women Impacting Agriculture” award the previous year, and was recently elected to the Dickinson County Soil and Water Conservation Commission. (Photo submitted)

or they may simply need help understanding nutrient needs and applying modern technology to their individual operations.

“We’re just seeing these families really grasp the concept of their legacies, find-

ing what fits them the best and then doing everything they can to make that ground safe for future generations and profitable for them and their families going ahead,” Boettcher said.

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USDA announces Conservation Reserve Program signup for 2023

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced that agricultural producers and private landowners can begin applying for the Conservation Reserve Program General signup now through April 7, 2023.

CRP is a cornerstone voluntary conservation program offered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Vilsack said.

“The Conservation Reserve Program is one of the largest private lands conservation programs in the United States, offering a range of conservation options to farmers, ranchers and landowners,” Vilsack said. “CRP has and continues to be a great fit for farmers with less productive or marginal cropland, helping them reestablish valuable land cover to help improve water quality, prevent soil erosion, and support wildlife habitat. Under this administration, we have made several updates to the program to increase producer interest and enrollment, strengthen the climate benefits of the program and help ensure underserved producers can find a pathway to entry into CRP.”

Producers and landowners enrolled more



than 5 million acres into CRP through signups in 2022, building on the acceptance of more than 3.1 million acres in the largest Grassland CRP signup in history. There are currently 23 million acres enrolled in CRP, with 1.9 million set to expire this year. USDA's Farm Service Agency is aiming to reach the 27-million-acre cap statutorily set for fiscal year 2023.

GENERAL CRP

General CRP helps producers and landowners establish long-term, resource-conserving plant species, such as approved grasses or trees, to control soil erosion, improve water quality and enhance wildlife habitat on cropland. Additionally, General CRP includes a Climate-Smart Practice Incentive to help increase carbon sequestration and reduce greenhouse gas emissions by helping producers and landowners establish trees and permanent grasses, enhance wildlife habitat, and restore wetlands.

CONTINUOUS CRP

Under Continuous CRP, producers and landowners can enroll in CRP throughout the year. Offers are automatically accepted provided the producer and land meet the eligibility requirements and the enrollment levels do not exceed the statutory cap. The Climate-Smart Practice Incentive is also available in the Continuous sign-up.

FSA offers several additional enrollment opportunities within Continuous CRP, including the Clean Lakes Estuaries and Rivers Initiative, the State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement Initiative, the Farmable Wetlands Program, and the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program. The CLEAR30 Initiative, which was originally piloted in 12 states in the Great Lakes and Chesapeake Bay watershed, has been expanded nationwide, allowing producers and landowners to enroll in 30-year CRP contracts for water quality practices. Under this administration, FSA also moved SAFE practices back

to the Continuous CRP sign-up, giving producers and landowners more opportunities to participate in the initiative. Through the FWP, producers and landowners can enroll land in CRP as part of their efforts to restore previously farmed wetlands and wetland buffers, to improve both vegetation and water flow.

GRASSLAND CRP

FSA will announce the dates for Grassland CRP sign-up in the coming weeks. Grassland CRP is a working lands program, helping landowners and operators protect grassland, including rangeland and pastureland and certain other lands, while maintaining the areas as working grazing lands. Protecting grasslands contributes positively to the economy of many regions, provides biodiversity of plant and animal populations, and provides important carbon sequestration benefits to deliver lasting climate outcomes.

HOW TO SIGN UP

Landowners and producers interested in CRP should contact their local USDA Service Center to learn more or to apply for the program before their deadlines.

Producers with expiring CRP acres can use the Transition Incentives Program (TIP), which incentivizes producers who sell or enter a long-term lease with a beginning, veteran, or socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher who plans to sustainably farm or ranch the land.

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Jean Driscoll
checking on a
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Annie's Project: Historic program for farm women

**CHRIS KICK &
MADELINE SCHULTZ**
ISU Extension

When her husband passed in 2000 from complications with Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, Jean Driscoll found herself stepping up in some big ways to operate the family farm.

A swine and crop producer from Cedar County in eastern Iowa, Driscoll had been involved with the farm from the start, working with her husband, the late Dennis "George" Driscoll, on barn chores, recordkeeping and occasionally some fieldwork.

His death at age 53 made her knowledge of the farm all the more important, and she quickly found herself taking on more responsibility, working alongside her sons, Tom and Sean.

"When George passed, I wasn't totally blindsided because I had already worked closely with him on so many things, but there were areas where I wanted to learn more," said Driscoll. "A few years after his death, I was offered an educational opportunity to learn more and improve my knowledge."

That opportunity was "Annie's Project," an

18-hour farm business management course that empowers women in agriculture to be successful with farm finances, human resources, legal issues, marketing and agricultural production.

In its 20-year history, more than 19,000 people have completed Annie's Project courses, in 38 states and the U.S. Virgin Islands. In Iowa, more than 128 Annie's Project courses have empowered 2,200 women in agriculture.

INCREASING KNOWLEDGE

Driscoll had an advantage in that she already knew most of the ins-and-outs of her family's farm, including the financial numbers and records. She also had a strong relationship with extension, having served on the extension council for many years. Annie's Project, which she completed in 2007 with her daughter, Lori Crock, still helped take her farm knowledge to a new level.

"At the time, women like ourselves were becoming more involved with ag, and this seemed like a great opportunity," said Driscoll. "We covered topics that were important at the time and that are still important, like financial balance sheets, conservation programs, marketing, women land ownership

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and rental agreements.”

Driscoll and her daughter both actively farm today, on two separate farms near Mechanicsville, Iowa.

The elder Driscoll will turn 76 in March, and although the farm has changed over the past couple decades, she is still involved full-time with caring for feeder pigs and fieldwork, as well as recordkeeping.

Today, Jean Driscoll and her sons no-till about 1,300 acres and finish roughly 6,500 pigs a year. During planting season, she operates the seed tender, and during harvest she hauls grain from the fields.

Driscoll encourages other women who might be thinking about the Annie's Project course to get involved. No matter what their level of farm knowledge may be, she said participants will expand their knowledge, in ways that will help themselves and their families.

“I would definitely encourage other women to go through this. You're never too young to learn and there is always something new to learn,” she said.

Driscoll has continued to use the knowledge she acquired from working with Iowa State University Extension and Outreach and was honored to be recognized in 2016 as one of Iowa State's first Women Impacting Agriculture awardees. She explains her farm and the many improvements she's made in a YouTube video posted the same year.



ANNIE'S PROJECT, Page 10

Kelvin Leibold, a farm management specialist with ISU Extension and Outreach, presenting to a class of women.



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ANNIE'S PROJECT

From Page 9

REACHING EVERYONE

Although Driscoll already had a good understanding of her farm, not all Annie's Project participants are as fortunate. For some, the classes are the first significant exposure women have to what's involved with running a farm.

Kelvin Leibold, a farm management specialist with ISU Extension and Outreach, has been involved with the program in Iowa and nationally since its early years. In the beginning, he said many women were working off-farm jobs, partly stemming from the farm crisis of the 1980s, and many women were not as involved with the day-to-day operations as their spouses.

"In many cases, they (women) became distanced from the farm and didn't always have time to get involved with the financial matters and the lenders," said Leibold. "I saw a lot of stress and a lack of understanding that Annie's Project helped to overcome. As an educator, I wanted women in my audience, and Annie's provided a safe haven for this to happen."

HISTORIC BEGINNINGS

The very first Annie's Project was offered

in Illinois in 2003, to a class of 10 participants. The program was the vision of Ruth Hambleton, a University of Illinois extension educator, who modeled the program after the real-life success of her mother, the late Annette Kohlhagen Fleck.

Annie was a farm woman who grew up in a small town in northern Illinois and married a farmer in 1947. She helped navigate her family's farm through challenging times by using good recordkeeping, sound decision making, and determination in the face of adversity.

Ruth named the program in her mother's honor and it quickly caught the interest of other states. It was first offered in Iowa in 2004, by the late Bob Wells, a farm management specialist with ISU Extension and Outreach.

Wells, who lived and worked in eastern Iowa, said in a video in 2011 that Annie's Project "gave women the chance to really empower themselves with the knowledge that they are not alone in this world. There are other farm women in their neighborhood, in their area and their state that face the same problems every day that they do." National reach

Wells worked with Hambleton and other colleagues in extension to expand the program across the country, including Tim Eggers, past farm management specialist,

Kelvin Leibold, and Madeline Schultz, current president of the national Annie's Project board of directors and program manager for Women in Ag at Iowa State. The team helped advise the national organization for many years and obtained grant support from the United States Department of Agriculture.

"Iowa has been a leader in the development of Annie's Project as a national program and nonprofit organization," said Schultz. "Here in Iowa, Annie's Project continues to be a very strong program and our farm management team members see the positive impacts it makes for Iowa women in agriculture."

Ruth Hambleton serves the national board

as treasurer and said she has no doubt her mother would be proud of what the program has become.

"She'd be very flattered that Annie's project is patterned after her and I know she's looking down from heaven, just really pleased to see all that is going on," Hambleton said.

GET INVOLVED

Learn more about Annie's Project courses and other opportunities for women in agriculture in Iowa by visiting the Women in Ag program website with Iowa State University Extension and Outreach.

Learn more about the national organization and events being held across the country on the national Annie's Project website.



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Rural Iowa report shows large farms continue to grow, small farms decrease



■ Farm trends publication highlights the changing landscape of Iowa agriculture

A recent farm trends publication from Iowa State University Extension and Outreach discusses changing farm trends between 2011 and 2021, including farm sizes, production values, net incomes and debt.

In Rural Iowa at a Glance, Farm Trends (2022 Edition), David Peters, professor and extension rural sociologist at Iowa State University, shares data that shows the way agriculture in the state is shifting. One aspect of farming that has seen a great deal of change is farm size. In the past 10 years, the number of large commercial farms has doubled, while the number of small farms has decreased by 27%. Small farms have also seen sizable reductions in sales and acres farmed, with sales dropping by 59% and acres farmed dropping by 47%.

The drop in farm sales and acres farmed is tied to the fact that 68% of farms in Iowa are now operated by people who do not make the majority of their income through farming. Many small farms are operated by people who have a non-farm income or are retired, and the farm primarily serves as a place to live rather than work.

“As the numbers demonstrate, farming can be incredibly variable,” Peters said.

RURAL REPORT, Page 12

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RURAL REPORT

From Page 11

He added, “We also have a severe labor shortage in the non-farm economy, so workers in rural Iowa have options. People can choose the farm life, which involves a huge capital investment and a lot of volatility, or they can choose an off-farm job, which offers a much more stable income. For many, having an off-farm job while maintaining a small farm provides the best of both worlds.”

RISE IN FARM INCOMES

According to Peters, the data also reflects a sharp and somewhat unexpected rise in net farm incomes between 2020 and 2021. Net farm incomes increased across all farm commodities in Iowa, as well as all farm sizes and classes. This increase in net farm income allowed many farms to pay down debts, especially small and midsized farms, which saw high levels of debt utilization between 2016 and 2020.

“I was surprised by how much net farm incomes grew,” Peters said. “I knew that farm incomes would rise, however, with many government support payments for COVID and trade disputes ending in 2021, I did not expect to see commodity prices rise by as much as they did to offset those supports.”

COMMODITY DIFFERENCES

While there was a net increase in farm in-

comes across all commodities, some commodities saw greater increases than others.

Corn and soybean farms have seen steadily growing incomes, with net farm incomes doubling since 2011.

Hog farms have also seen steady growth, but net farm income was still 21% lower in 2021 than in 2011.

Poultry has been much more variable, as although net farm income has grown by 200% since 2011, poultry farms saw a large dip in income between 2013-14 due to salmonella and bird flu outbreaks.

One area of concern for Peters was the cattle sector. “Incomes in the cattle industry have not increased in the same way other commodities have increased, and many cattle farms haven’t been able to pay down debt as a result,” he added.

Peters also noted that the dairy industry has seen sharp decreases in number of farms as well as acres farmed since 2011, which is another concern.

“Our dairy sector in Iowa was small to begin with but has really gone into decline in terms of numbers,” he said.

Peters added, “The dairy industry has a long history in the state, but the trends that I am seeing indicate that this decline may unfortunately continue.”

The full report is available on the Iowa State University Extension Store.

For more information, contact David Peters by phone at 515-294-6303 or by email at dpeters@iastate.edu.



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State's new drought plan seeks to increase monitoring and proactive mitigation

JARED STRONG
Iowa Capital Dispatch

State agencies have developed Iowa's first-ever comprehensive plan to mitigate the effects of future droughts that have the potential to affect the availability of water for drinking and for agricultural and industrial uses.

It includes a proposal to install monitoring stations in every county and to create a system that will collect and analyze data from the stations, which together is expected to cost more than \$1 million.

The Iowa Drought Plan — created over the past two years by the state Department of Natural Resources, Department of Homeland Security and Emergency and Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship — doesn't mandate any drought remedies. Instead, it acts as a guide that might boost available water in rural areas and help cities anticipate potential shortages.

"We need to have a structure and a mechanism that helps state agencies — and therefore local agencies — be able to respond to

drought conditions and maybe even prepare for them in a more structured manner," said Tim Hall, the DNR's hydrology resources coordinator.

The plan calls for a new online system to better monitor and detect droughts as they form. The proposed Iowa Drought Information System would aggregate rainfall, stream flow and other data that is already collected but is dispersed across multiple websites and databases, some of which aren't publicly available.

The system would also collect data from monitoring stations in each county to track local rainfall, wind, soil moisture and temperature and groundwater levels.

The U.S. Drought Monitor uses currently available data to estimate where drought conditions exist, but it lacks precision because the monitoring of soil moisture in Iowa is sporadic, said Keith Schilling, the state geologist.

With the proposed monitoring stations in each county, "we'd give them better data,



Droughts are expected to become more common with Iowa's changing climate.

DROUGHT PLAN, Page 15

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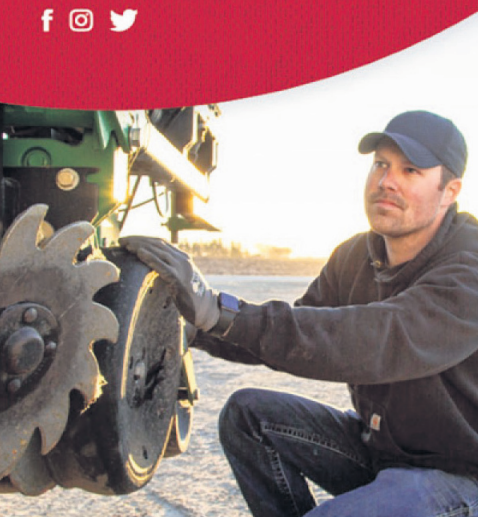


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DROUGHT PLAN

From Page 13

we'd get better data back," he said. "So they're not guessing where the drought designations are in the state. They will know where the drought conditions are."

There are 20 of the monitoring stations right now in the state, and 30 more in eastern Iowa are expected to be installed with the help of federal funding this year. It will cost about \$600,000 to install the stations in the western half of the state.

DROUGHTS MIGHT BE MORE FREQUENT

The state climatologist has noted a shift in rainfall patterns in the state, with potent storms striking smaller areas. That can lead to significant disparities in soil moisture from one county to the next or even within the same county.

Last year, two similar cornfields about six miles apart in Humboldt County in north-central Iowa had starkly different yields because one was significantly drier. The wetter land yielded 200 bushels per acre versus 140 for the dry one.

"If I had to pick an area most at risk, it is northwest Iowa," Hall said.

Much of that part of the state suffered from drought that has lessened this winter. That area of the state typically receives less precipitation than other parts of the state and has a higher concentration of livestock,

which increases the demand for water.

Further, the geology of northwest Iowa makes deep, groundwater wells undesirable, Hall said.

"It's got a lot of iron and a lot of sulfur in it," he said. "It doesn't taste good. It doesn't smell good."

As such, shallow wells that draw water near rivers are pervasive, and those are much more susceptible to droughts. In 2012, water utilities in that area of the state imposed restrictions and sought voluntary conservation from customers to preserve dwindling water supplies.

One solution for those rural water utilities is to connect to a South Dakota utility that draws large amounts of high-quality water near a dam of the Missouri River. But there are other options, including the retention of stormwater or river water during periods of high flow. An example: Hall said a northwest Iowa water utility created a drainage channel to divert water from a river, when it reaches a certain height, into a former quarry. There, the water soaks into the ground and helps feed a well field.

Droughts are predicted to become more common with the changing climate, and it's important for water utilities, municipalities and residents be more aware of conservation methods and when and how to implement them, Hall said. The new monitoring stations will help cities decide whether to restrict usage, which is most often accomplished by limiting lawn irrigation.



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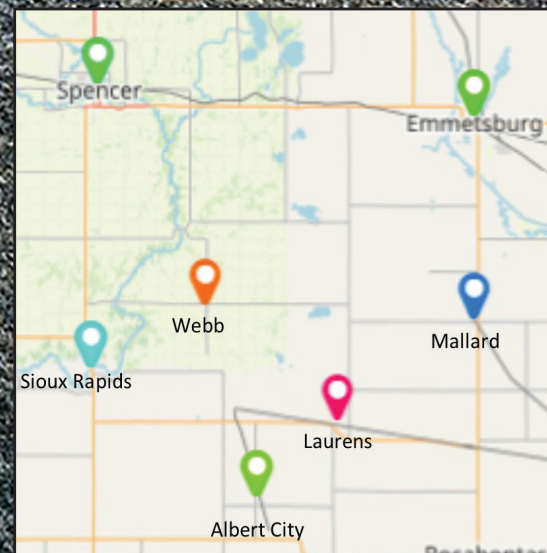
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