



‘Mini mall’ for farmers opens south of Luverne

Rock River Ag is home to two Pioneer Hi-Bred seed dealers and a salesman from Countryside Ag Supply. Brad Bergman, Alan Altman, Harlan Solma, and Joshua Rheault are part of the effort.

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Cattle producer improves work with technology

Open pens, partial-roofed lots and a full-roofed barn house cattle on the Sandbulte farm. An A-frame, full-roof 75- by 485-foot cattle barn was a big investment to put up, but it’s already paying off.

... Page 5B

Life on the inside; what’s it like at PMP?

With a tight labor force in the tri-state area, Premium Minnesota Pork goes out of its way to make sure employees are compensated and feel valued. Find out why they come and why they stay.

... Page 8B

Beef Tour set for July 13, 2021

The 40th Annual Summer Beef Tour was postponed last summer, but this year’s stops will make up for lost time.

... Page 10B

“ I think the key word is optimism. That is what was missing last spring and summer. We all have optimism now, and that can bring back the passion and creativity that is needed to have successful businesses and thus successful communities. ”



Brothers Mike (left) and Shawn Feikema operate a third generation family farm northwest of Luverne. Given longevity, the Feikemas benefit from perspective on the roller coaster of ag income over the past several months. “The outlook is better now than it was last spring and summer, but to say that it’s all better with no worries would be an overstatement,” Shawn Feikema said. “Farming is a marathon and requires us to make decisions about our business as such.”

Awash in cash or just staying afloat?

Government payments hit ag accounts after weather disasters, dismal markets and trade war, leaving farmers and ag lenders to review balances after cash covers debt

Photos and text by Lori Sorenson

Rock County farmers received \$51 million in government aid in the past few months, boosting ag income to heights not seen in nearly a decade.

Considering 700 farms in the county, simple math translates to \$76,000 in aid per farm — some getting thousands and others getting millions, depending on circumstances.

At the same time, commodity prices gained traction last fall and harvest yields were better than expected.

USDA data shows net farm income rose 43 percent over 2019 levels and 32 percent over the 20-year average. Adjusted for inflation, 2020’s income is the highest since 2013.

However, government programs accounted for nearly 40 percent of net farm income in 2020 (compared with 10 to 15 percent on average).

So, what does all this mean for a farm economy that was on the brink of disaster only six months ago?

Rock County producer Shawn Feikema said he appreciates the aid and market corrections, but he’s only cautiously optimistic.

“It is astonishing to me how quickly people believe farmers are ‘awash in cash.’ No, this is not the case for most farmers,” Feikema said.

“This may be true for those who have no debt and are near the end of their farming

Where do we go from here?

Rock County producer offers perspective in Q&A

The local ag economy circled 180 degrees from its low point last year with government aid finally coming through for farmers at the same time as commodity prices jumped.

Looking back on the roller coaster year, the Star Herald reached out to Feikema Farms for an overview — from their perspective — on where the local farm economy sits today.

Brothers Shawn and Mike Feikema are third generation operators of the farm that grew from a quarter section of land in 1950 to over 6,000 acres where today they raise cattle, corn, soybeans and wheat.

Following are questions from Star Herald editor Lori Sorenson and Shawn’s responses, some of which are included in the related story about local farm income.

Q How would you describe the current economic outlook for your operation as a comparison to this past spring and summer?

A The outlook is better now than it was last spring and summer. To say that it’s all better with no worries would be an overstatement. Farming is a marathon and requires us to make decisions about our business as such.

Our operation is looking forward with hope, and I assume that many others are as well. I think the key for us going forward is not to get caught up in the euphoria of higher prices.

Now is the time to get our game face on and do serious risk management.

As we have seen in the past few years,

Perspective on ag income/see page 6

career. For the majority, this gets us to break-even at best in the livestock sector. The grain sector probably brings us from losing to profitable.”

He and his brother, Mike Feikema,

operate a third generation family farm northwest of Luverne. Given longevity, the Feikemas benefit from perspective.

“The outlook is better now than it was last spring and summer, but to say that it’s all better with no worries would be an overstatement,” Shawn Feikema said.

“Farming is a marathon and requires us to make decisions about our business as such.”

That’s also the message from ag lender Ryan DeBates.

“We can start to be cautiously optimistic about our future,” said DeBates, Security Savings Bank president, Luverne. “If you make good decisions when times are good — debt reduction, conservative capital purchases — it will help you weather the next storm.”

This approach to farm management — plus help from Mother Nature and the government — is what got the Feikemas and many other local farmers through the economic storm of 2020.



For Feikema Farms, relief payments came just in time. “The livestock industry got decimated, and I do not think there is enough money around to make that sector whole again,” Shawn said.

Rock County ag income/see next page

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Mike Feikema runs the feed truck along cattle bunks on a sub-zero day Feb. 15 at Feikema Farms northwest of Luverne.

“... You never stop thinking about what could happen. It is the same thing that tells you to put your seatbelt on. ... there is nothing that guarantees that we stay in business. We must make decisions the best we can to ensure we stay in business for tomorrow but also for the next generation.”

— Mike Feikema,
Feikema Farms

Rock County ag income — awash with cash?/from page 1B

Government checks were life preserver for farmers drowning in debt

To gauge progress, it bears noting that only that only six months ago the farm economy was bleak.

Five years of dismal commodity prices, devastating natural disasters and a global trade war came to a head in 2020 just as the pandemic began wreaking havoc on the economy.

Then, COVID-19 hit packing plants.

Smithfield Foods in Sioux Falls shut down in April when more than 230 workers tested positive for the virus. The plant, which takes in roughly 14,000 hogs per day, is one of the nation's top pork processors, and its closure sparked alarm in the local ag sector.

“It's not good,” Kevin Barnhart told the Star Herald in an April 16, 2020, interview. “The sooner we can get Smithfield back online, the better ... before the next plant goes down.”

Barnhart is president of Rock County Pork Producers and works for Schwartz Farms, the largest local hog supplier, which trucks more than 8,000 animals per week from Rock County barns to Smithfield.

After seeking other outlets and adjusting rations, some growers ended up euthanizing pigs that had nowhere to go.

“I hope we don't lose any independent producers because of this,” Barnhart said in April.

“It's not one thing. It's a buildup of things. And it's not just hogs. ... When our farmers don't do well, we don't do well in Rock County. We live and die on the backs of our farmers.”

Cattle producer and Rock County Farm Bureau president Peter Bakken also weighed in last spring.

The 25-percent crash in the cattle market after coronavirus closures resulted in a million dollar loss to his family's operation in a few weeks' time.

He shared his story with the Star Herald and several national press interviews.

“It's very frustrating that we've worked so hard, yet we have no control over whether we can recover from this loss,” Bakken told the national press.

“I consider myself to be a well-established farmer and even for me this is going to be a major hit. It would be that much tougher if you were just getting started.”

Gaining ground or breaking even?

Fast forward nine months, and ag producers are reminded that farming is a roller coaster, and successful operations adapt to sudden swings and curves.

Bakken operates Blac-X Land and Cattle with his brother, Jay Bakken, and they're applying government checks against the debt they've accrued, and they're seeing only a modest net gain.

“We're looking at financial statements and cashing

checks that kept coming, but when it came time to do that, we realized that we needed this money to get back to zero,” Bakken said last week.

“That did give you a huge infusion of cash back to your operation. ... but when it came down to it, you needed it to keep the boat afloat.”

DeBates shared similar sentiments from his banking perspective.

“It was pretty tough; there's no doubt about it,” he said. “There were a lot of things happening all at one time ... you just have to be able to weather the storm.”

Was anyone ready to throw in the towel?

He said many producers were facing difficult decisions.

“There were a number of producers that were at the intersection,” DeBates said. “But there were also many producers who were able to weather the storm.”

He said the balance sheets are unique to each farmer's operation, but higher commodity prices and the stimulus

Rock County agriculture income/continued on page 4



Hungry cattle line up at the bunk Monday afternoon, Feb. 15, as Mike Feikema comes by with the feed truck. In sub-zero temperatures he said livestock burn more energy to stay warm and therefore need more feed to maintain weight.



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Mavis Fodness photos/0225 Ag Tab 2021 Rock River Ag
Local Pioneer Hi-Bred seed salesmen joined forces to create Rock River Ag LLC that combines similar agri-businesses together under one roof. Pictured from left are Alan Altman with Countryside Ag Services, independent Pioneer seed salesman Harlan Solma, Pioneer seed promoter Brad Bergman and independent Pioneer seed salesman Joshua Rheault.

Rock River Ag is ‘mini mall’ for farmers’ one-stop shopping

By Mavis Fodness
Decades of agricultural experience merged under one roof recently when a “one-stop shop” appeared south of Luverne.

The joint location is at the corner of Hwy. 75 and 61st Street and provides a home to two Pioneer Hi-Bred seed dealers and a salesman from Countryside Ag Supply.

New Pioneer Hi-Bred promoter Brad Bergman said there is an open office for another similar ag business.

Jointly they are housed under Rock River Ag LLC, a joint venture by Bergman and Pioneer Hi-Bred seed salesman Joshua Rheault.

“Basically we are kind of like a ‘mini mall,’” he said. “People who come want to buy seed or want to talk to a chemical guy, and they can do both here.”

Bergman designed the combination office complex and warehouse using knowledge gained from 18 years in the building construction industry.

He will become a Pioneer Hi-Bred seed salesman in 2023, when current salesman Harlan Solma, who rents an office in the Rock River Ag

building, switches positions with Bergman. Solma, with his 40 years of experience in seed sales, will then become a Pioneer promoter, a position Bergman now fills.

Rheault, who has been an independent Pioneer Hi-Bred salesman in the Hills-Beaver Creek area for nine years, and Bergman took the

“Thirty years ago you were throwing bags (of corn) into a six-row planter. In this day and age you can pick up a 50-unit Probox (which contains the equivalent of 50) bags) through a seed tender and have the planter loaded in half the time.”

— Brad Bergman, Pioneer Hi-Bred promotor and designer/developer of Rock River Ag, a multi-service agency near Luverne

Pioneer Hi-Bred officials’ suggestions and merged Pioneer seed dealers and similar agribusinesses together under one roof.

“We’ve just put the pieces in place for a transition at that time when everything comes under one roof and officially becomes Rock

River Ag,” Bergman said.

Having a local office appealed to Alan Altman, who began working for Countryside Ag Supply, a chemical and fertilizer company based in Hawarden, Iowa, a year ago.

Until renting an office and warehouse space in Rock River Ag’s facility,

Altman worked out of his Luverne home or his pickup truck.

Altman, who has worked in the chemical-fertilizer industry for 35 years, said the one-stop location appeals to today’s farmers, who rely on various industry experts for profitable farming

business suggestions.

“They (farmers) have no time to research all they need to do because they have other things to do,” Altman said.

Occupants at Rock River Ag agree that customer service is a priority.

Rock River Ag/see page 7B

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Rock County ag income — awash with cash?/from page 2

“It’s important to remember we don’t wake up in the morning and decide, ‘Which farm are we going to shut down today?’ That’s not the case at all, because when they’re successful, we’re successful. Having a relationship with your lender ... It’s easy when times are good, but having those difficult conversations and working together through those tough circumstances helps you both have a positive outcome.”

— Ryan DeBates,
Security Savings Bank,
Luverne branch



Ryan DeBates at Security Savings Bank, Luverne, sketches out short- and long-term debt to illustrate options for farmers balancing assets and liabilities.

provide options for everyone. “They’re able to make the payments. Maybe they had to sell livestock or grain at a loss, so there was a question about whether or not we could get their 2020 line of credit paid for. Now they have been able to zero out 2020,” DeBates said. “For some people the influx of cash is a lifeboat, it was a saving grace. For others, maybe they were able to build some equity they lost by paying down debt.” He said there’s emotional relief among farmers who can finally exhale. “The conversations are easier now because we got that shot in the arm from the government programs that were available to them,” he said. “The conversations now aren’t about ‘Do we have to throw in the towel?’ At least now there are more options to turn the corner in the right direction.”

Communication in itself is key to survival, he said. “It’s important to remember we don’t wake up in the morning and decide, ‘Which farm are we going to shut down today?’ That’s not the case at all,” DeBates said. “Because when they’re successful, we’re successful.” He said it’s all about working together, making difficult decisions to sell some assets or possibly even land. “Having that relationship with your lender ... It’s easy when times are good,” DeBates said. “But having those difficult conversations and working together through those tough circumstances helps you both have a positive outcome.” He said he’s also

Rock County ag income/
continued on page 6

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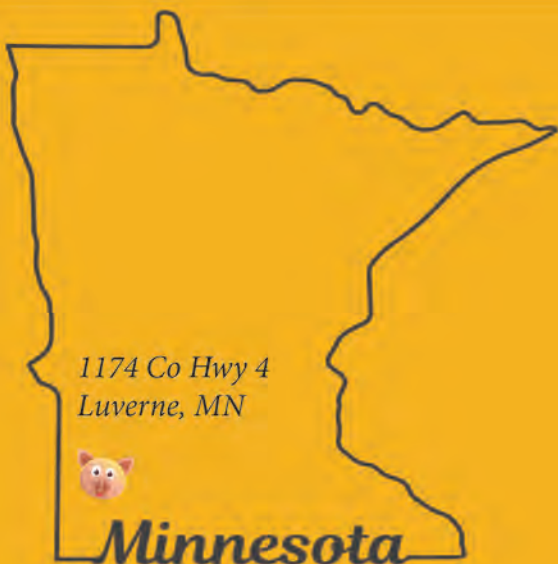
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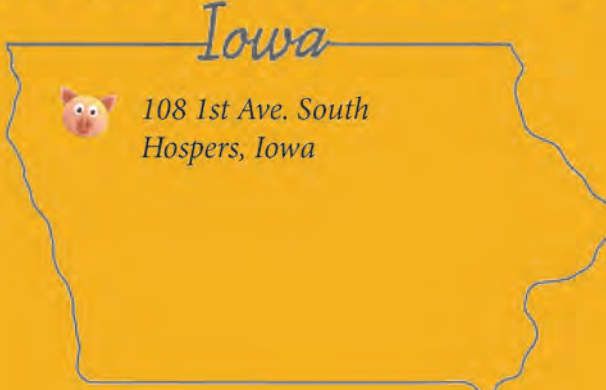




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Mavis Fodness photo/0225 Ag Tab 2021 Sandbulte
Mike Sandbulte stands inside the new full-roof cattle barn, which allows livestock protection from the weather extremes. The barn, built in 2020, is not fully enclosed to promote good ventilation for the stock that have full winter coats that protect them from the extreme cold. Daily chores in the barn consist of making sure the stock is fed twice a day. No bedding is needed, and manure removal is necessary only once a year. **Below**, Sandbulte loads feed for 1,800 head of cattle east of Hardwick.

On coldest days of year, cattle still require hands-on feeding

Technology, modern equipment, new barn design make the job easier for local livestock farmers

By Mavis Fodness
Twice a day 3,700 pairs of eyes wait for food at M & K Feeders Inc., a cattle feedlot located east of Hardwick in Battle Plain Township.
The daily regimen — even in below-zero temperatures and wind chills — has Mike Sandbulte (who owns M & K Feeders with his wife, Kandi) mixing the 84,600 pounds of the needed feed daily to bring the animals to the ideal market weight of 1,500 pounds in 200 days or less.
For each feeding Sandbulte uses a payload to load ingredients — silage, ground hay, corn, extruded soybeans and distillers grains — into a feed wagon. Sandbulte then hops into the tractor to auger the mixture

from the wagon into the bunks alongside each of the 14 pens of steers and heifers at the feedlot. He completes the loading, mixing and delivering multiple times until all the cattle are fed.
Sandbulte appreciates the modern-day machinery, computer technology, and improved finishing facilities that make the daily chores easier than when he was a youth growing up on the family farm west of Hardwick.
“At that time, a lot of the chores were done with a wheelbarrow,” he said.
The manual feeding of the cattle and hogs and cleaning their pens didn’t dampen

Sandbulte feed technology/see page 9



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Perspective/from page 1B

one political comment or one regulation can turn the markets upside down in a matter of days.

Q. Some farmers I spoke with last summer were about to give up hope as tough circumstances came to a head. Bankers told me we were at risk of losing some local farms. Were you concerned?

A. We have a solid partnership with our bank, and they believe in us and we trust them. Many farmers have this type of relationship with their bankers. If they do not, they will not last long.

As a business owner, you never stop thinking about what could happen. It is the same thing that tells you to put your seatbelt on. Sure, we are always concerned about our business. However, as business owners there is nothing that guarantees that we stay in business.

We must make decisions the best we can to ensure that we stay in business for tomorrow but also for the next generation. All farmers want to pass on their legacy, and so as the owner you never want to be the generation that lost it. This becomes to some degree a large stressor for farmers that many do not understand.

Q. Considering government support and the sudden uptick in commodity prices, it appears we are suddenly awash in cash. Is this the case? Or did we just come back to breakeven?

A. This question makes me laugh. It is always astonishing to me how quickly people believe farmers are “awash in cash.” No, this is not the case for

Perspective on ag income/continued page 14

Rock County ag income — awash with cash?/from page 4B

encouraged by farming’s recent boost for the local economy.

“Anytime they have an influx of cash, it helps our local economy,” DeBates said. “We can start to be cautiously optimistic about our future.”

Farm cash circulating on Main Street

Government aid allowed many farmers to exhale and make investments in their operation that they’d been putting off.

“I know at Blac-X, we crawled under our rock and said we aren’t spending any money,” Bakken said about 2020.

“I think the thing you’re going to see is that the money that kept you afloat is now stimulating the economy. It’s done what it was supposed to do. People are spending money. ... whether it’s on bale shredder, feed wagons, tires ...”

C&B sales representative Tom Ver Steeg said this has been the case at Luverne’s John Deere implement dealership.

“I would say when we got the bump in market prices, yields and government relief payments, it all started to pick up,” he said. “Sales have



Eli Bakken, Feikema Farms employee, checks rations before mixing feed for the next load to be hauled to cattle bunks.

and buy used tractors straight out, no trade-in, because they don’t want to pay taxes.”

Now he said C&B is scrambling to keep with demand in a market where production had been slowed by the pandemic.

“If someone wanted to buy a new tractor, you can’t get a 2021 model, unless the dealership has reserved production slots,” Ver Steeg said, referring to larger row-crop tractors.

“They’re getting spoken for quickly.”

But the sudden improvement in cash flow is a good problem to have.

“It’s helped implement dealers and Main Street businesses — the ones that were open,” Ver Steeg said.

“Mom maybe needs a new washing machine. Maybe we’ll go out to eat. ... It’s spreading to the local economy, there’s no doubt.”

For Feikema and the rest of the ag community, he’s glad to have received some government stimulus to spread around.

“Fortunately for communities, farms are asset based and purchasing and repairing those assets takes lots of money which then gets spent at dealerships, vet clinics, farm supply stores, banks, insurance agents and, yes, we do like to take our wives and families out for supper and entertainment occasionally, too,” he said.

“So, the money we get travels through all the hands of the community. Farmers love the communities they live in.”



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Treated concrete floors lead into each of the office areas and the training room at Rock River Ag. (Mavis Fodness photos)

A 80-by-160-foot warehouse at Rock River Ag allows for storage of seed corn and soybeans. Overhead doors allow easy loading and unloading of products.

Rock River Ag is 'mini mall' for farmers to use as one-stop shopping/continued from page 3B

Each is willing to deliver
directly to the farm.

The familiarity with customers' cropland and knowledge of previous crop input history saves the farmer needed time, especially during the busy planting times.

"As the industry moves forward, you're going to see a lot more technology involved," Bergman said.

"It ties into everything that's going digital or electronic."

A training room within Rock River Ag provides seating for 24 individuals behind desks and

chairs for participants to easily take notes. The room comes complete with on-site presentation equipment for guest speakers to conduct meetings about industry advancements.

A kitchenette provides an area for lunch and refreshments.

Bergman and Rheault have experienced firsthand the changes the farm industry with their continued hands-on involvement in farming stretching back three decades, when they grew up on family farms.

In addition to selling Pioneer

seed, Rheault continues to operate a multiple generation farm near Beaver Creek. Bergman assists his brother, Brian, with planting and harvesting near Kenneth.

"Thirty years ago you were throwing bags (of corn) into a six-row planter," Bergman said.

"In this day and age you can pick up a 50-unit Probox (which contains the equivalent of 50 bags) through a seed tender and have the planter loaded in half the time."

Time has become a factor in spring planting in recent years

when the window to get the seed in the ground is often shortened due to weather events.

And if the seed does make it in the ground, it may not thrive.

Bergman said a recent training session at Rock River Ag utilized satellite images of past crop years to see crop failures within maturing fields.

Treating of the seed may help with those failed areas.

Rock River Ag can individually treat soybeans at their facility with an insecticide or fungicide for special fields, where insects or

fungus was a problem.

"Beans have made more advances in the last five years," Rheault said.

Treating of corn seed is completed at the Pioneer Hi-Bred production plant in Algona, Iowa.

Keeping up with industry changes and how the advances transfer into the field are what Rheault, Bergman, Solma and Altman are focused on, saving farmers time and turning a profit through improved efficiencies.



At left, Rock River Ag also offers farmers an option to treat soybeans with an insecticide or fungicide before planting by running the seeds through a treater. (Center) in addition to an office complex and product warehouse, the new Rock River Ag facility, located south of Luverne on Hwy. 75, features a training room that allows guest speakers to introduce new products and technological advances to small groups. **At right** large plastic crates called proboxes hold the equivalent of 50 individual bags of corn each and provide a fast way for farmers to fill planter boxes.



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The logo for Rock River AG, LLC is a large, rounded rectangular emblem with a green border. Inside, a stylized green plant with a yellow flower-like top is positioned above the text "ROCK RIVER" in large, bold, black capital letters. Below this, "AG, LLC" is written in a smaller font, flanked by two short yellow horizontal lines. The bottom half of the emblem features a green background with a white, winding river-like path. Below the main logo, there are three smaller elements: on the left, the Pioneer logo (a green stylized plant inside a rounded square) followed by the word "PIONEER" in bold black capital letters; in the center, the name "Harlan" above the phone number "605-759-7571"; on the right, the name "Josh" above "605-929-1666". At the bottom right, the name "Brad" is above "605-366-9913". A solid green horizontal bar at the very bottom contains the address "1302 61st St. Luverne MN 56156" in white text.

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Life on the inside ... What’s it like to be part of the PMP team?

By Lori Sorenson

One of Rock County’s biggest ag industries sits quietly on the west edge of Luverne, diligently adding value to the local hog market and providing employment for hundreds of local workers.

Premium Minnesota Pork employs more than 360 workers from Rock and Nobles counties in Minnesota, Lincoln and Minnehaha counties in South Dakota, Lyon County in Iowa and other surrounding communities.

Sixty-two workers are from Rock county.

About the same number come from Worthington and a few more than that are from Sioux Falls.

PMP offers transportation from Sioux Falls to Luverne for Premium Minnesota Pork and from Worthington to Hospers for Premium Iowa Pork.

With a tight labor force in the tri-state area, PMP human resources manager Stephanie Bickerstaff said she and her company go out of their way to make sure employees are compensated and feel valued.

“I’m aware of the growing development in Sioux Falls, and from an HR aspect of course it raises concern,”



Star Herald file photo by Lori Sorenson

Premium Iowa Pork purchased the processing facility on the west edge of Luverne from Pilgrim’s Pride, formerly Gold’n Plump, in 2017. Early in 2019 PMP broke ground on the \$30 million project to retrofit and expand the 78,000-square-foot facility to the current 128,000 square feet, counting the enclosed monoslope hog barn. By mid-September the plant was operating at 100 percent. By the following summer of 2020, the Luverne plant was already expanding, breaking ground on a 10,000-square-foot \$7 million cooler addition that would allow the plant to double its capacity — to 4,500 hogs per day.

she said. “But knowing the company values and family dynamics, I’m confident in our workforce.”

Part of that confidence, she said, is knowing each employee on a personal level at PMP in Luverne.

“They are more than just an employee number here at Premium Minnesota Pork,” she said. “It truly is a family dynamic and that will make us as a company successful.”

Starting pay is \$14 per hour for production workers with immediate job grade pay to \$17.95, depending on the position.

PMP employees have full benefits and 401k available after 60 days, raises after six months and another after a year, along with paid vacation after the first year and annual raises thereafter.

Bickerstaff said PMP has drawn employees to relocate from Missouri, Sioux City, and other areas to be a part of the building process

for the new operation in Luverne.

PMP is working on construction for a building addition that will expand carcass cooler capacity.

When it’s completed in April, it will increase daily harvest capacity to over 4,000 head per day.

It will create additional opportunities for local hog growers and about 75 more employees.

PMP supervisors say it’s not difficult to keep employees satisfied, given the welcoming atmosphere at the plant and in the community.

“The businesses that I stop at in Luverne see the Premium Iowa logo on my

clothing, they ask about the plant and all have had positive comments,” said Corey Smith, cold side superintendent.

“Everyone in the community seems happy to have us here. ... Many of our current employees have been here since the first day of production.”

Bill Tuttle, kill floor superintendent, said he’s enjoyed the start-up process of PMP in Luverne.

“The people that I did know it was good to get reacquainted with and the ones I did not know I have enjoyed talking to them and learning about them,” he said.

“The one thing that I do see around here is the amount of family members that all have come to work together. We have a lot of husband-wife teams and siblings that have decided that this is where they want to work.”

PMP managers and supervisors often remind employees that quality work is rewarded, and that opportunities exist for advancement in the company.

“It has been a fun and exciting experience since Day 1,” said Mitchel Duffy, maintenance supervisor.

“Every day has posed an opportunity to learn, teach, or assist with my fellow co-workers to start this facility up the right way and to keep it running the way that it does.”

He said the plant has reconnected him socially with old and new friends from Rock County and surrounding communities.

“Working at this plant has presented many

“We are all a team; it has been like being a close-knit family where I can be myself. We are all living the highs and lows of this startup together. ... We get to have a voice in which we can have a significant impact on the success of our business. ... I am truly grateful and blessed to have this opportunity and excited for my future growth within the company.”

— Stephanie Bickerstaff, PMP human resources, Luverne

opportunities for myself to grow,” he said. “And I believe it poses many opportunities for the people of the surrounding area as well.”

From her personal perspective as an HR manager, Bickerstaff said it’s been rewarding to be part of the process in building a workforce for a brand-new operation in the community.

“The challenges and opportunities are constantly changing,” she said. “Hiring suitable candidates is challenging, but hiring for a startup during a pandemic has been an experience. It has forced me to adapt and move away from preset to-do list and routines.”

Bickerstaff said every day is different and presents new challenges and possibilities.

“I can continually grow personally and professionally,” she said.

“The passion I have for this company and culture has been positive and exciting. I have a chance to get to know my co-workers and our employees on a personal level, which has allowed me to create bonds with everyone.”

These shared challenges, she said, have resulted in stronger relationships at PMP.

“We are all a team; it has been like being a close-knit family where I can be myself,” Bickerstaff said.

“We are all living the highs and lows of this startup together. We wear many hats to be successful in our decision making. We get to have a voice in which we can have a significant impact on the success of our business. I personally have been exposed to the intricacies of many operations in this startup.”

She said helping a company start up seemed daunting at first, but now she said the rewards have been worth the effort.

“Although making the decision to work a startup has come with compromises, there have been other benefits that have personally been a huge upside and life-changing for myself and my family,” Bickerstaff said.

“I am truly grateful and blessed to have this opportunity and excited for my future growth within the company.”

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Sandbulte feed technology improves care for cattle, workload for humans/continued from page 5B

Sandbulte's desire to one day farm and raise cattle.

Two years ago, after spending 17 years driving semis hauling livestock and freight, he purchased the existing feedlot near the Rock River from JR Scott in 2019.

“Farming was always a dream of mine,” he said. “I’ve been around it and know the work that needs to take place.”

The choice of raising cattle was deliberate versus working inside a hog facility.

"Being outside is a lot more appealing," he said.

Full-cover barn saves on labor, less stress on cattle

Sandbulte's operation offers a visual history of how cattle feeding has progressed through the decades in efforts to save time.

“I have every variant of a pen on the place,” he said.

Open pens, partial-roofed lots and a full-roofed barn to house cattle are all used on the Sandbulte farm. The most recent structure, an A-frame, full-roof 75- by 485-foot cattle barn was constructed last year.

"It's a big investment to put up, but less investment in labor by far," Sandbulte said.

Cattle owner Kevin Rozeboom of Luverne financed the building of the new barn next to Sandbulte's operation, and in exchange Sandbulte custom feeds Rozeboom's cattle in the new barn that can hold up to 990 head.

According to Rock County Feedlot Officer Doug Bos, the most recent cattle barns like Rozeboom's constructed in Rock County provide cattle with



Mavis Fodness photo/0225 Ag Tab 2021 Sandbulte

Even though temperatures outside the full-roof barn were in the negative digits, steam rises from the cattle, which have grown heavy coats against the cold. The barn makes it easier for humans to care for the animals. The full-roof cattle barn is not fully enclosed. A gap at the top of the A-frame structure allows steam from the cattle to rise and leave the barn. Low moisture through adequate ventilation improves the respiratory health of the cattle inside.

full overhead protection from weather elements.

"We probably have 10-12 of those in the county," he said. "Several factors have pushed producers — to want cattle

sheltered versus open lots — toward the full-cover barns.”

Sandbulte has found that Rozeboom's barn doesn't require him to provide bedding inside the barn due to the slatted floor covered with rubber mats. Manure falls through the floor slats into a 12-foot pit under the barn. The pit is designed to be emptied once a year.

In the year since the barn has been in use, Sandbulte sees firsthand how much less time he spends tending to the cattle housed in the six pens in the covered cattle barn compared to the other eight pens that house cattle with little to no overhead cover from the weather.

While Sandbulte hasn't researched if the cattle's rate of gain is better in the new facility, he notices that the cattle are less bothered by the weather.

“Just looking at them during a snow storm, the cattle appear to be more comfortable,” Sandbulte said.

Because their environment under the roof doesn't change, neither does the cattle's feed consumption.

Sandbulte does see a drop in feed consumption of his own cattle housed in open lots and those with only a partial roof over the bunk area where they eat.

The cattle without overhead cover generally settle next to the windbreak of stacked round bales during a snowstorm and don't move to the bulks to eat until the weather event passes.

Unlike the full-cover barn, snow collects in the open and partial-covered lots along with manure from the 900 head. Both snow and manure are

removed regularly to keep the cattle comfortable and in their pens. A snowdrift through a pen may allow cattle to walk over the fences.

"After a storm I am extremely busy getting the bedding built back up and snow removed," he said.

New barn provides overhead protection

The full-cover barn, however, is not fully enclosed on the sides in order to keep fresh air flowing freely through the building.

Overhead doors on each end provide an alley to drive the tractor and feed wagon through to auger the ground mixture into bunks.

At the Sandbulte farm, the barn is positioned north-

Sandbulte technology/see page 16



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Rock Nobles Cattlemen’s Summer Beef Tour set for July 13

By Lori Sorenson

With feedlots and pastures still buried under snow, local cattle producers are planning the 40th Annual Summer Beef Tour.

The event was postponed last summer amid pandemic concerns, but the group hopes this year’s stops will make up for the delay.

“Even though it has been postponed, we’re currently planning on having a ‘normal’ tour,” said Rock Nobles Cattlemen’s president Jay Bakken, Beaver Creek.

“However, we will take into consideration any changes that we may be required to make to safely host the event.”

He said the majority of the tour is outdoors in open air and socially distanced.

“We’ll do our best to make the event enjoyable and safe for everyone that wants to attend,” Bakken said.

“We’re excited to get this Minnesota Cattlemens summer tradition back on track and put some “normal” back in the summer.



“It’s a good learning opportunity for other cattlemen across the state to see how our producers are managing their facilities.”

— Jay Bakken

The July 13 event, hosted this year by the Rock Nobles Cattlemen, features eight cattle-producing families from Rock and Nobles counties who will host tours of their facilities.

The purpose of the event is to showcase feedlot production in the two counties, Bakken said.

“The purpose is to promote the industry and show off innovative practices



that are happening out here,” he said.

“It’s a good learning opportunity for other cattlemen across the state to see how our producers are managing their facilities.”

Summer Beef Tour stops include:

- Binford Feedlots (Grant and Eric Binford), northeast of Luverne, features bedded barns, slatted barns and

modern feed commodity facilities.

- G&A Farms (Glen and Matt Boeve), Steen, features outdoor lots and a unique wastewater handling system with dewatering and pivot irrigation.

- Brad VanDeBerg, Hills, features a slatted barn, a unique shipping and receiving barn and working facility.

- Dave Mente, Adrian, features the tour’s only cow/calf operation. It will highlight rotational grazing and local seed stock display to illustrate genetics of breeding bulls.

- R&R Thier (Ryan Thier), Rushmore, features outdoor yards and bedded and slatted barns.

- Summit Lake Livestock (Russ and Brian Penning), Wilmont, features a unique hog-finishing barn

converted into cattle slat facilities.

- Brake Feedyards, Wilmont, is a multi-generational Brake family feedlot operation

- 3B Farms, Adrian, is a multi-generational Bullerman family slatted barn feedlot operation.

Fifteen tour buses will depart at 7 a.m. from headquarters at the ice arena in Worthington to the farms, where they will spend about an hour talking to the producers and viewing the facilities.

On the way to each stop, video footage from each farm is broadcast on the tour buses.

All buses will stop at the Magnolia New Vision facility for a noon meal, and then return to the ice arena in Worthington at 5:15 p.m. for an evening steak supper.

Tour isn’t just for beef producers

The Summer Beef Tour is for anyone who wants to board a bus and view the local operations, according to Bakken.

“It’s open to anyone, from fellow farmers to the local priest and hairdresser,” Bakken said. “You don’t have to be a farmer or involved in the beef industry to attend.”

He added that the \$20 registration fee includes a midday lunch stop and a grilled steak dinner. The registration fee is waived for students, college and younger.

The Minnesota State Cattlemen’s Association has been hosting Summer Beef Tours for 40 years, and Bakken said the longevity speaks well of the state beef industry and its producers.

“We have a good state organization made up of local producers who are willing to take on the work of hosting the tours,” he said.

“And we’ve had good support from our business partners who get to come along and learn about what we’re doing. ... It creates opportunity for some face-to-face interaction between these vendors and producers.”

Bakken said the ag economy in the beef industry is fairly far-reaching and the Summer Beef Tour is a good time for everyone to come together.

“It’s also a social time for camaraderie in the beef business,” he said. “If there were ever a time to get support from your peers, this is it.”

The tour is hosted in different parts of the state each year (next year it’s in Zumbrota), and each region features its own unique forms of cattle production.

“Up north, it’s mostly cow-calf country, but down here we’re mostly feedlots,” Bakken said.

“We have a lot of producers doing innovative things here and we’re going to see top-notch feedlot production enterprises in this part of the state.”

Summer Beef Tour registration information is at www.mnsca.org or by contacting Bakken at jsbakken918@gmail.com.



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THE BENEFITS:

- By gifting grain to the Luverne Area Community Foundation you avoid including the sale of the agriculture gift in your farm income.
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HOW IT WORKS:

- To make a gift of grain to a charitable organization like LACF, the taxpayer/donor must be a farm operator.
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- The grain will be transferred as a gift to LACF by having the elevator send a properly executed receipt to LACF. The elevator’s receipt must show the Luverne Area Community Foundation as the owner/seller of the grain.
- Donors will receive a formal thank you letter of receipt from LACF once the gift and sale are finalized.



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Farm Resource Guide available

The Farm Resource Guide for 2021 is now available at many University of Minnesota Extension county offices across the state.

This resource guide includes a wide variety of useful farm business management information including the following items:

- Custom rates: What to charge for planting etc.
- Average farmland rental rates by county: From two sources with projections for 2021.
- Flexible Rental Agreements: Examples of how they work and how they have worked in past.
- Lease forms for Cash Rent and Share Rent arrangements: Which you can fill in the blanks.
- Farmland sales information for all counties in Minnesota: Lists current average ag sales.
- Information on charges for custom feeding, commodity storage, leasing buildings and various bin rental rates: List various costs like leasing a dairy barn and machine storage.
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- Commodity price probabilities for corn, soybeans, alfalfa hay, straw, grass hay, hogs and cattle: Puts odds to getting break-even prices and tables show historic patterns.
- Corn and soybean yields by county: USDA county yields used for calculating the farm bill payments.
- Feedlot Rule highlights: Information on Manure Agreement and Easements.
- Manure Spreading Lease examples and Land Application Agreement: Forms included.

How to get a Farm Resource Guide

This Farm Resource Guide is available for a \$25 fee plus postage and sales tax if you would like to have your own copy.

The U of M Extension Office in Worthington can provide you the information in your preferred format: email cost is \$25 plus sales tax; CD cost is \$29; or hard copy is \$31.

To get your own copy of the Farm Resource Guide, email bauxx003@umn.edu or call 507-372-3900 ext. 3906 and indicate your preferred format.

Dave Bau, U of M Extension educator, Ag Business Management, welcomes your feedback on what you would like to see included in next year's guide.

For more farm business information see the University of Minnesota Extension website: <https://extension.umn.edu/managing-farm>.

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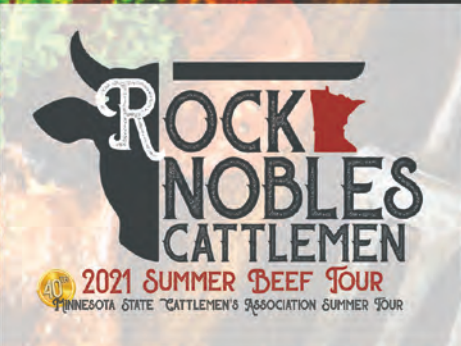
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Dr. Erin offers management tips to help prevent calf scours in herd

By Dr. Erin deKoning, DMV

Has anyone ever heard of a condition called PPM? One of my favorite farm clients will jokingly try to tell me that his animals are a victim of his PPM. If you ever visited his farm or saw his cattle, you would quickly see that PPM is definitely not a problem on his operation.

To avoid being crass, I will leave out the first word of the PPM acronym, but feel free to fill in the “P” word yourself. The remaining letters “P” and “M” stand for the following: poor and management.

We all know that vaccines are a wonderful tool to aid us in preventing calf scours. But when proper management is added to the equation, scours can be virtually non-existent.

Studies have shown that a calf with scours weighs 24 pounds less at weaning time. Pounds pay when selling feeder calves. With current prices on a mid-five weight steer at a local sale barn, the difference is almost \$80. Eighty dollars per calf on a fifty head cow-calf operation can add up to \$4,000, which is quite significant.



Luckily there are several things that can be done to help prevent scours in calves.

Providing a calf with the proper antibodies via colostrum is an important first step in scour prevention. Calves need adequate colostrum intake within the first twelve hours of life.

What is considered adequate? When providing bagged colostrum as supplement, this involves giving one bag of colostrum replacer within two hours of birth. A second bag should be administered within



eight hours of birth.

If you are ever in doubt about a calf’s colostrum intake status, providing a bagged colostrum replacer is a cheap and easy insurance policy to help set up a calf’s immune system for life.

One of the easiest ways to manage scours is through bedding. I cannot overemphasize the importance of clean and deep bedding, both pre and post calving, as well as when giving birth. Providing bedding pre-calving is critical so that the cows are able to keep their udders

clean. Adequate bedding should be provided when the cow gives birth so that she is able to have her calf in a clean area. The clean calving pen will help to prevent navel infections in the calf as well as protect the calf from ingesting any pathogens that could be present in the manure. Bedding should be provided post-calving to continue to keep the cow udder clean and to keep the environment dry to reduce exposure to scour pathogens.

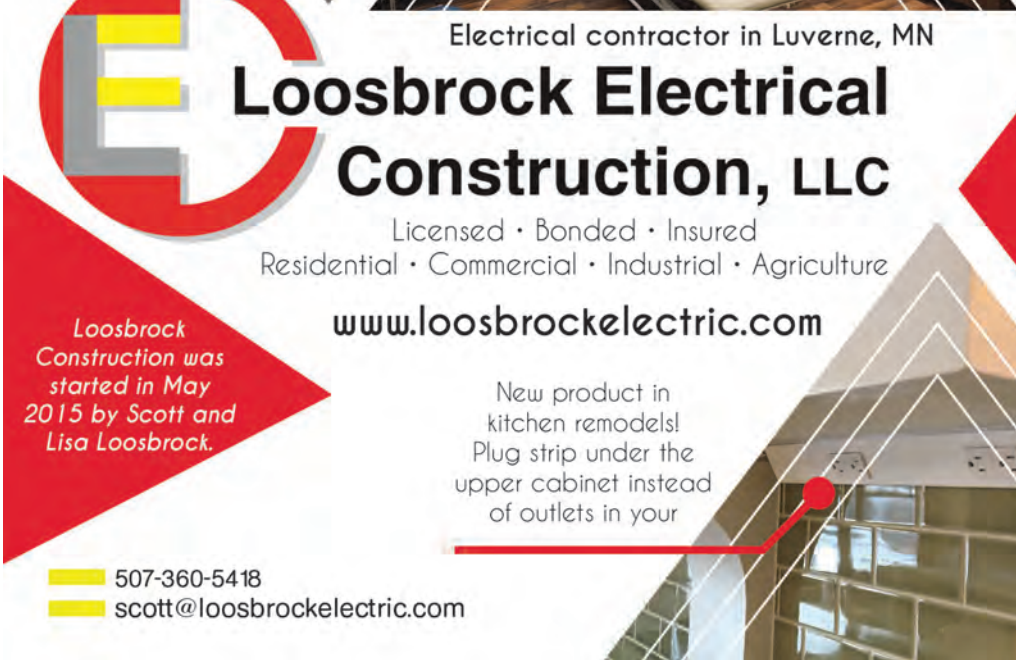
Segregating calves by age is another great way to prevent

scours. Newborn calves should not be mixed in with any other calves older than seven days of age. Why? The majority of calves that die from scours are under the age of seven to ten days. As a calf ages, the immune system develops and becomes more protective. Older calves are more able to fight off an infectious scour agent than a delicate newborn calf will.

What if your facilities just won’t allow for segregating calves by age? Not to worry, ensuring that the calf had adequate colostrum intake and the pens provided are well bedded and clean will help tremendously.

Keeping calves healthy until pasture turnout is a full-time job. Hopefully by implementing some good management practices, getting some cooperation from Mother Nature, and adding some assistance from our veterinary clinic if needed, every calf will thrive.

I hope every operation will have a very successful calving season and that your operation won’t fall victim to PPM.





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Klobuchar highlights renewable fuels at confirmation hearing of Secretary of Agriculture Nominee Vilsack

The Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee convened Feb. 2 for a hearing to confirm Thomas Vilsack as U.S. Secretary of Agriculture.

At the hearing, U.S. Senator Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) focused on how she will work with Vilsack and the Biden administration to encourage the use of renewable fuels and invest in research and data related to farming and agriculture.

The following excerpt pertains to the discussion about renewable fuels.

Sen. Klobuchar:

Thank you very much, Senator Stabenow, and thank you for your service, Secretary Vilsack, and thank you for returning to service as well.

I wanted to start by asking about our renewable fuels, something near and dear to the hearts of the people in your home



state of Iowa as well as in Minnesota, and just what's happening.

As you know, at the end of last year there were some very — in the last administration — there were some very bad decisions made from my perspective by the administration about waivers to oil companies. And we've had 150 ethanol plants that are shut down in our country, or operate at a lesser capacity.

Could you talk about what your plans are in a little more detail when it comes to biofuels? ... I

"At the end of the day consumers benefit, they have less expensive fuel, they have a cleaner-burning fuel, they have a fuel that's better for the environment."

— Thomas Vilsack, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, responding to U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) in confirmation hearing

introduced the Renewable Fuel Infrastructure Act in December with Senator Ernst to build upon the infrastructure program.

We're going to reintroduce the bill next week. And I think that could be helpful as well.

So, your comments on biofuels and what you'll do as secretary, including about the refinery exemptions and how the past administration interpreted them.

Vilsack: First and foremost, our own vehicles,

the vehicization of biofuels, in the various, the vehicle fleet the USDA has.

Certainly I want to make sure that's occurring. And encouraging our sister agencies as they look at vehicles, as they look at green fuels, as they look at jet fuels, to look at ways they can use biofuels appropriately and effectively and to spur the industry. ...

The USDA Secretary works closely with his or her partner at EPA to make sure that folks at EPA fully understand and appreciate

the benefits of this industry in terms of jobs, in terms of the environment, in terms of life cycle analysis.

This industry has made great strides, it's becoming much more environmentally friendly than it was at the beginning. But sometimes I fear that we're still working off of old research.

New research would suggest and indicate that this is an industry that is providing environmental benefits, cleaner air for example.

And making sure that as they make decisions relative to the renewable fuel standard, that they are consistent. That they are consistent with the rule, they are consistent with the law.

The way our system was designed for small refineries that were having trouble and difficulty. It was not designed for large-scale

refineries that are owned by Exxon and Chevron to receive a waiver. So I would hope, and would strongly urge the EPA, to go back to a day when those waivers are very, very, very infrequently granted.

And then finally I think there's a way in which we can utilize USDA resources and work with Congress to increase those resources.

To build out the infrastructure, to make it easier for higher blends to be available to consumers.

Why? Because at the end of the day consumers benefit, they have less expensive fuel, they have a cleaner-burning fuel, they have a fuel that's better for the environment.

As we look at the future, I think biofuels continue to play a role in reducing emissions and providing job opportunities in all parts of the country.

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Rock County ag income — just staying afloat or awash with cash?/continued from page 6B

most farmers.

This may be true for those who have no debt and are near the end of their farming career. For the majority, this gets us to breakeven at best in the livestock sector. The grain sector probably brings us from losing to profitable.

The livestock industry got decimated, and I do not think there is enough money around to make that sector whole again.

The grain business has much more risk mitigation and disaster aid options than what the livestock business does. So, for the most part, the livestock farmer has been suffering for many years.

The pandemic brought government money to the cattle producer for the first time in my career. It is just plain and simply a higher risk business than grain farming. That is why a smaller number of growers are owners of livestock.

Q. In visiting with implement dealers and others who do business with famers, last fall saw



Brothers Mike (left) and Shawn Feikema say the livestock industry was hard-hit during the pandemic and will take longer than the rest of the ag industry to recover from the downturn.

a flurry of purchases of equipment, parts, machinery, etc. What did your operation do with the cash support?

A. Most of ours goes to pay loan and principal payments. Remember ... we are only to a breakeven point.

Now, that does not mean many did not upgrade equipment or infrastructure. Farming, like I mentioned

before, is a marathon; we must maintain our fleet of equipment and our infrastructure. The same as every person must maintain their house. We can only go so long without spending money on equipment or we have nothing left but scrap iron.

Most farming operations are run by good business people. We understand return on

investment, and we analyze what capital expenses will pay us back. Every asset that is purchased is analyzed to make sure that it will pay for itself over its life expectancy.

Q. How do you see the sudden improvements in the ag economy affecting our local economy?

A. If a farmer is profitable, they will

“... for the most part, the livestock farmer has been suffering for many years. The pandemic brought government money to the cattle producer for the first time in my career. It is just plain and simply a higher risk business than grain farming. That is why a smaller number of growers are owners of livestock.”

invest in and improve or expand their business, and the great part is that they will spend most of that money, either earned or received from the government, at local businesses.

Farmers are always thinking about how to be more efficient and how to do things in a way that maximizes profit.

This is key to being able to pass on our legacy to the

next generation, but it also affects the investment in and commitment to the local community as well.

Q. We've spent a lot of time focusing on mental health in agriculture. I would have to think there has been a bit of a weight lifted off shoulders. How would you describe the mood of ag producers today vs. last spring?

A. Yes, a bit of weight has been lifted. But remember that for the most part the livestock operator has not seen the uptick that the grain sector has.

Also, because we came from such low prices in the grain sector, this summer when prices rallied a dollar, many sold much of our crops at that time. Little did we know it would get this high.

Remember, prices never rally when the farmer has lots of it to sell. If we had lots to sell, the price would still be low.

I think the mood of farmers is a little better, especially when talking about grain prices. For our livestock producers who must buy grain to feed their livestock, it's really just another kick in the teeth.

They did not have a better crystal ball than the grain farmer who sold his grain too early. The livestock producer did not buy enough grain when prices were low.

Q. How has the recent financial boost affected your relationships with family and others in your operation and with businesses you deal with?

A. I don't know that it changed my relationships in any way; maybe you should ask my wife and kids that question. I think for me, operating a business is still stressful — so many government regulations and programs to think about.

I never thought 20 years ago when I started farming that most of my days would be spent in the office.

Any farm today requires a high degree of management which leads to stress, which can lead to depression and all sorts of ailments that all of us need to be aware of and on the lookout for in our neighbors, family and ourselves.

As far as businesses we deal with, I think the key word is optimism. That is what was missing last spring and summer. We all have optimism now, and that can bring back the passion and creativity that is needed to have successful businesses and thus successful communities.

Finally ... I think we need to remember that all people had a difficult year, not just farmers.

I do not think that the farmer had it any worse or better than anyone else. We received lots of government assistance and that helps us, but that also helps the community.

A farmer always wants to build his business. Fortunately for communities, farms are asset-based, and purchasing and repairing those assets takes lots of money, which then gets spent at dealerships, vet clinics, farm supply stores, banks, insurance agents ...

And, yes, we do like to take our wives and families out for supper and entertainment occasionally too.

So, the money we get travels through all the hands of the community. Farmers love the communities they live in.

From new homes, garages, fellowship halls, offices, pole buildings, farm shops, cattle barns, remodels, twin homes or whatever our clients want built, we have the crew to get it done.

Cleveringa Construction is also transitioning to the next generation as current employees Adam Uithoven and Derek Sandbulte prepare to take over the business from founders Merlin and Carol Cleveringa.

All the full- and part-time employees of Cleveringa Construction are very dedicated to their jobs. Their work is above and beyond what customers expect, assuring them a successfully completed project.

“As the business transition takes place, we want to thank all of our first-time and repeat customers and extend a hand to new customers as Cleveringa Construction moves forward.

“The Good Lord has blessed us very well. Remember to give thanks for all you have.” ~ Merlin and Carol Cleveringa

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Sandbulte feed technology improves care for cattle, workload for humans/continued from page 9B

south with the east side of the barn completely open while the other side has a plastic curtain that can be raised or lowered to modify the air flow.

The roof of the A-frame pole barn is also not fully enclosed, with a foot gap at the peak to also promote good ventilation.

It's not unusual during cold weather that heat can be seen radiating through the opening in the roof. Keeping that moisture out of the barn lessens the likelihood of respiratory issues including pneumonia.

Feeding assisted by computer program

A computer program, Performance Beef, allows Sandbulte to track feed amounts and input costs allowing the daily feeding routine easier to track and complete.

The system is connected to the feed wagon, whose scale records weights to iPads mounted in the tractor hooked to the feed wagon and to the payload loader that Sandbulte uses to fill the wagon.

The computer system records individual ingredients and the pen numbers where Sandbulte empties the wagon by augering the ground mixture into bunks.

As the cattle mature, the feed rations change and the system is able to track when ingredient amounts are updated.

"I do a seven-step ration program



Mavis Fodness photo/0225 Ag Tab 2021 Sandbulte

Above, cattle lie in bed packs of corn stalk bales, which keeps them off the cold ground and provides a comfortable place to stand.

At left, cattle eagerly consume the silage mixture Mike Sandbulte empties from the feed wagon into the bunks. Partial-covered cattle sheds mean cattle eat from bunks under a roof but lie outside in the open lots. These open lots require bedding and regular cleaning of manure and snow.

based on calorie count," Sandbulte said.

"I have a nutritionist who tests the ingredients grown on and delivered to the farm."

Sandbulte grows the corn, silage and hay used in the feedlot. His parents, Gerald and Charla, lend a hand (Charla also monitors herd health by daily looking at the

stock in each pen).

The help doesn't stop with his parents, however. Other family members are pulled in at times to help with the cattle work.

Sandbulte's brothers, uncles and cousins help run each of the cattle

through the chute when vaccinating needs to take place.

Manure generated from Sandbulte's open and partial-cover pens is spread on the cropland used to grow the corn, silage and hay for the feedlot. The manure from the full-cover barn is sold.



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