

Kentucky Winter Ag Conference addresses farming industry issues

BY ZOE LEWIS
PAXTON MEDIA GROUP

WATER VALLEY — Farmers, FFA students and agriculture companies joined together for the 2026 Winter Ag Conference on Friday, Feb. 6, in Graves County to network and discuss farming industry concerns.

Some of the issues discussed included high input costs, the U.S. trade war, and an aging farming population. The event featured five speakers, including Will Snell, an agricultural economist at the University of Kentucky, and Greg Peterson, also known as “Machinery Pete.”

High input costs
Over the past year, farmers across the nation have fought high input costs. Input costs are the expenses needed to operate a farm, which can include seeds, pesticides, farm equipment and more.

The Investigative Midwest reports USDA data shows that since 2020, “seed expenses have increased 18%, fuel and oil expended increase 32%, fertilizer

expenses increased 37% and interest expenses increased by a whopping 73%... Labor costs are up nearly 50% since 2020.”

Keith Lowry, president of Lowry Farms, Inc. and a sixth-generation farmer, said this year could be one of the hardest years to farm due to a variety of factors, including high input costs.

“This will be one of the most challenging crops to put out, as far as making a profit or breaking even in my whole 52 years of farming,” Lowry said. “We do a good job. We’re very efficient, but the way things are right now, with the input cost, is just very challenging.”

Snell said the high input costs have placed farmers in a “financial squeeze,” even with government assistance.

“There has been a lot of government to keep farmers going and surviving, but that’s just a band-aid approach. We need markets to improve and get moving in the right direction,” Snell said. “Farmers want to earn money in the marketplace. They don’t want these government handouts.”

He said tariffs and inflation

have not helped the farming economy.

“There’s no doubt that the U.S. faces very challenging tariff barriers in the world market. Our problem is that when you’re losing money, and your cash flow is limited, and access to credit may be limited, long-term relief from tariffs doesn’t help you in the short term,” Snell said. “Inflation is very challenging on all of us, especially agricultural producers, because not only the higher input prices, but part of that equation is the higher interest rates.”

Machinery Pete said farm equipment is one type of input cost that has not decreased. He said he has tracked the farming equipment market for 36 years and that prices for new equipment usually increase by 4% each year. Now, he said, prices are increasing by 20% a year.

Machinery Pete said high prices can result in farmers stretching the life of farming equipment.

“Farmers really need to bring a new mindset to their equipment.. When times were

tough, you could always sort of fall back and get good deals in the used market. But things have changed,” Machinery Pete said.

He also said that if farmers continue to buy used equipment instead of new, he expects the used farm equipment market to experience a shortage.

Snell said he expects to see some costs stabilize — such as input, feed, and fuel — or decrease — such as interest rates and labor costs.

There were two local FFA chapters at the conference, including Graves County and Murray High Schools. Callie Smith, a sophomore at Graves County and an FFA member, said that although prices are low, she thinks farmers will persevere.

“We have to keep fighting for agriculture,” Smith said.

Aging farming population
Another issue discussed at the convention is the aging farming population. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, the average age of a farmer is about 58 years.

According to the 2022

National Young Farmer Survey, barriers such as “access to land, access to capital, health care costs, access to affordable housing, the high cost of production, student loan debt, climate change, immigration issues, and access to federal programs” stand in the way of young producers’ success.

Lowry said it is very expensive for someone to start their own farm, compared to those who have a generational farm.

“Everything is so expensive nowadays to get started. I’m not going to say it’s impossible for any young farmer who wants to farm. I could not do it today without some type of help from the family,” Lowry said.

Lowry also said it is important for young farmers to understand that farming is more than just planting a seed and driving a tractor.

“We have to be everything from a mechanic to a market expert to financials,” Lowry said.

Although there are concerns about the aging population, Snell said he thinks that new opportunities will make farming a desirable career.

“We’ve got to encourage more young people in agriculture... Given our infrastructure, our resources, our technology, our entrepreneurial spirit, amongst our young people, there are a lot of opportunities, not only on the farm, but also in ag technology, ag business,” Snell said.

Networking and community While the farming community discussed a variety of topics, Lowry said it is good for farmers and other agricultural leaders to get together.

“Farming, it has been in the past, a tight-knit group, and I’m very pleased to see all my fellow farmers,” Lowry said.

He said even with some negative news, such as high input costs, farmers will never give up.

“We get up every morning. We never know what’s going to happen that day. We hope everything goes well... We just get right back up on our feet and pull our bootstraps up and go back to farming,” Lowry said.

Agriculture license plate available for any vehicle

BY PAXTON MEDIA GROUP

Kentucky drivers can show their appreciation for the state’s agriculture community with a new license plate.

The “Friends of Agriculture” special license plate is available for all vehicles.

“This new plate allows everyone to showcase their appreciation for farming and all it brings to this state and community,”

Commissioner of Agriculture Jonathan Shell said in an announcement issued by his office. “It’s a simple way to show your pride and enthusiasm for the agricultural lifestyle.”

The new plate was made possible through House Bill 157, which was sponsored by Reps. Ken Upchurch, Adam Moore and Mitch Whitaker, passed during the 2025 legislative session. The bill expanded the eligibility for an agriculture special license plate. Before its passage the previous agricultural special license plate was only applicable for those with a qualified farm vehicle.

The Friends of Agriculture plate does not replace the farm plate. The new plate is an additional way for individuals to show their pride in Kentucky agriculture, but don’t qualify for the farm plate.

FFA and 4-H members from across the state submitted designs for the new plate. The final plate design features a scenic rolling hills farmland highlighted with an image of the flag of the United States



With a design inspired by two high school students, Kentucky has issued a new Friends of Agriculture license plate.

in the corner.

The design was inspired by the submitted artwork from two students, Caden Penn, a sophomore and FFA member at Crittenden County High School, and Alyssa Woodard, a sophomore and FFA and 4-H Club member of Henderson County High School. Each student received a \$250 award for their submission.

The purchase and renewal of the special license plate include a \$10 fee that will go into the Ag Tag fund and be divided equally among Kentucky 4-H, Kentucky FFA and the Kentucky Department of Agriculture, organizations that provide for Kentucky’s agricultural future.

Through the years, Kentucky’s farm license plate, through a \$10 voluntary donation, has raised millions for the Ag Tag fund and agricultural endeavors. 4-H councils used Ag Tag dollars to provide 4-H camp scholarships and travel for life-changing educational experiences to enable local 4-H

youth to grow as leaders and engaged citizens. FFA chapters used the money to meet the greatest needs in their community, such as FFA jackets for students in need or helping cover travel costs to leadership events.

KDA uses its portion for various programs such as the Ag Athlete of the Year awards, the Kentucky Leopold Conservation Award, Kentucky Women in Agriculture, the University of Kentucky Grain and Forage Center of Excellence, and the Farm to School Stars program that rewards Kentucky schools for using Kentucky food products in meals.

Proceeds from the new plate, which can be purchased by anyone, will be used in the same way as the traditional Ag Tag funds.

The new plate, which can be personalized, is available for purchase at county clerk offices across the state or on the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet’s website.

Farmers among many facing higher insurance premiums

BY ZOE LEWIS
PAXTON MEDIA GROUP

MCCRACKEN COUNTY — Farmers faced many challenges last year, including low commodity prices, high input costs and being stuck in the crossfire of a trade war. It’s a new year, but farmers say they’re facing another challenge: increased insurance premiums.

The Affordable Care Act’s Enhanced Premium Tax Credits were available to people making 400% more than the federal poverty level who purchased insurance through the independent marketplace. Those subsidies allowed participants to have lower health insurance premiums of no more than 8.5% of their income.

However, those subsidies expired in December, and farmers say they are already feeling the effects.

KFF Health News reports that more than 25% of farmers purchase health insurance through the individual marketplace. Daniel Edwards, a McCracken County row crop farmer, is part of that population and benefited from the subsidies. He said his premiums have almost doubled, so he switched to a cheaper insurance plan.

“That means my deductible is going to be higher. That means it’s ultimately going to come more out of my pocket, but my premium each month is less,” Edwards said.

Farmers now face a new expense, along with some of the issues they dealt with last year. Edwards said it can be difficult for farmers to afford



Photo by Zoe Lewis

Grain is being loaded on a truck at Edwards Farm on Tuesday, Feb. 10, in McCracken County.

other necessities.

“The way it affects me is we’ve got depressed grain prices as it is, and if they’re wanting more money for health insurance, that just means my dollar goes less and less,” Edwards said. “I couldn’t afford \$900 a month out of my pocket, as I’m trying to take care of a family at home as well.”

Edwards also said it’s important for farmers to have health coverage, especially since farming can be dangerous.

According to the National Safety Council, agriculture is among the most hazardous occupations. The United States Department of Agriculture’s National Agricultural Statistics Service states that there are 200,000 work-related injuries on farms annually.

Keith Lowry, a sixth-generation row crop farmer and the president of Lowry Farms, Inc., said he recently lost a truck to a fire. There were no injuries, but this is the type of danger farmers face.

“We get up every morning.

We never know what’s going to happen that day. We hope everything goes well. For the most part, it does, but some days we’re dealt a little different hand, and we just go with it,” Lowry said.

Edwards has also had his fair share of farm-related injuries, and he said it would have been difficult to pay the medical bill without insurance.

“To me, you’ve got to have health insurance to be a farmer, because you can’t afford a half-million medical bill you’ll be paying on that the rest of your life,” Edwards said.

Edwards said some places offer insurance, but most are overpriced. He said he hopes action is taken at the national and state levels to make coverage more accessible for farmers.

“I’m hoping either administration will help with these health care premiums, because not just farmers, but the American public can’t continue to pay this,” Edwards said.

University of Kentucky One Health Initiative accepting seed grant proposals

BY CHRISTOPHER CARNEY
UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY

The University of Kentucky One Health Initiative (UKOHI) at the Martin-Gatton College of Agriculture, Food and Environment is pleased to announce a call for seed grant proposals. Researchers and faculty from Kentucky universities and colleges along with professionals from Kentucky state agencies are invited to apply.

Part of The Bill Gatton Foundation gift, UKOHI plans to provide project funding to support the formation of new research teams and collection of preliminary data aimed at solving major problems in Kentucky through the application of One Health concepts.

Following its launch last year, UKOHI’s aim is to be a One Health

hub for collaborative research, instruction and Extension programs that promote and advance solutions to improve human, animal and environmental health in Kentucky.

“The UKOHI fosters collaborative partnerships among our faculty, staff and students, as well as members of state agencies and other Kentucky colleges and universities, to identify and resolve significant health threats to humans, animals, and the environment,” said •S. Reddy Palli, Department of Entomology chair at Martin-Gatton CAFE, state entomologist and one of The Bill Gatton Foundation Distinguished Professors. “We are excited to review new proposals that can help us advance One Health concepts to create healthier communities in Kentucky.”

REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS (RFP)

Project proposals must clearly identify a problem and how One Health principles will be applied in a designated research area, such as zoonotic diseases, antibiotic resistance, food safety or environmental health.

Eligibility requires that teams should be composed of researchers from two (or more) colleges or other agencies, or two (or more) disciplines. Additionally, the lead PI must hold a full-time faculty or senior researcher position for their respective organization.

Grant recipients are expected to meet with the UKOHI committee to discuss progress, present project results at the annual One Health Symposium, and submit a final report on grant activities.

FUNDING DETAILS, TIMELINE AND PROPOSAL REQUIREMENTS

Award amounts will vary depending on project needs and scope. The project duration is 12 months (non-renewable). Total project awards during this cycle will be up to \$200,000, with a maximum of \$50,000 for each award.

Submissions should include the following sections:

- Abstract with a summary of the project and its significance
- Project plan with specific aims, methodology and how this data fills a current “gap” for a larger bid
- Team synergy with a description of the roles of each investigator and why this team is uniquely qualified
- Plans that briefly describe future extramural funding, identify the specific external agencies, programs and deadlines for submission

• Budget and justification with a detailed breakdown of how the funds will be spent

• Biosketch in the style of the National Institute of Health or similar Biosketches of up to two pages each for the PI and co-PIs.

Proposals will be evaluated by a peer-review committee based on innovation, feasibility, team integration, impact and return on investment potential.

The RFP application deadline is April 1. Award notifications will begin May 1, and the project start date is July 1.

Visit the funding tab on the One Health Initiative website for more details and submit RFP proposals. For additional questions, contact Gloria Gellin at ggell2@uky.edu.

Learn more about the One Health Initiative at Martin-Gatton CAFE.



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