

# Backbone

Spring 2020

Stories of people in Agriculture

“Agriculture is  
the **backbone**  
of Nebraska’s  
economy.”

- Steve Wellman, Department  
of Agriculture director

**Dodge County  
farmer “lucky” after  
last year’s floods**

Plus, more stories from  
throughout Northeast Nebraska





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## Backbone

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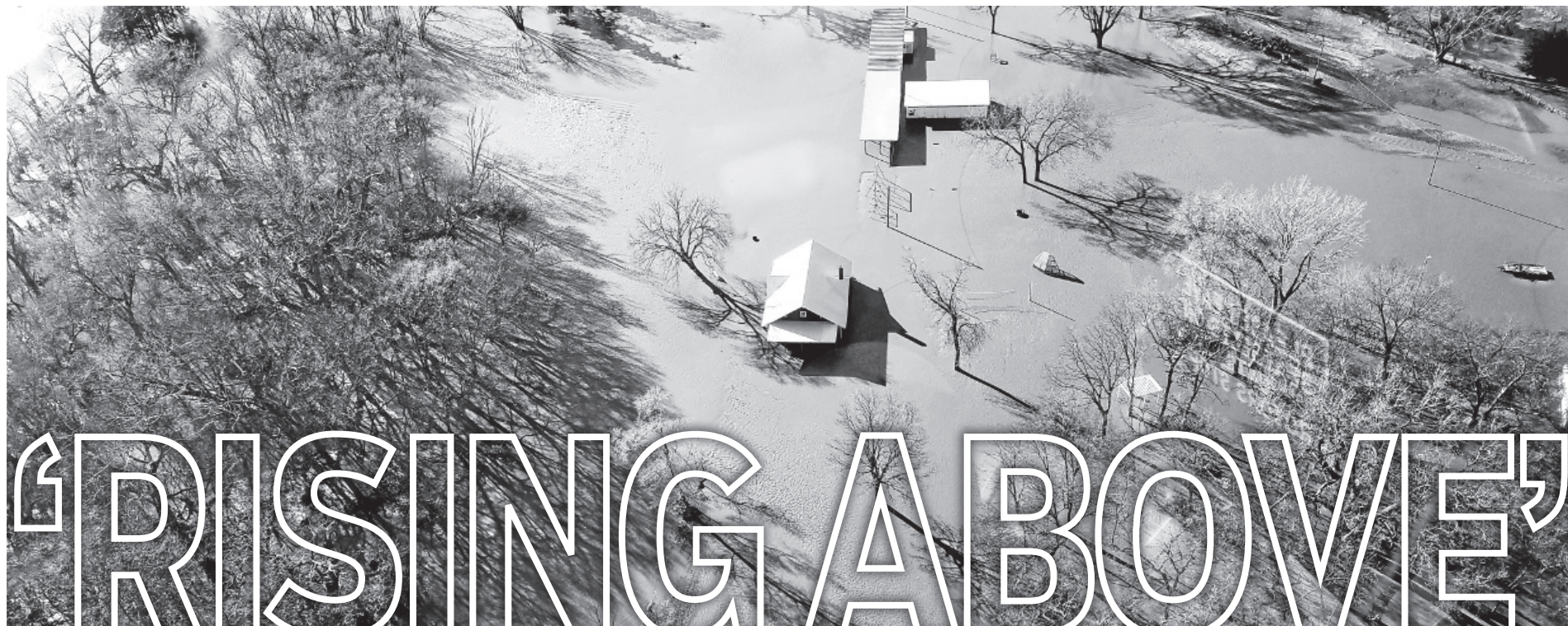
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# 'RISING ABOVE'

## Putting the spotlight on Nebraska's farmers

Nebraska has an agriculture problem: “Not enough young people are coming back to the farm.”

That’s not breaking news. As a news media company, we have the opportunity to not only tell this story but also be a part of the solution.



VINCENT LABOY

### Welcome to Backbone.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture came out with some strong facts in 2012 stating that more than one-third of farmers in the United States were 65 and older, and 50 percent of current farmers were expected to retire within the

next decade.

The average age of a Nebraska principal operator in 2017 was 56.4, as reported by the Nebraska Department of Agriculture. That’s an increase of almost two years from the 2012 average.

It’s almost a decade later and the issue of “bringing youth back to the farm” continues.

This is an especially big issue in Nebraska as agriculture plays a bigger role in our state’s economy, with one in four jobs being related to agriculture. Multiple times Nebraska Department of Agriculture

Director Steve Wellman has said: “I’ve thought for years that the backbone of Nebraska – the state, the workforce, the economy – is agriculture.”

The NDA’s February 2019 fact sheet shows:

- Every dollar in agricultural exports generates \$1.28 in economic activities such as transportation, financing, warehousing and production. Nebraska’s \$6.4 billion in agricultural exports in 2017 translated into \$8.19 billion in additional economic activity.

- Nebraska’s farms and ranchers utilize 45.2 million acres – 91% of the state’s total land.

- Nebraska had 47,500 farms and ranches during 2017; the average operation consisted of 954 acres. In 2018, the numbers decreased to 45,900 operations with an average of 980 acres per operation.

Contrary to all the statistics, Future Farmers of America has over 10,000 members in 189 chapters. Since 1928, FFA members have been learning through hands-on involvement in agriculture and related fields. But, the sheer size of its membership alone does not guarantee Nebraska will have future agriculture producers.

Different tax-incentive and education programs exist both nationally and locally to address this issue. Websites like “NebraskaBeginningFarmer.com” and “FarmFlavor.com” exist. Both the USDA and NDA dedicated space on their websites toward the education of new farmers. And there are multiple Nebraska agriculture organizations trying to do something to stop the exodus.

There are those who oppose agriculture in our own state. Wellman addressed this: “Agriculture is the backbone of Nebraska’s economy, and it is extremely disheartening to learn that there are groups of citizens in our own state that are working to essentially eliminate the livestock industry.”

So what can a news organization do?

A group of editors and sales representatives from Columbus, Plattsmouth, Fremont, Schuyler and David City, Nebraska, were having multiple, separate conversations about this problem with me. There were common threads, so I brought those leaders together. We all agreed we had to be a part of the solution.

We decided to educate the three in four Nebraskans who do not currently work in agriculture about the opportunities in agriculture. We plan to do this through

compelling, ag-related, human-interest stories; which is what we do best. Each issue will have a different theme, but will revolve around one common goal: Telling the stories of people in agriculture.

Who knows? Maybe some who left the farms might want to come back. Maybe new people will be interested in a lifestyle change.

Combined with our multi-media options for disseminating information, Backbone will make us the perfect partner for agriculture schools, major agribusinesses and government agencies. We look forward to new partners along this journey. We look forward to future issues about FFA, Women in Agriculture and digging into what our government dollars are doing to address this issue, among other things.

In short, we decided to utilize our skills to help educate the masses. We feel compelled to join the struggle.

We won’t sit by any longer and watch the fiber of Nebraska’s backbone atrophy.

Vincent Laboy is the regional publisher of The Columbus Telegram, The Fremont Tribune, Schuyler Sun, The David City Banner-Press and The Plattsmouth Journal. Reach him via email at [vincent.laboy@lee.net](mailto:vincent.laboy@lee.net).



## PLATTE COUNTY



An aerial view of U.S. Highway 81 looking north toward Columbus taken by Todd Tobiason in mid-March 2019.

COURTESY PHOTO, TODD TOBIASON

**“You look at a 511 map and it looked like a bowl of spaghetti. Every road was closed.”**

Ryan Loseke, Platte County veterinarian

# KEEPING HOPE ALIVE

Veterinarians look back at flood, hope for better days

**ZACH ROTH**  
Lee Enterprises

**R**yan Loseke knew that things were going to be bad on the night of March 12, 2019. Massive, historic flooding was expected, but he didn't know just how bad it would eventually become.

About 1 a.m. that Wednesday, Loseke received a veterinary call to look at someone's cow. But during the journey there, Loseke ran into a rainstorm that he likened to a typical July shower, only in the middle of March, so it made him raise an eyebrow.

At 4:30 a.m., he received yet another

call. To his horror, what he saw as he was driving proved that what people were experiencing was nothing like they had experienced before.

“The snow was gone, and the creek to the south of here was already across the road,” Loseke recalled. “I had never seen water come up so fast, so I knew it wasn't a good scenario.”

That day was only the beginning of the journey for Ryan and his wife, June, who run their Loseke Veterinary Services practice north of Columbus in Platte County.

Please see **VETS**, Page 6



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# Vets

From 5

The Losekes provide ambulatory care for large livestock and regular veterinary care for smaller animals, such as dogs and cats.

In the weeks and months after the historic March 2019 flooding, they received calls from numerous producers asking them to look at their livestock that had been injured during the catastrophe. It put their skills to the test, as they had to deal with so many injuries in such a short period of time.

For instance, some of the cattle that they had taken in needed IVs in order to survive because they had been out in the cold and were suffering from dehydration. Even in that case, some of the livestock didn't make it because it had been too long between when they became dehydrated and when they were admitted.

The fact that they managed to get so many of them to recover was an important part of what they did during that time and helped to provide a sense of relief during a trying time for many area farmers.

"It's an emotional thing for them to lose that much livestock, and to keep as many as they could alive was a huge deal," June said. "We didn't really see cattle in terrible shape. There were some that were stuck in mud by the railroad tracks that needed to be euthanized, but we weren't part of that. Those were beyond help."

There was also an instance where a couple from New York was visiting the couple for a weekend when they received a call to address a stricken steer. June was having lunch with the group when she received the call, and she couldn't say no.

"I couldn't say, 'I've got a group of people here, I can't see your calf now,'" June said. "I said, 'We'll be at the feed yard in 20 minutes and you can come then.' I told my guests, 'We're going to the feed yard, but before we go on a tour, we're going to help this man and his steer out.' They were amazing people from the get-go, they didn't skip a beat and their noses were in it. We had the calf in the chute and we were looking at its leg and they wanted to see, 'What are you going to do and how are you going to get this calf back to health?'"

Those stories show what a hectic time that it was for the group in the weeks and months following the flooding. Feed was scarce because there was no way to get any kind of transportation across the swollen bodies of water into the area where Ryan and June own land.

"You look at a 511 map and it looked like a bowl of spaghetti," Ryan said. "Every road was closed."

June and Ryan Loseke take a picture on their property north of Columbus. The veterinarians helped care for livestock which had been affected by last year's flooding.

**ZACH ROTH, LEE ENTERPRISES**



Still, they managed to make their mark on the recovery effort through their work with livestock in areas far and wide. Ryan had patients south of the Loup River and in the process of serving them, managed to do some damage to the molding on the front of a pickup truck that the pair owns.

"Traveling to get to our clients was a trick," June said.

Everything was different, a little bit harder due to the many roads that were still closed weeks afterward. For instance, when the Losekes needed feed for their cattle, they had to find it in places as far as Iowa because the Archer Daniels Midland

(ADM) facility in Columbus was shutdown.

Many other farmers had to find new ways to get important materials, like protein supplements for their livestock. The Losekes didn't have too many farmers bring their cattle over to the clinic; rather, they went out and did the work on the property themselves in order to save the farmers' time and money.

"We would go to the place, we would give IV fluids in their barn," Ryan said. "Veterinarians were helping each other out. 'Hey, I can't get to this client, can you take care of it?' There was a lot of collaboration among the veterinarians in this community to get

## County flood facts

**Platte County:  
Initial flood damage and cost**

**Amount allocated from federal, state and local shares -**  
\$4,578,373.12 (as of Feb. 10)

**# of farms -** 836

**Land in farms (acres) -** 383,635

**Average size of farms (acres) -**  
459

**Share of Sales**

- Crops - 28%
- Livestock - 72%

**Total market value of products sold -**\$688,562,000

Source: Nebraska Emergency Management Agency





ZACH ROTH, LEE ENTERPRISES

A group of cattle sits peacefully on the property of June and Ryan Loseke north of Columbus. The Losekes are veterinarians who worked on livestock that had been injured during last year's flooding.

things taken care of."

There was also a degree of resiliency among producers across the area. Megan Taylor, an agronomist with Nebraska Extension serving Platte, Boone and Nance counties, said that this trait was common among the people that she spoke with and worked with in the weeks and months following the flooding.

"We have farmers who are incredibly tough and proud of their business," Taylor said. "Some of the producers that I worked with, that is their livelihood, this is their home (and) their everything. They put their blood, sweat and tears, whatever it is, into their operations of their livestock or their cropping ground so it was very hard to see people that devastated."

"But at the same time, everyone said, 'OK, these are the cards that have been dealt, we've got to keep going,' and they did."

One year later, Ryan and June are looking forward to the future. But the specter of last year's flooding remains in the mind of each and every farmer and producer throughout the area. The Losekes are no different.

They still feel the impact whenever they do pregnancy exams on cattle. As they

looked through the many calves that they had to check, they found that there were fewer pregnant cattle as a result of the flooding.

"They'll have less calves born in the next month or two," Ryan said. "The cows were open. Some of that started with the cold weather, the flood, poor feed conditions and the pastures weren't in very good shape. The grass wasn't good quality this summer because of it."

There are also lameness issues with cattle and livestock that the pair was still trying to rehab as they got closer and closer to that one year mark.

"The ground was so muddy that feed, legs (and) limbs lingered on for another 45-60 days," Ryan said.

The flooding was only the beginning in the eyes of the Losekes. People are still affected to this day,

still rebuilding their fence, still sending their livestock to them to be treated and still trying to rebuild. They have seen terrible loss and the overall impact of March 2019 is still being felt by so many.

But through it all, producers and animals alike have remained resilient. Resiliency has got them through it and resiliency will

**"The snow was gone, and the creek to the south of here was already across the road. I had never seen water come up so fast, so I knew it wasn't a good scenario."**

**Ryan Loseke,**  
Platte County veterinarian

Please see **VETS**, Page 9

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# Spring outlook for farmers

**W**ell, it has certainly felt like spring in Nebraska.

Spring weather always gets me excited for planting and for the summer growing season. Across the state, many have been enjoying the warmer temperatures coupled with sunny days making the past several weeks incredibly mild. With those conditions the planting season itch has begun, but what do these weather patterns mean for our planting season? Currently, the extended forecast is showing average temperatures in the month of March to hover around that mid-50s range. Wet conditions are also predicted throughout the month of March trending into April, but with any extended forecast take the conditions predicted with a grain of salt.



**MEGAN TAYLOR**

There is one guarantee moving into spring and that is that we will have wetter soil conditions. With wet soil conditions, the key is patience; our soil profiles have been pretty full through last season and throughout winter. Therefore, expect a few delays upfront when planting begins. There is always the temptation to do a little tillage to help dry soils out. However, this will lead to more long term issues than just waiting to plant. Driving over wet soils can cause compaction issues, which could take years to remedy. Turning over the soil to dry an upper layer, creates a secondary compaction layer that can reduce the infiltration of water and root penetration. In areas with habitually wet soil using tillage could exacerbate this issue. There are also risks with crusting on ground that has been overworked, this can be especially challenging for soybeans and corn seedlings

## N EXTENSION

attempting to break the soil surface.

If you are long term no-till or minimal tillage, the temptation of having improved soil structure and residue to justify driving over wet soils can be strong. Remember, that residue can only do so much! Waiting even two days for soils to dry further can reduce risks for poor stand establishment and ensure that your crop gets the roots that it needs to be successful. Seed-vee smearing, sidewall compaction, and overpacking the seed are all risks associated with planting into soils that are too wet. Remember, that in wet soil conditions we can see seedling diseases and blight issues as well, that can reduce overall establishment.

With our spring outlook, it's hard to guess what the future will bring. I wish there was a crystal ball I could look in and share with you all what I have seen! We cannot control the weather, but we can control our reactions to it. Try to be patient and make a plan for planting season. If you have habitually wet areas or heavy textured soils, those may need to be planted last or immediately when conditions are right. In the next couple of weeks, try to come up with a plan and be ready to move when conditions are right! Have a safe planting season and if you have questions or are interested in completing an on-farm research project please give me a call at 402-563-4901 or [mtaylor42@unl.edu](mailto:mtaylor42@unl.edu). This past year our on-farm research project participants saw a \$9-\$12 savings per acre based on research on their acres, so please give me a shout if you are interested.

## Vets

From 7

continue to get them through it as the years continue.

"It's a long tail," Ryan said. "Short of losing a family member, losing their stock (is) tough on producers. I was concerned about the emotional health of our clients because some of them had devastating losses.

"One thing I heard, time after time after time, was, 'People have it worse than me.'"

Locally, I think the loss of James (Wilke, a Columbus area farmer who sacrificed himself to save lives during the flooding) put things into perspective. 'We suffered losses of our livestock, but we didn't lose our dad, husband, friend,' whatever. Nobody ever felt sorry for themselves. They were very stoic, and I heard 20 times, 'People have it worse than me.'"

Zach Roth is a reporter for The Columbus Telegram and Schuyler Sun. Reach him via email at [zachary.roth@lee.net](mailto:zachary.roth@lee.net).



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# ROAD TO RECOVERY

A man in a blue and white plaid shirt, blue jeans, and a baseball cap stands in a vast, flat, sandy landscape. In the background, a long, metal irrigation system with multiple support structures stretches across the horizon under a clear blue sky. The ground is a mix of light brown sand and patches of dark, wet earth.

**Colfax County farmer moves forward after trying 2019**

The flooding Platte River turned Drew Wolfe's 200-acre cornfield into a 200-acre sandy beach. In some places, the sand was up to 5 feet deep, and he's not sure his topsoil survived the initial rush of water.

**KAYLA WOLF, LEE ENTERPRISES  
FILE PHOTO**



# Wolfe, extension, try to find positives one year later

**ZACH ROTH**  
Lee Enterprises

**T**he devastating flooding of March 2019 touched every single level of society in Colfax County.

From children looking for an escape, to farmers still trying to find some kind of normalcy within the ruins, its impact is still being felt far and wide from Schuyler to Richland to Leigh. What is normal in 2020 will almost certainly not be what normal was in past years.

Now, those in Colfax County are among the Nebraska farmers trying to bounce back after a devastating 2019.

Last March, fifth-generation Colfax County farmer Drew Wolfe had dead cattle lying on his property, water standing where feed used to be and sand replacing what had once been dirt. The barriers that had separated his property outside Richland were gone, as gushing water and ice flowed

right through them, destroying everything in their path.

He had to pick up the pieces, one way or another. But it wasn't easy. Over 400 acres of farmland and pasture on his property were destroyed; thus, he needed some intervention from the federal government. Because the Platte River is still at a very high level, Wolfe has tried to get the attention of government agencies that will be able to help him recover what was lost.

"We haven't had anything done from the agencies to either put some bank back, stop it from putting it back in its channel (or) stop it from gouging out wherever it wants to go," Wolfe said. "We're just waiting to hear from our local NRCS (Natural Resources Conservation Service) and the county to see what some of our options are. It not only affects us, it affects everybody to the east of us."

Please see **COLFAX**, Page 12



**ZACH ROTH, LEE ENTERPRISES**

Drew Wolfe greases up a truck on a recent February morning. Wolfe is still waiting for help for his devastated property.



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The property of Drew Wolfe stands silent on a cold February morning. Wolfe is still waiting for federal help for his property, which was severely damaged by last year's flooding.

**ZACH ROTH, LEE ENTERPRISES**

## Colfax

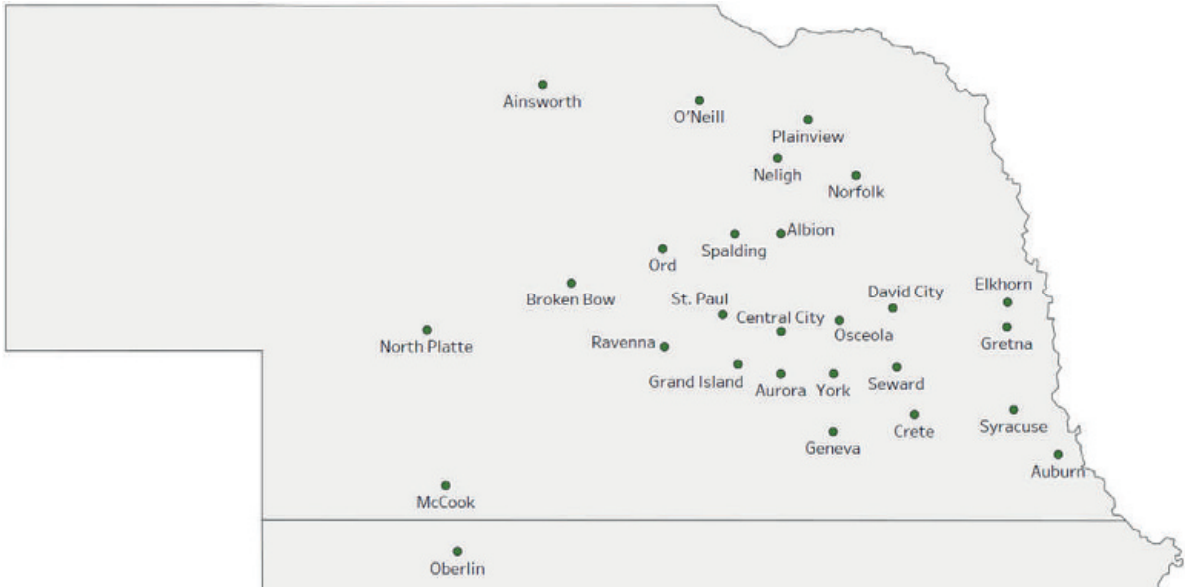
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The government has done what it could to help him and others like him; even state Sen. Ben Sasse, kicking off his reelection campaign with an RV tour of Nebraska, asked what he could do to help. But Wolfe

said he still feels that people like him are feeling the sting, even if he can understand the overall depth of what the bureaucracy has to deal with.

"I've been in contact with several different agencies, and they're all overwhelmed with paperwork," Wolfe said. "Funding is an issue. There are some programs out there trying to help, but nobody knows

how many dollars are available. There's no commitment; we can't get anything done. It takes time, and I understand that, but nobody has any answers. We're coming up on a year here and you'd think you'd have a direction on where you're going, but we don't. It's awfully hard to meet financial obligations when you don't know what you're going to do for income."



- A NEW DAY IN FARMING -



**JOHN DEERE**





Julie Kreikemeier, an educator for Nebraska Extension in Colfax County, has heard similar stories across the county. She noted it may be some time before producers like Wolfe can get the help they need.



**Kreikemeier**

“They will be (waiting) for a while because,” Kreikemeier said. “All of the paperwork needed to be filed, whether it was for fence reimbursement or because they lost farm ground. As we know, with all things, it takes time, no matter which governmental organization you are filing to.”

Wolfe is good friends with Kreikemeier and the two share a solid, respectable relationship. Both of them know that nothing will ever be normal again. Sand still remains on the property of Wolfe and his troubles in trying to find help don’t seem like they will be resolved any time soon. But through it all, the perseverance and determination of the people of Colfax County got them through one of the most trying times in modern history, living up to the motto of the University of Nebraska, “In Our Grit, Our Glory.”

“The flood really pushed that,” Kreikemeier said. “We didn’t know that the flood was going to happen. Nobody could have predicted it. ‘In Our Grit, Our Glory,’ it came out and this is something that we Nebraskans do all the time. The flood gave us proof of that and whether you’re involved in our programs or not, it really shows what the strength of Nebraska is. I really believe the university chose such a great motto to represent all of us and all of Nebraska.”

Wolfe is trying the best he can to make the most out of a terrible situation. He’s still looking for a good source of feed for his remaining livestock, but he didn’t raise anything because of the flooding. Large swaths of his property remain unusable for anything. None of it will come back. The Platte River still overflows, even during times where there were rainstorms in other areas of the state. Wolfe estimates that his cornfields have been flooded on five separate occasions.

“Nothing has really changed,” Wolfe said. “It’s a struggle to do those day-to-day things. There is not a day that goes by that we don’t have to do something that’s been caused by the flood. I know that sounds hard to believe, but every day, it’s something. It’s a life-changer, there’s no doubt about it. It definitely changed our lives.”

But he still keeps hope and still works away at it, like so many others in Colfax County. Resiliency got him through 2019, and he hopes that it will get him through the coming years as well.

“We met a lot of really good people out



A truck sits waiting to carry feed on a recent February morning. Drew Wolfe, the owner of the property, is still waiting for help almost a year after flooding devastated his land.

**ZACH ROTH, LEE ENTERPRISES**

## County flood facts

**Colfax County: Initial flood damage and cost**

**Total estimated cost**—\$2 million

Expended about \$700,000 towards repairs

**Amount allocated from federal, state and local shares** - \$112,575.00 (as of Feb. 10)

**# of farms** - 516

**Land in farms (acres)** - 262,364

**Average size of farms (acres)** - 508

**Share of Sales**

- Crops - 35%
- Livestock - 65%

**Total market value of products sold**—\$364,450,000

Source: Nebraska Emergency Management Agency

of it,” Wolfe said. “It’s a day-by-day adjustment. We’ve found different sources of feed. We are not doing any commercial operations. It’s all an adjustment. Every day is an adjustment. Every day, we’re gaining a little bit in my eyes.”

Zach Roth is a reporter for The Columbus Telegram and Schuyler Sun. Reach him via email at zachary.roth@lee.net.

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# Agriculture is the backbone of Nebraska

## Agriculture is Nebraska's No. 1 industry.

When agriculture does well, our state does well. Even after last year's challenges with blizzards, flooding, low prices, etc., Nebraskans pulled together. The dedication, resourcefulness and resiliency of Nebraska ag producers helped keep the state's ag industry strong. These top national rankings from the U.S. Department of Agriculture show what a strong Nebraska ag industry looks like.



**STEVE  
WELLMAN**

Nebraska is first in the nation in beef and veal exports (2018), first in Great Northern bean production (2018) and first in

popcorn production (2017). We are second in the nation for: all cattle and calves (Jan. 1, 2020); all cattle on feed (Jan. 1, 2020); commercial red meat production (2019); and ethanol production (Jan. 2019).

Nebraska also has a reliable supply of corn (third in the nation—2019) and soybeans (fourth in the nation—2019) for livestock feed and renewable fuels. All of these rankings and more make Nebraska agriculture worth celebrating.

To highlight how important agriculture is to our economy, just look at the numbers. Nebraska's ag industry adds more than \$21 billion a year to the state's economy (2018). Ag exports, \$6.8 billion of that number, are only part of the

story. Every dollar in ag exports generates \$1.28 in economic activities such as transportation, finance, warehousing and production.

Even with all of Nebraska's top national rankings in agriculture, there is room to grow and many ways to do it. For example, Nebraska agriculture continues to grow and add value by expanding livestock production, attracting investments and business expansions, and growing international trade.

International trade is particularly encouraging as Nebraska supports several trade missions and hosts many international groups every year. Last year, the Department of Agriculture team promoted Nebraska's world-class crops and livestock during several trade missions led by Gov. Pete Ricketts, including

trips to Mexico, Vietnam, Japan and Germany.

Since Nebraska farmers and ranchers produce more food than we use, we need to continue to help expand our domestic and international markets for their products. Nebraska farmers and ranchers continue to increase their production while conserving our natural resources. Their safe, high-quality food products fill our plates and fuel tanks here and around the world. We've started 2020 with good news about trade including the passage of USMCA (U.S.-Mexico-Canada agreement) and a phase-one trade deal with China.

International trade is also a good opportunity to share the story of Nebraska agriculture. A story that needs to be told on the home front, as well. I can share that story, as I've been involved

with agriculture my whole life. Since one in four jobs in Nebraska are related to agriculture, others are stepping up and talking about Nebraska agriculture, too.

Agriculture touches everyone's lives and connects all of us somehow. That's why sharing information about agriculture is so important. It helps people understand that agriculture is more than farming. It takes a whole industry of people to grow your food and get it to your table. Whenever you get the opportunity, remember to thank the farmers, ranchers and ag industry for providing us with the food, feed and fuel that we use each and every day.

Steve Wellman is the director of the Nebraska Department of Agriculture.



# Honoring a HERO

Nebraska pays homage to late Columbus farmer Wilke

**ZACH ROTH AND MATT LINDBERG**  
Lee Enterprises

**W**hen the bridge on Monastery Road near Columbus finally reopens to traffic this year, it will feature a stirring reminder to why the bridge was rebuilt in the first place.

The Platte County Board of Supervisors approved a resolution in February to name the structure the “James Wilke Memorial Bridge,” in memory of the Columbus man who sacrificed his life to rescue others during the devastating flooding last March. The board has ordered signage to be placed near the bridge in order to remind people of the sacrifice.

District 1 Supervisor Fred Liss said that he had been approached in the months after the flooding about doing something to remember Wilke’s courage and selflessness in the midst of a great tragedy.

“Shortly after the event, I was approached by some folks in our district and they had mentioned to me (that) they thought it might be a nice sentiment,” Liss said. “After I had discussed it with a couple of my fellow supervisors, we decided to go ahead and put it in a resolution.”

The resolution states that, “on March 14, 2019, James Wilke, in an effort to aid emergency responders in the act of a rescue, gave his life when the Shell Creek overflow bridge located on the Monastery Road suddenly and without warning collapsed into the floodwaters below.” It commended Wilke’s “selflessness and heroism” in making the attempt to rescue those on the bridge.

Wilke’s family was present at the board meeting, and following the reading of the resolution by Board Chairman Jerry Engdahl, he presented the resolution to Wilke’s widow, Rachel. Engdahl said that with all of the great things said about the kind of person that Wilke was, naming the bridge after him was a solid choice.

“The only concern I had was (if that) was OK with the family,” Engdahl said. “I sure wouldn’t want a sign put up reminding you every time you drove over of your husband’s passing. But she was fine (with it).”

Liss noted that, to his knowledge, it was the first bridge in Platte County to be dedicated to someone. He said he felt that it was a tremendous honor for Wilke and his fam-

ily to have the bridge named for him.

“If we put the appropriate signage on the bridge — which we intend to do — any person who crosses over that bridge will be reminded of this individual,” Liss said.

Since his passing, Wilke has been honored by many people and organizations for his heroic actions. He was named Nebraska’s 2019 “citizen hero” at the Hy-Vee Heroes Game during the 2019 Nebraska football season. He also was recognized by Gov. Pete Ricketts as a “flood hero” during a December 2019 ceremony in Lincoln.



**Wilke**

Additionally, John Deere created a tribute video. The clip isn’t lengthy, but it is effective. It’s the right balance of hitting its viewers in the feels while also uplifting them by sharing the kind of person James was through interviews conducted by John Deere representatives with Wilke’s

family and friends.

The tribute begins with a clip from ABC news anchors discussing the Columbus flood situation, followed by several B-roll clips of ice chunks and inclement weather, laying out for viewers the magnitude of the situation that unfolded throughout the state and surrounding Midwestern areas.

James’ wife, Rachel, starts discussing her late husband’s strong faith and how working on his farm truly was the highlight of his life.

A family friend, Isa Stewart, goes on to discuss how she viewed Wilke as a second father figure, how he was such a huge supporter of her through her successes, and failures, with Future Farmers of America (FFA).

The video transitions to Wilkes son, Colton, recapping what happened the day of his father’s death.

“He got a call saying that somebody was stranded and that they needed a tractor because it was pretty windy and rainy out, yet,” Colton says in the video. “He got in the tractor (and) took off down the road.”

Engdahl said Wilke was a true hero.

“It’s to remember (him) so we won’t forget,” Engdahl said. “We’re ordering signs now. Once it’s there, we’ll get the signs installed.”

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DODGE COUNTY

# ONE OF THE LUCKY ONES



Dodge County farmer Jeremy Moss, 41, back left, with his family: 14-year-old son Wyatt, front left; 15-year-old daughter Ally; wife, Angie Moss; 12-year-old daughter Katy, sitting on the hay; daughter Emmy, 8, back right; 9-year-old son Ryan, right, and the landlady, Kandy Adalgren.

TONY GRAY, LEE ENTERPRISES



# Dodge County farmer thankful after Nebraska's tumultuous year

**NOAH JOHNSON**  
Lee Enterprises

Jeremy Moss said he is one of the lucky ones.

While most other area farmers were hit hard by last year's catastrophic flooding that cost the state over \$1 billion in damages, Moss's small farming operation was left mostly unscathed.

A year later, he said things are nearly back to 100%, but he still remembers the struggles he and his fellow farmers endured as the floodwaters pushed into Fremont and the surrounding area last March.

"The biggest struggle was just getting through it," Moss said. "Everything was late. It was muddy and always raining."

Moss runs a small, 300-acre farming operation with his father-in-law as a side business. He grows primarily soybeans and corn, sometimes experimenting with some cattle on the side.

"I really enjoy doing it," he said. "I hope to make money once in a while."

He said farming is supposed to be quiet and peaceful. He usually turns off his phone, jumps into one of his small tractors and disconnects from the world for a

couple of hours.

That wasn't the case last March.

As the flooding took its toll, Moss remembered spending many days volunteering his time to pull vehicles out of the road after getting stuck on its muddy surface.

He also spent time clearing out debris for those who had been hit harder than him.

Moss said that while many of the farmers who were affected would simply put their heads down and got back to work trying to rebuild, he could see how hard the flooding had hit them.

"You could see the struggle in their eyes," he said. "They did the best they could with it."

Moss's home was just feet away from being hit with floodwaters. By the time he and his family evacuated to stay at a friend's cabin in Lake Ventura, Moss said the water was just 2 feet from entering his basement.

"The flood took me 100% by surprise," he said. "It was very close to entering the house."

Moss's family of five children and his wife, Angie, were displaced for a month after floodwater found its way into the family's well.

Angie said she and her family were lucky

to have known someone willing to house them during the time. While the lakeside home was beautiful, she said everyone in the family was itching to return to the home that had been theirs for the past 17 years.

"It throws you off. Mostly it was the kids wondering when we could go home," Angie said. "Realizing that we were fortunate enough for somewhere to go, I think it was a lot of feeling more grateful that we had someplace to be. The people who let us stay there were so selfless."

She said her biggest job during that time was to make sure her children's lives were as normal as possible. She said getting her kids to school while a blown-out bridge impeded their normal commute to Arlington Public Schools was difficult.

"Luckily our school in Arlington made a huge effort to make sure everyone had a way to and from school," she said.

Jeremy distinctly remembered feeling sick to his stomach when he finally returned home a month after he was forced to evacuate. He wasn't sure if the water had found its way into his home.

"I stayed up all night not knowing, wondering if we were going to have to rebuild,"

he said.

When he walked down the steps to his basement, he was hit with an overwhelming sense of relief as his basement was left untouched.

"I had a good surprise," Jeremy said.

Fremont City Administrator Brian Newton remembers seeing firsthand the effects of last year's flooding. Specifically, he remembers large areas of land that cover the stretch of road from Fremont to Omaha caked in sand from the rivers.

"If you drove around between here and Omaha and all of the land along the Elkhorn, that's where you saw the massive piles of sand," he said. "Those fields raised good crop for years. It was just phenomenal the amount of sand. I remember one farmer telling me it would cost five years of yield to move sand."

He said there are some fields in Dodge County that were severely affected by last year's flooding that will likely have to be dealt with for years to come.

"There are more impacted fields than others," he said. "The severely impacted fields that have sand in topsoil, there's no

Please see **DODGE**, Page 18



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# Dodge

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way there will be very good yields in them for a long time.”

When Jeremy looks back at the previous year’s flooding, he often wonders why he got so lucky while so many of his friends and neighbors were hit hard.

“I ask ‘why was I spared,’” he said. “We were just lucky.”

One of those people who weren’t spared lived right next to Jeremy and his family.

Steve Pierce’s home was nearly a foot above previous record flood stages, but last March’s floodwaters surpassed that mark by about 2 feet.

It left the majority of his home destroyed. While he said the main floor remained mostly undamaged, around 6-7 feet of water filled his basement. On top of that, Pierce lost his hot tub, deck and his boat floated 15 yards downstream before it filled with water.

His wife’s newly purchased vehicle was also filled with water up to the steering wheel.

“It was pretty much destroyed,” he said.

Pierce said he was the type of person who reacts quickly, so by the next weekend after the floods he was already working on

## County flood stats

**Dodge County: Initial flood damage and cost:**

**Amount allocated from federal, state and local shares -**  
\$4,338,960.28 (as of Feb. 10)

**Public infrastructure itself (includes townships but not Fremont and North Bend) -**  
estimated initially close to \$19 million. Fremont was close to \$1 million

**# of farms -** 676

**Land in farms (acres) -** 337, 346

**Average size of farms (acres) -** 499

**Share of Sales**

- Crops - 65%
- Livestock - 35%

**Total market value of products sold—**\$270,502,000

Source: Nebraska Emergency Management Agency

repairing the air and heating in his home.

During that time, he noticed that the foundation had shifted during the flooding.

“I started doing the math and found that fixing everything up wouldn’t really do much good since it wouldn’t do anything to put it above flood level,” Pierce said.

Pierce and his wife decided that they would have to tear down the home and start from scratch.

“It was more economical for us to take everything down,” he said. “For time sake, we decided to go with a modular home.”

For some time, Pierce was worried that his family would be forced to move away. He said he vividly remembers telling Jeremy he might be forced to move.

“Jeremy came down and I told him about it and he was near moved to tears that we weren’t coming back,” Pierce said. “He wanted us back and would do anything to make sure that we were back.”

Jeremy did just that. Pierce said he was an invaluable friend and resource as the family looked to recover and rebuild. He brought dumpsters to Pierce’s home and helped cut down 5-6 days of work into just eight hours with the help of a crew.

“We ended up filling like three dumpsters with personal belongings and property,” he said. “Everything was shot.”

Pierce said the help he received from Jeremy went above and beyond what he expected.

“When it came time when I needed help, he was there,” he said. “He’s a spot on guy. He’s one of the nicest guys you’ll ever meet. He’ll do whatever he can to help you out.”

A year later, Pierce said the home is livable. There are a few small projects and tweaks he still needs to complete, but he’s happy where he is. Compared to the camper that he and his wife spent the summer in, the modular home is a mansion.

All in all, Pierce said the project cost around \$180,000. He took out money from his retirement account and money from donations and loans covered the rest.

He said the setback will likely delay his retirement by three years, but it was worth it to remain in the area.

“I don’t hate working so that’s good,” Pierce said.

Pierce said Jeremy was one of the main reasons his family was able to stay where they are now. The selflessness his neighbor showed is something Pierce will never forget.

“He’s one of the nicest guys you’ll ever meet. He’ll do whatever he can to help you out,” he said. “I love my neighbors and if I need something they’re right there.”

Noah Johnson is a reporter for The Fremont Tribune.

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YOUR HOMETOWN  
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At sunset ball attendees could have a tethered balloon ride for a fee at the 2013 event.

**BARB BIERMAN BATIE,**  
FOR LEE ENTERPRISES

## CATTLEMEN'S BALL 2020

# Cattlemen party means big money for cancer research

**BARB BIERMAN BATIE**  
For Lee Enterprises

**I**t has been dubbed the “state’s biggest pasture party,” but in reality it is much more. The Cattlemen’s Ball of Nebraska was established to promote beef in a healthy diet, showcase rural Nebraska and to raise money for cancer research.

Since 1998, the ball has raised more than \$14.7 million to fight the big “C.” Each year, 90% of the proceeds go toward research at the Fred & Pamela Buffett Cancer Center in Omaha. A nonprofit charity, the Cattlemen’s Ball donates the remaining 10% of dollars raised to Nebraska communities for health and wellness programs.

It all started with a group of friends who in one way or another had their lives touched by cancer.

“We were looking for a way to help out,” said Kae Pavlik of Yutan, Nebraska, and one of the founders of the Nebraska Cattlemen’s Ball.

There had been some attempts at starting a Cattle Baron’s Ball teamed with the American Cancer Society in the early 1990s, but it never got statewide support.

Then in the late 1990s, Pavlik and a group of 15 friends sat down at the Haythorn Ranch near Ogallala, Nebraska, and began brainstorming how to expand on the idea. Knowing that

the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha was centered on cancer research, she and a core group spent two months working with UNMC representatives to mesh their interests in finding a cure for cancer while spotlighting Nebraska’s cattle industry.

The first ball under the new name took place in 1998 near Ainsworth at the Graff/Snover Ranch.

“It got the western part of the state involved,” said Pavlik. “It just takes an extra spark somewhere and it just kept going.”

That special spark came in the form of Dr. Ken Cowan, she said. He became director of the Fred and Pamela Buffett Cancer Center at UNMC in 1999, and he knew who to approach.

“You could get together and make a difference,” Pavlik said.

Since then the enthusiasm for the ball has mushroomed. The advisory board now works to alternate ball sites between the east and western parts of the state to showcase different regions.

“People are now coming forward to host the ball or volunteer and it’s wonderful,” said Pavlik. “Unity is a big word in this effort and I love what I’ve been and what I’m still able to do for the cause.”

The rotating event sites

Please see **PARTY**, Page 20



# Party

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gives the host community and the region around it the opportunity to showcase its corner of the state. To date the ball has been held near Ainsworth, Lexington, Arthur, Valentine, Valparaiso, Ashland, Brady, Wisner, Milford, Doniphan, Lodgepole, Albion, Kearney, West Point, McCool Junction, Sutherland, Princeton, Lynch, Banner County, Anselmo, Hebron and Wauneta.

As the days wind down to the 22nd ball on June 5-6 near Columbus, hosts Scott and Patricia Mueller have plenty on their plate. Thankfully, there is a system in place that keeps things running in a rhythm, Pat Mueller noted.

"We have 50 different committees dealing with various aspects of the ball from entertainment to parking to the catering of meals and beyond," she said. "We have planned some Sheriff's Societies wine tastings during March to help raise some seed money for the ball and we have a tour of the Fred and Pamela Buffett Cancer Center planned for April 3 that is open to the public. These are some new events we hope will create additional interest in the event."

The Muellers have had a hand in many areas of the beef industry since the 1980s, including cow-calf, a feedlot, cropland, feed sales, commodity sales and a process verified program, Samson LLC. In addition, Pat Mueller has operated Traditions Restaurant and Bed & Breakfast in Columbus for 20 years.

Getting ready for more than 4,000 guests takes some planning. Last fall, the Muellers planted an area along Shell Creek near Columbus to rye where the event tents and parking will be.

"We planted a heavy, good cover we hope will stand up to the walking and driving. We have also done some dirt work and tree removal to free up open space at the site," she said.

As spring rolls around they will need to put in a well to provide water for all the ball activities and scope out where all the electrical



BARB BIERMAN BATIE PHOTOS, FOR LEE ENTERPRISES

Each ball features demonstrations of working ranch techniques, which evolved into the ranch rodeo shown in this 2013 photo that continues through the 2020 ball.

hookups and wiring will need to go to provide lighting and power for the event.

Suzanne Jagels, executive secretary on the event's advisory board, noted hosts are chosen two years in advance so they have the opportunity to begin preparations at their respective operations.

The advisory board Jagels sits on oversees the ball and assists with much of the behind-the-scenes work throughout the year. In recent years a group of 10-12 co-hosts help by leading various subcommittees that deal with everything from the annual art show and Calf-for-a-Cure to the health and wellness tent and the golf tournament. Hundreds of local volunteers lend a hand, too.

The Cattlemen's Ball started as a one-day event. But the addition of a golf tournament, various auctions and fundraising efforts expanded the schedule to two days in 2007.

A Trail Boss ticket for \$400

buys entrance to a Friday evening reception, a Saturday morning champagne brunch and lunch with early access to the general store and all exhibits. The premium ticket also offers preferred seating for the Saturday night concert and dinner.

Top Hand tickets are \$125 and allow admission at 12:30 p.m. Saturday and include an evening dinner, concert and dance.

The meal features Nebraska beef, beers and wines.

The Saturday night concert with a major country headliner is a big draw. In recent years those artists have included JoDee Messina, Tracy Lawrence, Montgomery Gentry and Clint Black. Headlining the 2020 Nebraska Cattlemen's Ball will be Easton Corbin and Tracy Byrd.

Other events on tap for 2020 are the annual golf tournament June 5. Day 1 festivities also include the Trail Boss reception and live auction. Exhibit tents and the general

store will be open, and the Side Step Band will perform.

Saturday, June 6, events begin at 8 a.m. with the Nebraska Rawhide Run, a 5-kilometer road race and cancer benefit. There's also the Trail Boss Champagne Brunch and Luncheon, and opening ceremonies at 1 p.m. An annual style show features cancer survivors and their caregivers. There's also a farm and ranch auction, prime rib dinner, followed by another live auction and the headlining concert.

After all the boot scootin' and western-themed activities, the main goal is to find a cure for cancer. The festivities raise money that goes directly to cancer research and care programs in Nebraska through the Fred & Pamela Buffett Cancer Center project.

Long-time supporters of the ball note it has come a long way from the first ball in 1998 that raised \$95,000 to the record setting year in 2013 that brought in



Each Cattlemen's Ball has celebrity MCs. In 2007 Mike LePorte, then farm director for Nebraska Rural Radio Association's flagship station KRVN at Lexington, was the Saturday host.

\$1.86 million raised in 2013.

Last year Dr. Ken Cowan stepped down as director of the Fred & Pamela Buffett Cancer Center, and he looks back on what the ball has created nostalgically.

"The Cattlemen's Ball is truly special to me, because it introduced my family and me to Nebraska," he said.

He attended the 1999 Cattlemen's Ball in Lexington at the home of Dr. Joe and Diane Jeffrey after he interviewed to be director of the cancer center, then the Ep-pley Cancer Center.

"My wife, two daughters and I were impressed with the sense of community, welcoming kindness and warm hospitality shown to us," he said.

It convinced him and his wife that Nebraska was an excellent place to raise their daughters, who were 9 and 12 at the time. He's attended every ball since.

"While the scenery each year has changed, one thing hasn't: the incredibly generous people of this state who are passionately dedicated to cancer research," he said.

For more information on the Cattlemen's Ball of Nebraska, to purchase tickets, to check schedules or to donate, go to the website: cattlemensball.com.



# WEATHERING THE STORM

## Midwest Hop

Producers excited for 2020 after challenging year before

**TIM ROHWER**  
Lee Enterprises

**P**LATTSMOUTH – Bruce and Annette Wiles are cautiously optimistic about a good crop in 2020, compared to last year.

“It’s looking promising,” Bruce said recently.

Like many others whose livelihood comes from the land, the Wiles in 2019 had to deal with high flood waters that had an impact on their hard work.

“I didn’t get dealt a good hand of cards from Mother Nature,” Bruce said.

The Wiles are the owners of Midwest Hop Producers, devoting dozens of acres to the growing of this crop, one of the key ingredients in beer.

They have 18 acres in the Bay Hills area, which wasn’t impacted during the flood in 2011. In 2019, however, Mother Nature dealt them a blow, not once, but twice.

In March, 4 to 5 feet of water covered those acres, but because the ground was frozen, the crop had not yet emerged. It did, though, slow down field work.

It was in June when the impact was felt. By then the crop had emerged and was starting to grow. But, the flood waters from the nearby Platte River put a “stress” on the hops and impacted their growth and the eventual yield.

“We got nowhere near the yield that we should have had,” Annette said.

As it turned out, the Wiles have decided to sell those 18 acres, just a few short four years after the business began. The flooding played a role, they said.



Bruce and Annette Wiles inside their local craft beer tasting room.

**TIM ROHWER, LEE ENTERPRISES**



**GWYNETH ROBERTS, LEE NEWSPAPERS FILE PHOTO**

Annette Wiles, owner of Midwest Hop Producers, on an August 2019 day talks about the farm’s collaboration with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to grow and conduct hemp trials in the greenhouses in Plattsmouth.

“It’s more conducive to row crops, as opposed to specialty crops like hops,” Annette said. “The water table there is high.”

Added Bruce: “The risk is too high.”

In the summer of 2014 the Wiles started bringing together a group

of dedicated people to focus on establishing a large-scale hops production in Nebraska. After much research, conference attendance and input from fellow growers and processors across the country, their business was formed the next year.

Fortunately, the Wiles have other acres for hops east of U.S. Highway 75 they plan on continuing to use.

“We’re not going to quit growing hops,” Annette said.

“We’re adding more hop acres here in this yard,” Bruce said.

It wasn’t just crops that sustained damage from Mother Nature last year.

Temperatures of 70 degrees that dipped to subzero temps almost immediately ended up killing more than three million bees or 70 percent of the total that Bruce raised for their honey on their property.

“I’m planning on expanding my beehives,” he said.

Besides their land, the Wiles residence in Buccaneer Bay was hit last year. Sandbags had to be placed on the exterior where 2 feet of water was recorded with 3 inches seeping into the interior.

“You don’t realize the strength of water destruction until you see it,” Annette said.

Two years ago, the Wiles lost some 50 trees to a tornado at the

property east of Highway 75.

Fortunately, the outlook for the future looks bright as the Wiles were granted a license in 2019 by the Nebraska Department of Agriculture to participate in a pilot program to grow hemp.

“It was a blessing,” Annette said. “It gave us a new avenue.”

The hemp, which can be used in many products like lotions and creams, is being grown indoors in two greenhouses on their land east of Highway 75.

“Our first harvest was done in January,” Bruce said. “We learned a lot and look forward to the next crop.”

Their business also features a wine and beer tasting room that is open on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, sometimes offering live music.

Tim Rohwer is a reporter for The Plattsmouth Journal.

## County flood facts

**Cass County: Initial flood damage and cost**

**Amount allocated from federal, state and local shares** - \$1,567,336.12 (as of Feb. 10)

**# of farms** - 516

**Land in farms (acres)** - 262,364

**Average size of farms (acres)** - 508

**Share of Sales**

- Crops - 35%
- Livestock - 65%

**Total market value of products sold**—\$364,450,000

Source: Nebraska Emergency Management Agency



# Nebraska Strong Recovery Project offering support

**TIM ROHWER**  
Lee Enterprises

**S**ince last spring's devastating flood, much effort – and perhaps rightly so – has been made in helping victims with their financial losses.

But, there has been much anguish mentally, also.

An organization called Nebraska Strong Recovery Project has been in various places for many months to help with that issue. It plans to stay for months to come.

"We're more on the mental health side of things," said Stephanie Skeem.

"We've talked to a lot of people in distress," added Teresa O'Donnell.

The two women are trained crisis counselors for the organization.

"Stress can cause physical, mental, emotional pain," Skeem said.

"Maybe they are not sleeping well," O'Donnell said.



**TIM ROHWER, LEE ENTERPRISES**

Nebraska Strong members Stephanie Skeem and Teresa O'Donnell are in Plattsmouth to help Cass County flood victims who are dealing with mental issues. The organization will help out wherever needed in Nebraska.

The two women spoke about the organization at the Cass County Board of Commissioners on Jan. 21. Later, they set up a table, like every Tuesday, at the Under His

Wings Thrift Store in downtown Plattsmouth. Each Monday, they do the same at the Plattsmouth Public Library.

They have plenty of handout materials on dealing with such stress.

Other times they are speaking to groups or individuals about their services. They even went door-to-door in hard hit areas to see if they could assist people.

"We're here to assess their needs first and then go from there," Skeem said.

Even those who helped disaster victims may become stressed themselves, she added.

Their organization works closely with other such groups to ensure victims get the proper care needed.

"We work together and depending on what the person needs, we will direct them to the appropriate resources," Skeem said.

Perhaps most importantly, they try to convince flood victims that it is okay to admit they are feeling

stressed out instead of keeping it inside themselves.

"That's what we are here for," Skeem said.

They plan to be around until this May, she added.

Every Monday, these two counselors are at the library from 1 to 4 p.m. and at the thrift store every Tuesday from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

O'Donnell said the Nebraska Strong Recovery Project serves all counties in the state. Volunteers have been present in Dodge County and would be available to come to other counties if needed.

O'Donnell said residents can call the main hotline number of 1-800-464-0258 to request assistance. They can also contact individual behavioral health regions in the state.

Region 6 covers Cass, Sarpy, Douglas, Washington and Dodge counties. Region 6's telephone number is 402-444-7719.

Region 4 covers a wide swath of the state and includes Colfax,

Platte, Nance, Boone, Madison, Stanton and Cuming counties. Region 4's telephone number is 402-370-3100 extension 115.

Region 5 covers Polk, Butler, Saunders, Seward, York, Lancaster, Fillmore, Saline, Thayer, Jefferson and Gage counties. Region 5's telephone number is 402-441-4358.

"They can call and there will be someone on the phone who can answer their questions," O'Donnell said. "We're definitely available for anyone who is seeking help."

People can also call the Nebraska Rural Response Hotline at 1-800-464-0258 from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays through Fridays or the National Disaster Distress Hotline at 1-800-985-5990 24 hours a day.

Nebraska Strong is a nonprofit organization and the services provided are free.

Tim Rohwer is a reporter for The Plattsmouth Journal.



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attachments along with becoming the sole Nebraska dealer for Marshall Tree Saw. H2 equipment offers full shop services, field service, hydraulic hoses and parts support for all makes and models of equipment. H2 Equipment also rents track loaders with all types of attachments including the Loftness battle ax grinding head and the Marshall Tree Saw.

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