

Nebraska Ag Groups Become the Silver Lining During Pandemic

Nebraska agriculture has always responded positively when needed most. The state's farmers, ranchers, agri-businesses and ag organizations have risen to the task time and time again. Such has been the case since the onset of COVID-19.

As the pandemic spread across the state, everything changed. Schools closed and switched to remote learning, and many businesses had to slow or shutdown operations as well. The loss of jobs and income with businesses and meal options at school resulted in a rapidly increasing number of families and individuals needing food assistance.

"Last fiscal year (July 1, 2019-June 30, 2020), the Food Bank for the Heartland distributed more than 28 million meals across our service area," Food Bank Communications Manager Angie Grote said.

"That is five and a half million more meals than the previous fiscal year."

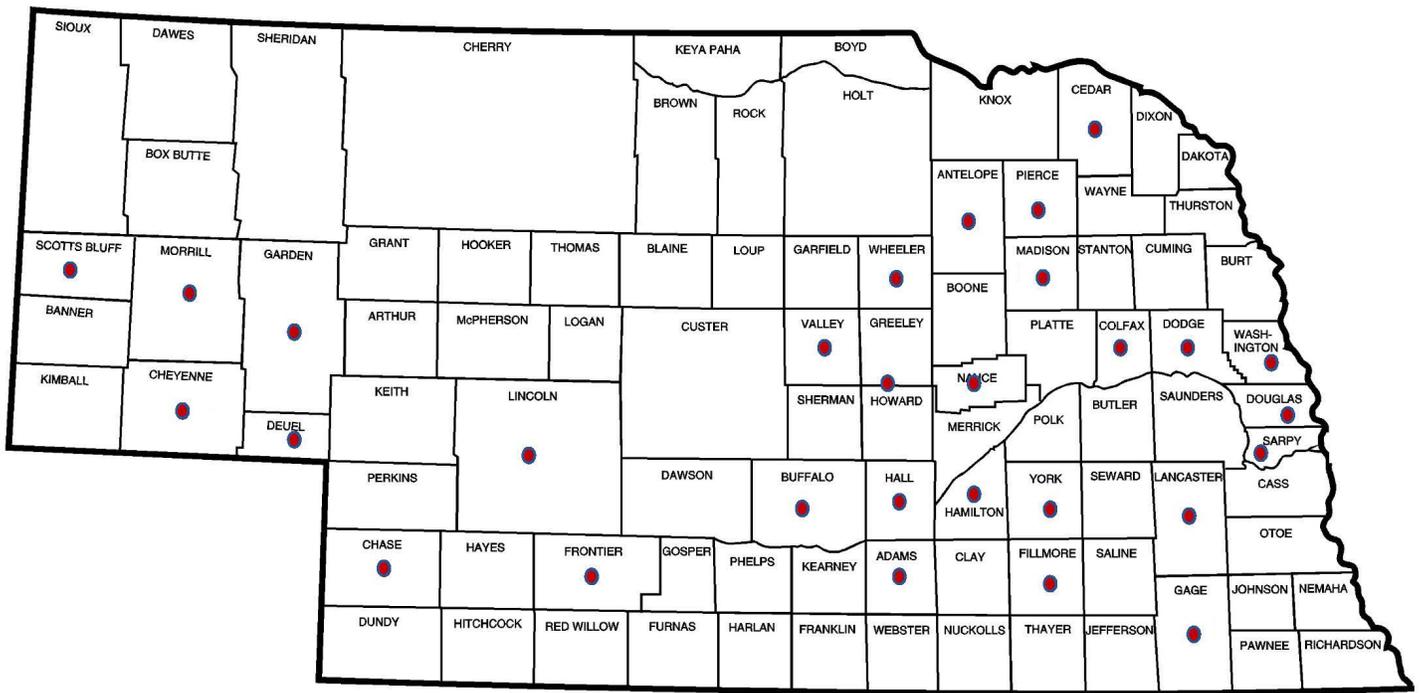
Food Bank for the Heartland, based in Omaha, serves a total of 93 counties in Nebraska and western Iowa. Since the pandemic, the number of people served through the Food Bank and its food pantry partners increased more than 40 percent.

"We are seeing families and individuals who never expected to be in a situation where they needed food assistance that are now seeking that help," said Grote. "I know the pandemic has affected us all and has had a devastating impact on many families."

Recognizing that urgent need for food assistance, several Nebraskans involved in agriculture found a way to step up and provide a helping hand.



Staff and volunteers at the Open Door Mission in Omaha proudly display the cold storage unit they were able to purchase through a grant program. Photo courtesy of AFAN.



The map illustrates the counties across the state where food pantries received cold storage grants. Some counties had multiple pantries that applied and received grants. Illustration courtesy of AFAN.

Cold Storage and Dairy Products

Farmers and ranchers across the state felt the rippling effects of COVID-19 as it spread across the country. The food industry was among the hardest hit as many restaurants had to reduce capacity or shutdown. Not only did it mean a loss of jobs and income, it also meant food suppliers had no place to distribute their products. That was especially true for the dairy industry which was also greatly impacted by the shutdown of many school lunchrooms, one of the larger consumers of dairy products.

“When restaurants and schools had to shut down to help prevent the spread of COVID, it created a drastic decline in demand,” said Kris Bousquet, formerly

with Midwest Dairy and currently with AFAN and the Nebraska State Dairy Association. “With processing plants cutting production, there were a lot of large bulk items such as cheese, butter and sour cream being stockpiled.”

While overall demand for food and dairy products decreased in restaurants and schools, it increased for food banks and food pantries across Nebraska. **Midwest Dairy** realized there was an alternative destination for all those nutritious products.

“Midwest Dairy requested USDA to grant a waiver that would allow checkoff-funded dairy entities, such as themselves, to use funds to purchase products that could be donated to food banks who in turn would distribute to food pantries,” said

Bousquet. “With those dollars, we were able to buy stockpiled bulk dairy products and repackage them for donation.”

Midwest Dairy, which represents 11 states, was given the opportunity to use up to \$500,000 for purchases of the surplus products with a portion of those products to be distributed in Nebraska.

The Food Bank for the Heartland and the **Food Bank of Lincoln** served as the distribution hubs in Nebraska. Food pantries statewide could then make requests for products. However, it was soon discovered that the pantries had their own specific challenges. While there was a real need for dairy products for their clients, many of the pantries had little or no cold storage for perishable items.

“We decided to open up additional funding that could be used by the pantries to purchase refrigeration units,” said Bousquet. “We worked with some of our Nebraska dairy farmers who went to their local pantries and assisted them in applying for grants as needed.”

It wasn't long before the requests from food pantries for refrigeration units far exceeded the available funds from Midwest Dairy. That's when the **Alliance for the Future of Agriculture in Nebraska (AFAN)** stepped in to assist.

“Our membership includes a large contingency of farm organizations and commodity groups in Nebraska, and I knew they would be willing to contribute to a project that provided assistance statewide,” AFAN Executive Director Steve Martin said. “We were able to



UNL faculty and staff loading packages of pork donations headed for distribution to a food bank. Photo courtesy of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

secure additional funding for more cold storage units, and our staff was able to use a portion of its time to administer the project.”

Martin and Bousquet also received support from **Nebraska Department of Agriculture (NDA)** Director Steve Wellman. He assisted in providing additional funds from NDA, as well as coordinating with other agriculture partners.

cold storage units were awarded to food pantries across the state of Nebraska allowing them to purchase industrial-grade refrigeration and/or freezer units.

Thanks to the cold storage units those pantries now have the ability to store all types of perishable items including dairy products as well as beef and pork, which have also been donated as part of the pandemic food aid campaign.



The cold storage grants allowed several food pantries, such as the one in Fullerton, to purchase refrigerator-freezers that help them serve their rural communities. Photo courtesy of AFAN.

“NDA was a vital partner in making this project work,” said Martin. “It was important to have Director Wellman involved in the project in order to be able to expand it statewide and assist a larger number of food pantries seeking refrigeration units.”

Through those united efforts, approximately 45

Pork Cares

It started with a spark from one Nebraska pig producer. Then through a collaboration with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the **Nebraska Pork Producers**, the Pork Cares campaign provided more than 10,000 pounds of pork that was packaged or served at food pantries and soup kitchens.

Due to COVID-19, several pork processing plants in Nebraska slowed or shutdown production

as work forces were reduced due to illness. These changes led to a backlog for the state's pork producers who had few places to take their animals to be processed.

Columbus pig producer Bill Luckey decided to take action to find a way to utilize some of the pigs in order to assist food pantries who were seeing a growing number of people needing food assistance.

"We wanted to make sure these pigs could be used somewhere but we had to figure out a way to get them processed," said Luckey. "I was talking to a friend, and we realized that with many universities shut down, perhaps some of the meat labs would be available to process the pork."

Luckey, an alumnus at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, reached out to his alma mater and soon details were worked



*Pork being processed at the UNL Loeffel Meat Laboratory.
Photo courtesy of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.*

out to open up the **Loeffel Meat Laboratory**. Luckey was familiar with the meat lab having worked there himself in the late 70s, followed by two sons who worked there as well.

With a processing procedure in place, it was time to add another partner to assist with the promotion and implementation

of what became known as the Pork Cares Campaign. The Nebraska Pork Producers Association was a natural fit for that role.

"Pork producers in our state tend to be very philanthropic, and the response we received when we took on this project was positive," Nebraska Pork Producers Director of Domestic Marketing Jane Stone said. "This positive attitude was already evident by the successful Hams Across America program we do every year. So, the Pork Cares Campaign was something I knew we could successfully handle."

On a rainy day in June, Luckey took the first load of pigs to the Loeffel Meat Lab to be processed by staff, professors and grad students. Thanks to some of the pig buyers in the Columbus area, and promotion by the Nebraska Pork Producers Association,



*Pork burgers being grilled and ready for serving at area food pantries and soup kitchens.
Photo courtesy of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.*

more farmers donated pigs to be processed. By the end of August, a total of 72 pigs had been donated and processed.

Much of the packaged pork was donated to the Lincoln Food Bank who in turn distributed it to food pantries in Lancaster and the surrounding counties they service.

In addition, Stone worked with the **National Pork Board** to host grilling events in Lincoln and Omaha to serve pork burgers to food pantry and soup kitchen clients.

“We did save some of the bellies at the meat lab so animal science students could learn to process them into bacon this past fall,” said Stone. “Once processed, we were able to donate the bacon and some ground pork to the Platte County Food Pantry, Lincoln Food Bank, People’s City Mission and the Husker Food Pantry.”

It took a cooperative effort by all three partners: area pig producers, the University of Nebraska and the Nebraska Pork Producers Association, to make the Pork Cares project a success. That success did not go unnoticed by fellow livestock producers in the beef industry who found a way to contribute to the cause of helping people in need of food.



Former Nebraska Beef Council member Dawn Caldwell and Nebraska Extension Educator Hannah Guenther submitted selfies sporting “Good Life. Great Steaks” t-shirts.

Good Life, Great Steaks

Like most ag industries in the state, the beef industry also felt the impacts of COVID in 2020. Low prices and distribution challenges made it a tough go at times. Despite the challenges, cattle producers also wanted to help families and individuals needing food assistance during difficult times.

“After hearing from our producers that they wanted to help, we started looking at projects that fit best for us,” **Nebraska Beef Council** Director of Marketing Adam Wegner said. “We came up with an idea where we could raise funds to donate to the food banks and promote beef at the same time.”

Playing off the popular “Nebraska...the Good Life” theme, the Beef Council created t-shirts

with a map of Nebraska and the wording “Good Life. Great Steaks.” inside the image of the state.

“The response was overwhelmingly positive,” said Wegner. “It was a win-win because we were able to quickly raise funds for the food banks and promote Nebraska as a top producer of quality beef.”

In just five weeks, the Beef Council sold more than 1,200 t-shirts. The approximately \$8,000 raised was donated to the Food Bank of Lincoln and Food Bank for the Heartland, who between them, serve all 93 Nebraska counties.

Because of the promotion’s success, the Beef Council conducted a second phase of the project this past fall selling more than 300 additional shirts.

"We are so grateful to be partnering with these great organizations in the state of Nebraska," said Heartland's Grote. "Helping a neighbor is a priority for them. They realized they would be helping a lot of people, especially during the pandemic."

Thoughtful thinking, great organization and teamwork led all these organizations and their constituents to reach out to all areas of the state and lend a helping hand when it was needed most. Midwest Dairy, the Nebraska Pork Producers, the Nebraska Beef Council, AFAN,

NDA and all the many people and organizations that came together to make these donations possible, are the heart and soul of Nebraska agriculture and represent everything good that the industry has to offer.

The Dairy Ripple Effect

When Midwest Dairy launched its cold storage grant campaign, they wanted to take it to a grassroots level. This meant proactively recruiting dairy owners to contact local food pantries to evaluate their need for cold storage.

Dairyman Heath Snodgrass, of Royal, Nebraska, took advantage of the opportunity.

"After Kris Bousquet contacted me, I made a call to the Antelope County Food Pantry which is centrally located in our county," said Snodgrass. "I soon found out that they did indeed lack any capacity to store perishable items."

Volunteers at the food pantry were excited about the possibility to receive a grant from Midwest Dairy since it would allow them to store and distribute dairy products, something they had not been able to do.

Snodgrass moved forward and filled out the application for a cold storage grant for the food pantry. However, during the process he found out from the pantry volunteers, that not only did the pantry lack cold storage capacity, but they also did not have funding to purchase dairy and other perishable products.

To fill that funding gap, Snodgrass enlisted the help of his dairy equipment supplier, **Automated Dairy Specialists, LLC**, located in the western part of Antelope County in Clearwater. Once the grant was secured and the cold storage unit purchased, Automated Dairy jumped in to assist in more ways than one.

"The first thing we did was to send our guys to the food pantry to unload and install the cold storage unit," Automated Dairy Manager Connie Bellingtier said. "The next concern for the food pantry's

director, Bev Anderson, was having dairy products to fill the cooler."

Automated Dairy Specialists then made the commitment to supply 15 gallons of milk and 30 units of other dairy products such as butter and cheese, each month. It didn't take long before it was realized the food pantry needed even more milk so that amount was upped to 25 gallons a month.

"Our philosophy is that if a gallon of milk can help one child get a better start to school each day, it will just make him a better learner and his life will just be better all the way around," said Bellingtier.

Bellingtier said Automated Dairy plans to continue their commitment to the food pantry. She added that the project fits into their philosophy of helping those in need while supporting the state's dairy industry.