The News-Gazette®

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FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2026

A SALUTE TO AREA FARMERS

A look back at more than 50 years of winners of our Farm Leader of the Year award and our newly created Emerging Farm Leader of the Year accolade

SEEKING A COMPROMISE

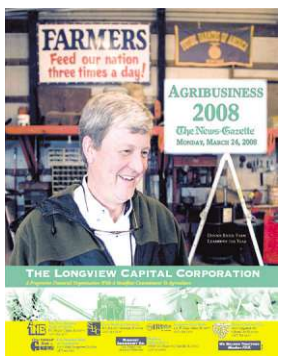
University of Illinois researchers are 'scratching surface' of maximizing 'agrivoltaics': Combining solar panels and row crops on farmland

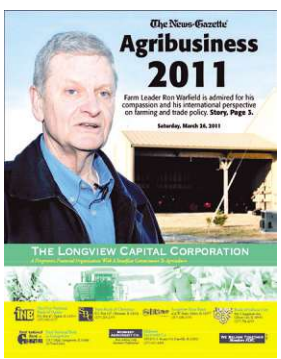
PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

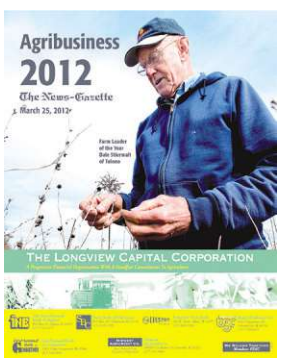
News-Gazette 2016 Farm Leader of the Year Mark Pflugmacher weighs in on technological advances in agriculture and where he thinks things are heading

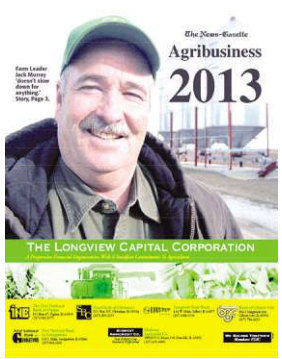
AGRIBUSINESS 2026

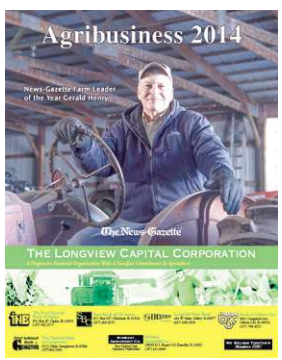
Saluting our past Farm Leaders

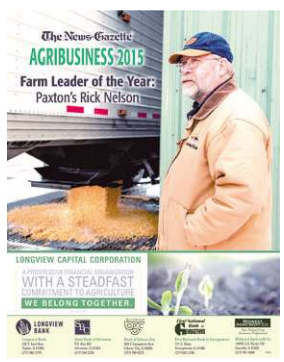


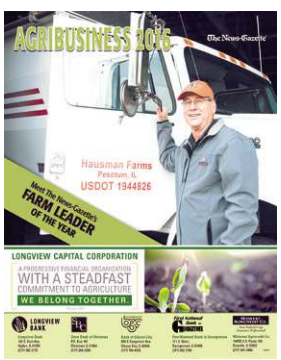


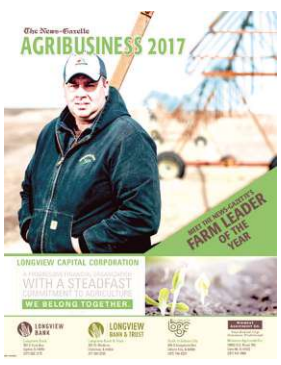


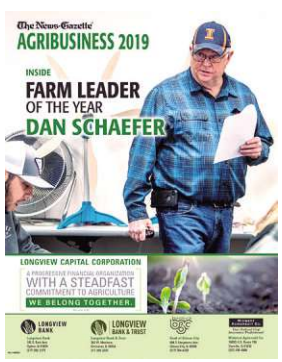


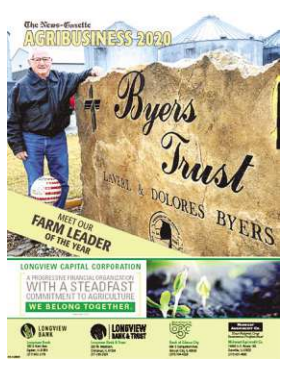


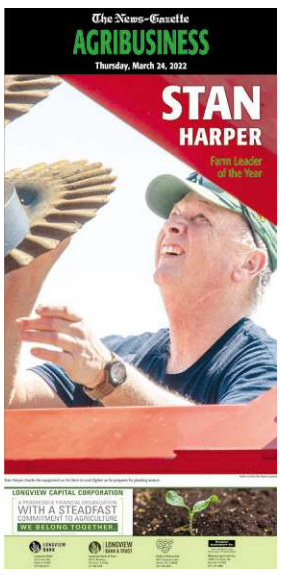


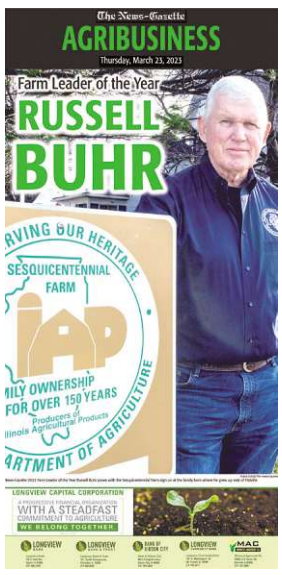


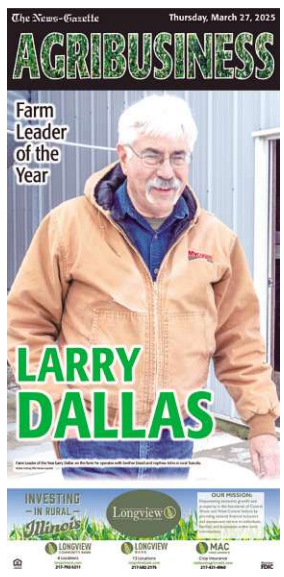












With the addition of Randy Graham and Debbie Curtis Graham, here's the list of winners through the years

1972 — Lyle E. Grace
1973 — Richard H. Burwash
1973 — Kenneth M. Kesler
1974 — Eugene Curtis
1975 — W. Stanley Wood
1976 — John H. Mathews
1977 — Gerald Compton
1978 — Jay Wallace Rayburn
1979 — Maurice Gordon
1980 — Keith C. Kesler
1981 — W.T. Hodge Jr.
1982 — Eldon Hesterberg
1983 — Charles L. Ehler
1983 — Luke M. Feeney
1984 — Richard C. Rayburn
1985 — Tom Barker
1986 — Paul E. Curtis
1987 — Fred Werts
1988 — W. Stephen Moser
1989 — Linden Warfel
1990 — Lloyde Esry
1991 — John Reifsteck
1992 — Lyle Shields
1993 — Lee Eichhorst
1994 — Jerry Wallace
1995 — Kent Krukewitt
1996 — Donald Wood
1997 — David Downs
1998 — Ray Aden
1999 — John Albin
2000 — Gary Grace, Roger Grace
2001 — Terry Wolf
2002 — Wayne Busboom
2003 — Lowell Heap
2004 — Steve Stierwalt
2005 — John Jay
2006 — Gary Luth
2007 — Dennis Riggs
2008 — Eric Rund
2009 — Paul Compton
2010 — Ronald R. Warfield
2011 — Dale Stierwalt
2012 — Jack Murray
2013 — Gerald Henry
2014 — Rick Nelson
2015 — Chris Hausman
2016 — Mark Pflugmacher
2017 — Jon Schroeder
2018 — Dan Schaefer
2019 — Laverl Byers
2020 — Ken Dalenberg
2021 — Stan Harper
2022 — Russell Buhr
2023 — Steve Hettinger
2024 — Larry Dallas
2025 — Randy Graham, Debbie Curtis Graham

Emerging Farm Leaders

2024 — Olivia Shike
2025 — Cole Pruitt

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ROB LE CATES: ABOUT THIS SECTION

Announcing our 2025 Farm Leaders of the Year

CHAMPAIGN — If you happen to run into Curtis Orchard co-owners Randy Graham or Debbie Curtis Graham the next time you're picking apples or grabbing some cider and doughnuts, be sure to give them a hearty congratulations.

The agritourism power couple has been named as the The News-Gazette's 2025 Farm Leaders of the Year.

Randy and Debbie are continuing a family tradition in earning the accolade: Debbie's grandfather Eugene Curtis won it in 1974, as did her father, Paul, in 1986.

The panel of prior winners who choose the next recipient opted for a joint award this year because of the importance each person plays in the farm operation. It's the first double award since 2000.

The Grahams will be celebrated alongside the second-ever Emerging Farm Leader of the Year, Cole Pruitt.

The soon-to-be Parkland College graduate who works as an EMT and a volunteer firefighter made history with his St. Joseph-Ogden FFA chapter, earning the school's first state championship in 40 years in agricultural mechanics repair and maintenance in 2024.

The celebration is set for 5 p.m. March 30 at Riggs Beer Company, 1901 S. High Cross Road, Urbana. Tickets can be purchased by heading to news-gazette.com and clicking on the Farm Leader ticket icon on the right-hand side of the page.

The Grahams and Pruitt will also be featured in our annual Farm Leader of the Year section, set to be published March 27.

For ticket and advertising information, please reach out to Mark Lukas, vice president of sales, at mlukas@news-gazette.com or 217-393-8238.

Rob Le Cates is a multimedia reporter at The News-Gazette. Reach him at 217-393-8262 or rlecates@news-gazette.com.

Provided

DEBBIE CURTIS GRAHAM AND RANDY GRAHAM

Provided

COLE PRUITT

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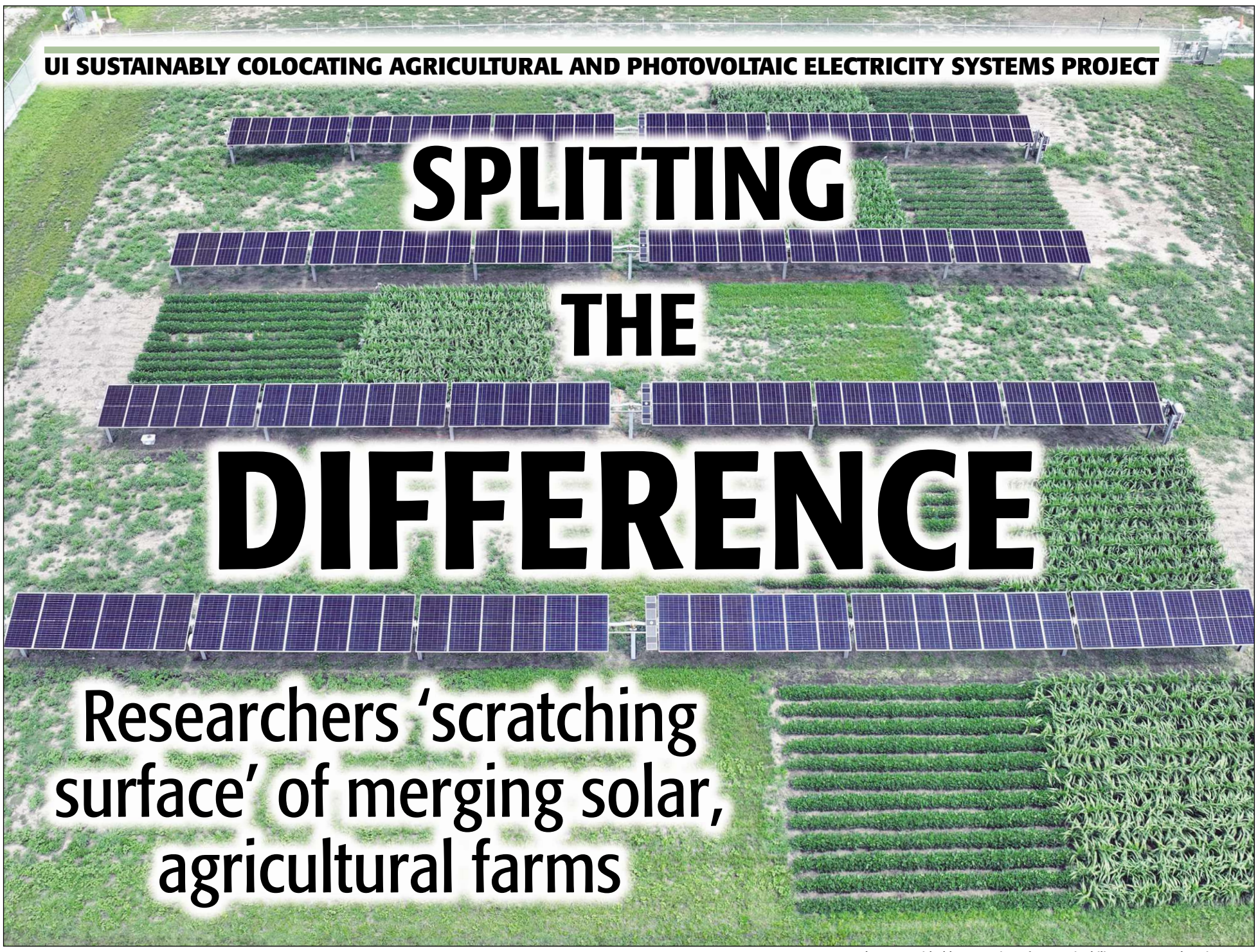

SPLITTING THE DIFFERENCE

Researchers 'scratching surface' of merging solar, agricultural farms

Photos provided by UI Institute for Sustainability, Energy, and Environment

The University of Illinois' Sustainably Colocating Agricultural and Photovoltaic Electricity Systems project is exploring if agricultural crop growth can co-exist with solar-energy generation using a new research site that had its grand opening in September.

By ROB LE CATES
rlecates@news-gazette.com

CHAMPAIGN — The recent rise in conversion of farmland from growing crops to harvesting sunlight has brought with it plenty of social and economic issues — and University of Illinois researchers are in the beginning stages of bridging the gap and allowing both uses to coexist on some of the most fertile land in the country.

The abundant, unimpeded sunlight on Illinois' cropland near electric grids has caused solar companies to offer double or triple the amount of rent to set up their panels, enticing farmers with a significant raise that reduces the risk associated with crop production. But that also takes those acres out of production for crops, with many fearing they'll never return to their original use.

UI researchers are experimenting with a compromise they call agrivoltaics, the term used to describe the combined revenue from agriculture and solar-energy generation.

The research is part of the UI's Sustainably Colocating Agricultural and Photovoltaic Electricity Systems project, started in 2021 through funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture.

And though it was created five years ago, Director Madhu Khanna said it is just getting started.

"We've only just started scratching the surface in terms of understanding how agrivoltaics could be used, and currently it's really just developed as a technological solution to ease the community opposition and the whole issue of conflict around land use," she said.

At its roots, the project has multiple broad objectives.

"We were interested in looking at how different types of crops, grown in different regions, would perform under agrivoltaics relative to if you were to grow them alone," she said. "Would it be economically viable? What would the impacts on yield and growing conditions be?"

Those were questions the SCAPES team asked themselves — ideas still being tested today.

SCAPES partnered with the universities of Arizona and Colorado, which have similar setups in different climates. The UI team also worked with Auburn University in Alabama, the UI-Chicago and the National Laboratory of the Rockies.

The UI team is focused on rain-fed commodity crops grown in the Midwest and specialty crops like peppers, tomatoes and kale, while the Arizona team is focused on specialty crops with irrigation, and the Colorado team is studying specialty crops in addition to grasses.

All three compiled data from the fields of each site alongside economic viability and provided their findings to farmers and solar developers.

The first concepts of agrivoltaics dates back to around 40 years ago in Germany, when physicist Adolf Goetzberger first proposed combining agriculture and solar-energy production. In the early 2000s, Europe and Japan started to explore agrivoltaics.

Studies began in the U.S. in late 2000s. Three regions spearheaded the research — the University of Massachusetts Amherst, the University of Arizona and the National Renewable Energy Lab, now the National Lab of the Rockies.

Those labs researched the rudimentary understanding of agrivoltaics and crop growth underneath panels, combining to form the InSPIRE program, which is funded through the U.S. Department of Energy.

Through the years, more private companies and other research institutions started to test agrivoltaics. Today, the U.S. has about 60 agrivoltaic crop farms, 400 agrivoltaic grazing operations and about a dozen with cattle. Pollinator habitats with native grasses have started to breach the horizon of agrivoltaics, too.

Initially, the UI team started with the utility-scale Solar Farm 2.0 that was already on campus. It featured eight 6-foot-tall panels placed 18 feet apart. The space allowed for five rows of crops to be planted between the photovoltaic cells, but not much else.

J.K. Lee, a key researcher involved in planting, said the distance between arrays did not permit access to modern farming equipment, so the land had to be tended and harvested primarily by hand.

"Cultivating the row crop in between the panels is not easy," he said. "I think especially accommodating equipment is the biggest challenge — as you know, Midwest agriculture is not small."

Despite this hurdle, SCAPES established a new site designed with agrivoltaics in mind last year that can accommodate conventional machinery, better simulating how farmers could adapt to the practice.

The Energy Farm sports an 88-kilowatt solar field consisting of 152 bifacial panels that rotate to continuously face the sun throughout the day.

The arrays are arranged in 160-foot-long rows that are elevated 6 feet above the ground, with 40 feet in between each row. The new farm aligns with the sites in Arizona and Colorado sites, allowing the UI team to collect data in tandem with the other locations.

Please see SCAPES, B-5

The Energy Farm, the UI SCAPES program's newest site, sports an 88-kilowatt solar field consisting of 152 bifacial rotating panels.

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The UI SCAPES program's newest agrivoltaic site, opened last year, features a better design for combining the experimental technology with large farm machinery.

A SCAPES team member tills the ground at the original site at Solar Farm 2.0 in 2023. Most of the planting and harvesting work there had to be done by hand.

SCAPES

Continued from B-4

Khanna said one of the challenges in agrivoltaics is specific site designs and crops used, which can diversify findings.

"Agrivoltaics can perform well with (specific) crops under (specific) conditions, but it may have some trade-offs in other locations," she said. "So having this similarity of design and experimental methods will help us give a better sense of where it works and where it doesn't."

An example of give-and-take the UI researchers found involved shade exposure on its first site. The panels shade plants on either side, while the middle crops receive full sunlight.

The SCAPES program published a report on its findings from the 2023 and 2024 growing seasons involving soybeans, sorghum and specialty vegetables grown on the old location.

Researchers found that while soybeans saw a large penalty with shade, having issues with grain weight, sorghum did not share the same fate.

They determined that sorghum could be grown between the panels without significant yield losses. They also concluded that kale, peppers and tomatoes fared well in the partial shade and increased water use.

They found that the shade from the panels keeps the soil beneath them cooler, which increases the retained moisture levels, promoting crop growth.

Most importantly, they looked at the balancing act called land-equivalent ratio, where revenue from solar-energy generation can offset losses from lower crop yields.

Khanna, the program director, said this basically allows the SCAPES team to compare apples to oranges, in the form of kilowatt hours and bushels.

"That land-equivalent ratio, in most cases, was actually greater than 1, which indicates that the overall productivity of the land improves in terms of the total combined output that you could get (from) both the energy and the crop," she said.

Part of the research involved surveying solar companies and farmers. In response to the rise in cropland being rented out for solar farms, many local governments around the country have instituted restrictions or bans on the practice.

"This often causes delays in getting solar projects approved and often has to be canceled, or they may not get the best land they're looking for," Khanna said. "So agrivoltaics is a way to overcome some of that opposition, and that seems to be a major motivator for solar developers."

The researchers theorized that while the majority of farmers still prefer the conventional method of agriculture, if rental payments from solar companies are too good to refuse, agrivoltaics can be a good compromise over turning over their land completely to solar panels.

Farmers "don't have the riskiness associated with crop production, and so even though yields might go down a little bit, (the income) is more than making up for it," Khanna said. "So for farmers, this is likely to be an appealing option."

Implementation brings a few challenges. Depending on the farm's size, farmers may have to maneuver among more narrow and shorter spaces, which might cause them to shift from growing corn and soybeans to shorter crops and/or hay.

Adding agrivoltaics also comes with increased costs for proper machinery to fit in between panels.

Khanna said the technology around agrivoltaics has the potential to be very beneficial, but only under certain conditions, and the current equipment comes with high costs.

"We need to think about what kind of policy incentives would be needed to promote agrivoltaics, and those could take form as investment tax credits and things like that, which would lower the cost for developers and provide more interest and opportunity to be able to expand this," she said.

The researchers foresee an increased demand for electricity in the future, and as the practice scales up, they hope proper equipment will become more incentivized and accessible.

"One could imagine in the future scenarios where it may be more distributed, where individual farmers are both generating electricity for themselves and for the grid and using their land for multifunctional use," Khanna said.

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NEWS-GAZETTE 2016 FARM LEADER OF THE YEAR

‘The biggest thing that we farmers want is our future’

By ROB LE CATES
rlecates@news-gazette.com

THOMASBORO — The start of 2026 brought with it the start of Mark Pflugmacher’s 30th year as a farmer — which means he’s witnessed plenty of change in the industry over the first quarter of the 21st century.

He fondly remembers driving his father’s John Deere 4010 in the summer heat as a fourth-grader, raking hay with his uncle to provide for his family’s feeder pigs and cattle. The smell alone was one of the various reasons he doesn’t miss raising livestock.

Family legacy is important to him. The blood and sweat put into the ground are all worth it when the family business continues, he said.

“The biggest thing that we farmers want is our future, and we want our children to take over for our farm,” he said.

He’s not forcing anything on his 7-year-old son, Kenston, though. Farming will be an opportunity for him if he chooses to pursue it.

With inflation causing input costs to spike, Pflugmacher has noticed an increasing number of farmers calling it quits over the past 10 to 15 years. But he said he’s also seen an influx of younger people returning to the farm.

He said it’s good to see the next generation of farmers getting out into the fields, but those price spikes may discourage them from pursuing agriculture.

The News-Gazette’s 2016 Farm Leader of the Leader answered questions on industrial and economic change, technological advances and what he believes is the next big thing for agriculture.

Rob Le Cates/The News-Gazette

Mark Pflugmacher is a third-generation row crop farmer in Gifford. He remembers growing up driving his father’s eight-row planter. He said it would take his family an entire day to harvest as much corn as he can in an hour today.

What would your father or grandfather be stunned to see in agriculture today?

I think they would be stunned by the size of the machinery. When I started farming, we had an eight-row planter, and now we have a 24-to-36-row planter. We’re driving 10 mph, and I think they would be shocked to see this stuff out in the field. We now have combines. I don’t have one, but we have combines that can collect 7,000 bushels an hour, and we used to only be able to do 7,000 bushels of corn in a day.”

What are 3 major changes in agriculture since you started, and how have they affected you and the industry?

“The three biggest things I would say are technology, cost of business and seed (advancements). I could talk about technology all day — what hasn’t technology done in the last five to 10 years that’s changed agriculture? It’s not just auto-steer on tractors anymore; a lot of things go into technology. Then the other thing that’s happened in the last five years is the cost of business ... and inflation is a big thing. Just the cost of seed and what it takes to put in a crop now, compared to what it was even five years ago, is just insane.

I say seed because this year, we’ve been in drought. We can grow a bushel of corn on less rain than we could 10 years ago, and we can still get a lot of bushels off of it, which is just unbelievable. The seed treatments (for soybeans) and stuff that we are able to plan earlier, we used to plant corn first, now I do soybeans first, because the seed treatment and the technology used (to enhance it).

What do you believe is in store for the next 25 years?

I think the biggest thing that’s going to change, and it’s already starting a little bit, is AI, and I’m looking forward to it. I think seed companies are going to use AI to select hybrids that will perform better on your farm. The more information we put into this stuff and the AI concept, the better it’s going to be. So I think AI is really going to be the next big thing that changes agriculture.

Do you believe technology has helped or hurt agriculture?

Both, but mostly I think it’s helped. It’s made equipment more reliable, but it’s also allowed us to work longer days with auto steer. We can keep track of certain hybrids versus others with yield monitors, and that’s been going on for the last 20 years, but it’s really fine-tuned.

In the last five, six years, equipment has gotten better with the imagery, and there have been companies that have used imagery to predict yield already in July and August. We can use that information now to swell some of our crops, and it’s actually more accurate than even walking through the field. The more information we put in it, the better it’s going to get.

What technology have you implemented?

I’ve used field imagery, basically GPS imagery. That’s helped me quite a bit. I’ve used seed technology, and what’s gotten even better is just the technology that equipment manufacturers have used. We have planters now that we can drive through the field at 10 miles per hour and have better seed singulation than we could when we’re driving 5 miles per hour, and that’s just in the last five to six years. That is a big difference in the world, because we can cover a lot more ground now.

What do you suggest to improve the global market?

“We’re overproducing what we’ve got, and we’ve done it to ourselves. We have to find a way to have South America basically stop cutting down rainforest or stop producing acres, because they’re just flooding. They are out-producing us, which is fine, but they keep on adding acres ... and pretty soon it’s going to make us basically not grow soybeans. I’m not talking about central Illinois, but about maybe the fringe acres of the U.S.

Maybe we only put those acres in row crops when we need to under an emergency basis or something. I don’t know what the plan is, but we have a system that is set up on row crops, and unfortunately, it’s all about supply and demand. We just have a lot more supply than demand, and until we stop supplying, we’re going to have issues. We need to find more uses for our product — that’s the only way — or find different uses for our ground too.

What do farmers today need to do to attract and retain younger people?

I think there have to be more programs with older farmers who don’t have any heirs to work with a person who wants to farm, and it’s going to be tough, because I’m sure that person is going to have heirs that don’t live on a farm.

The problem is that it’s so expensive to get into farming, and so there has to be some kind of financial help for beginning farmers and others a little bit. ... I’m not necessarily saying the government helps. I’m saying that if you want that farm to survive and you want to move on, then that person is going to have to help this other person financially get started, and it might have to be on a 20-year contract or some way to get them involved. It’s just so costly to start farming nowadays without any kind of help. It’s virtually impossible to do unless you have some kind of financial ability.

AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION

Checking in with area FFA chapters

Sunday marks the start of FFA Week, an opportunity for members to celebrate the organization and its role in building up future leaders. The News-Gazette's **ROB LE CATES** talked with several dozen area schools to see what their chapters have been up to this year. Below are the replies from Champaign County; for the full list, head to ***news-gazette.com***.

Fisher

➜ **Members:** 123

➜ **So far in 2025-26:** The chapter participated in various career development events, held multiple chapter meetings and group activities, traveled to the National FFA Convention and participated in community service activities. One of their favorites was hosting a petting zoo at the UI tailgate.

Photos provided

Urbana

➜ **Members:** 50

➜ **So far in 2025-26:** The chapter has done career exploration, field trips and garden work during class time. The students love being in the garden, whether it's weeding, mowing, planting or moving mulch. The chapter went on a field trip to Epiphany Farms and the Food Forest in Normal in September.

St. Joseph-Ogden

➜ **Members:** 225, with around 50 to 60 considered active

➜ **So far in 2025-26:** Throughout the year, the chapter led a Greenhand supervised agricultural experience night to introduce first-year members to the experience. Students learned how to properly retire flags and donated items to assemble birthday celebration boxes for families in need. They attended the National FFA Convention on a day trip and listened to keynote speaker A'ric Jackson. In early February, the chapter hosted its annual alumni auctions, which raises more than $80,000 annually and supports scholarships, trips and competitive opportunities for the students.

Heritage (Broadlands)

➜ **Members:** 37

➜ **So far in 2025-26:** The chapter attended the Farm Progress Show in Decatur, the state convention in Springfield and the national convention in Indianapolis. They held multiple school-focused events like a cookout for all the students, cleaned up the landscape on the first day of school and had a float in the Broadlands homecoming parade. Students also enjoyed monthly FFA meetings. In September, the students mimicked a drive-in theater and watched "The Sandlot" at the high school. They painted pumpkins in October and bowled turkeys in November.

Mahomet-Seymour

➜ **Members:** More than 400 in high school, junior high programs

➜ **So far in 2025-26:** Mahomet-Seymour was named a National Three-Star Chapter, the highest rating achievable, at the National FFA Convention in Indianapolis. Students on different committees planned activities and events, including creating safety kits and providing lunches for farmers during harvest at local grain elevators. The chapter collected almost 6,000 food items for the Mom's Pantry. FFA members were also involved in career development events; some students recently participated in the Parliamentary Procedures section, where Mahomet-Seymour won first place as a team.

Rantoul Township

➜ **Members:** 50

➜ **So far in 2025-26:** Students competed in dairy-foods, poultry, land-use, job-interview and agriculture-education contests. Each monthly meeting has a different activity, like a cookout, community service or white-elephant gift exchange. Members also received their FFA jackets in December.

Unity (Tolono)

➜ **Members:** 175 in grades 6-12

➜ **So far in 2025-26:** Unity FFA organized activities like a chapter cookout for students and their families, joined the school's student council to write holiday cards to residents in local nursing homes and went ice skating. They also went to the National FFA Convention in Indianapolis. Students partook in leadership workshops and learned about future college and career options at the career fair and shop at the FFA mall.

Serving Farmers & Agribusiness

Planting a Legacy for the Future

Champaign County Farm Bureau

Speak up for Agriculture: Play a vital role in shaping the future of farming locally and nationally

Build Connections: Network with fellow farmers, industry leaders, and community advocates

Unlock Exclusive Benefits: Access valuable discounts and member-only perks for your farm and family

Drive Positive Change: Support impactful programs that strengthen rural communities and protect farmland for generations to come

Champaign County Farm Bureau Foundation

Empowering the Next Generation: Foundation Scholarships support student-leaders pursuing degrees in food, agriculture, and natural resources

Training for Success: FUEL Grants offer real-world experience in production agricultural careers

Cultivating Awareness: Ag in the Classroom brings agriculture to life with truthful, interactive lessons for today's students

Building Community: Supporting the future of agriculture through collaboration within our community

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