

Fertilizer costs outpacing corn price

Douglas County agriculture has slowed in January. It didn't seem like that much grain moved after the first of the year. We have hauled some corn when it was frozen and have soybeans to go to town as well. There are lots of semis on Rt 36 going to Decatur. Those processors need corn and soybeans year-round.

The farm press is full of stories about high fertilizer prices. Nitrogen fertilizer has tripled in price from a year ago. Phosphorus and potassium will cost twice as much. Fall 2022 corn is about 25% more than a year ago, not enough to cover the fertilizer increase.

Any group of farmers immediately begins to discuss the price of fertilizer and what might be done in the face of sky-high input prices.

I was on an Illinois Farm Bureau-sponsored conference call with two major fertilizer companies the first week of January. One is mainly a producer of nitrogen fertilizer and the other mostly phosphorus and potassium fertilizers. They were not optimistic prices would go down anytime soon. There is never one reason for something like the price increase we have seen. These companies blame shipping costs and world demand among other things.

An interesting take was from the producer of nitrogen fertilizer. They said that Europe had a dry, windless summer. Their windmills made no electricity and dry rivers didn't have enough flow to generate any either. Instead, generation plants using natural gas became the main source of electricity, and natural gas prices shot up. Natural gas is also the raw material for nitrogen fertilizer. The nitrogen fertilizer producers shut down unable to make any money.

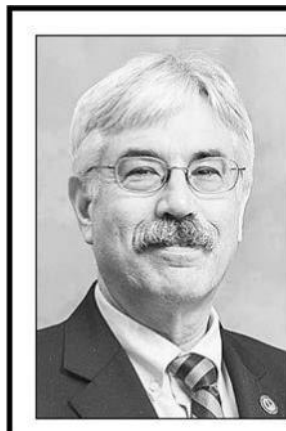
The American Farm Bureau Federation held its annual meeting early in the month. Delegates from the 50 states and Puerto Rico gathered in Atlanta, Georgia. The format is like that of the Illinois Farm Bureau. The states submit resolutions to change AFBF policy and debate those changes. Illinois chose a dozen pieces of our policy to add to the AFBF policy book and got all but one of those through the delegates.

There are of course stark differences in opinions among the delegates. Heavily debated were policies dealing with price discovery in the cattle market. The big cattle feeding states in the west sell most of their cattle via contracts with the packers. The Upper Midwest and eastern states don't have the numbers of animals to

attract the big packers and suffer from much lower prices. AFBF policy was not changed and heavily favors the big cattle feeders.

An Illinois policy advocating a crop insurance credit for planting cover crops failed to pass. Illinois has a state program and other funding for planting cover crops, which can be quite expensive. This money goes quickly and is generally available only to first-time adaptors of cover crops. We thought an insurance credit was a way to compensate everyone for doing something for soil health. Not enough of the rest of the country felt the same way.

I talked to a Montana farmer that grew wheat and dry peas and laid a third of his ground out each year to allow moisture to accumulate for a crop the following year. His total rainfall is 12 inches per year. That is just a little more than the 10 inches we were ahead of average at my house in Illinois this year. One of the Georgia delegates seated behind the Illinois people raises pecans and pine trees for lumber. It seemed like there were dairy farmers from every state in the union. Dairy policy problems make growing corn and soybeans look easy. American agriculture is diverse and productive.



Douglas County Agriculture

Larry W. Dallas
Illinois Farm Bureau
District 12 Director

One thing we have done earlier than usual is figuring out our herbicide programs for spring. Like fertilizer, many of the most used herbicides will be more expensive. They may also be hard to get. We would like to get at least some of the scarcer products that are very effective. If we can't get as much of a product as we would like, we need to formulate an alternate plan that will give us similar weed control. It is much easier to have this planned out ahead of time rather than doing it on the fly during planting.

Like so many things many of our herbicides are coming from China. Ocean freight rates have risen by a factor of 7 in the last year and ships cannot be unloaded because of back-ups at west coast harbors. In some cases when ships are un-

loaded, they turn immediately for Asia, not waiting for a return load. Labor shortages from covid get some blame. It all means higher prices and product shortages for us.

Cash grain prices have remained at good levels. South America is experiencing weather problems again this year and that is keeping prices up. Soybean harvest has started in the southern hemisphere and yields are good but the first crop corn in Argentina is in very poor condition because of drought conditions. It may be dry enough to affect planting their second crops too. That uncertainty keeps grain prices up.

This hemisphere is a couple months from planting our next crop, but large areas of the US are still in drought conditions. We have plenty of time to make

up the deficit. Rain can't soak into the frozen ground, however.

The dry parts of the upper Midwest are frozen. The grain markets will continue to factor all these uncertainties into prices.

Besides hauling grain, we have been working on equipment in the shop. There are winter parts sales at the implement dealers, and we put together a list of things that we know we will need for the coming year.

There are things we don't fix until we can get the repairs at a reduced cost. These are things that won't be needed until the next season or might be more cosmetic in nature. It is probably not a big money saver, but it is satisfying.

The flurry of meetings that occurs most winters is muted by covid still. A meeting of Illinois drainage districts is going on as I type this, however, after missing last year. I need to update my herbicide applicator license sometime this winter. That training can be done online. We went to a farm sale hoping to pick up another grain truck reasonably. A lot of other farmers had that in mind too and we did not bring it home.

Thank you for reading about January in Douglas County agriculture.

El Salvador seeks Illinois farms for skilled, H-2A workers

By KAY SHIPMAN
FarmWeek

El Salvador offers Illinois farmers thousands of skilled workers seeking seasonal, 10-month jobs through a 2020 agreement between the U.S. and El Salvador governments, the El Salvador Consulate general counsel said during a Jan. 6 speech in Springfield.

"This (labor program) is a win-win-win," Consul General Federico Guerrero told attendees of the Illinois Specialty Crop Conference. Based in Chicago, Guerrero worked in the multinational tech industry before joining his country's foreign service, first as vice consul in Los Angeles in 2019. He was later promoted to general consul in Chicago.

In 2020, the two governments established programs allowing Salvadorans to apply for H-2A and H-2B visas to work in temporary U.S. agricultural and nonagricultural jobs. "Our main ally is USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development) in every step. It is backed up by the embassy of the United States," Guerrero said.

Guerrero highlighted program benefits.

"There is no recruitment fee," the general consul noted, adding the El Salvador government handles recruiting.

"It's completely legal. We take the person to the U.S. consulate" for approval, he explained. The recruitment and visa process takes 21 or fewer

days, and the El Salvador government will help workers fill out forms and with the application process. During the pilot program, 97% of visas were approved. The program doesn't limit the number of Salvadorans an employer may hire.

Illinois farmers will find a wide selection of potential employees.

A database of 50,000 Salvadoran profiles has been compiled. Agricultural workers have field experience with corn, vegetables, fruit, beans, coffee and sugar crops. "We can match workers with experience" to jobs, Guerrero said.

Asked about unfamiliar Illinois crops, Guerrero said, his government will work to help

the workers prepare "once we learn what you (growers) need. We will start working with our minister of agriculture so they can learn the theory so once they come here it will be a little easier. It will only be tough the first month, but then you'll have people who will become experts. They will go back and share that with more people."

Guerrero emphasized the temporary workers will return to their country and families. "We assure 100%, they will go back home," he said.

The El Salvador government will put individuals accepted into the program through health screenings to assure they're healthy, Guerrero said. To date, each one in the pro-

gram has been fully vaccinated for COVID-19 and most already have had booster shots. "Before they come here, we will assure everyone has had a booster shot," he added.

After the workers arrive, 21 El Salvador consulates across the U.S. will support and monitor them while they're temporarily in the U.S.

Interested Illinois farmers should first contact an immigration attorney who specializes in the H2 program, Guerrero said. "That's where they will send all the information and have to fulfill some steps they will abide by. They will choose El Salvador as the citizenship of this program.

"Then, the Department of State will give you clearance

for you to be able to bring Salvadorans in. That's the point where you contact us, or you can even contact us once you start this process," Guerrero said.

During the pilot program, Salvadoran H-2A workers were employed in Mississippi, Louisiana and several other states, but not in Illinois.

"We look forward to having them in Illinois in 2022," Guerrero said with a smile.

This story was distributed through a cooperative project between Illinois Farm Bureau and the Illinois Press Association. For more food and farming news, visit FarmWeekNow.com.

Court weighing school COVID mitigations Lawsuit seeks to block mask mandates, exclusion rules

By PETER HANCOCK
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SPRINGFIELD – A Sangamon County judge is considering a motion to block Illinois schools from requiring people to wear face masks in classes and excluding students and staff from school buildings if they've had close contact with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19.

Circuit Judge Raylene Grischow heard oral arguments last week in a class action lawsuit against 145 school districts that was filed last year by Greenville attorney Thomas DeVore, who has unsuccessfully challenged the state's COVID-19 mitigation measures in several other lawsuits.

In September, DeVore filed a motion for a temporary restraining order to permit students to continue in-person learning in school.

Attorney General Kwame Raoul's office is defending the districts and the Illinois Education Association, along with the Illinois Federation of Teachers, has entered the case as intervenors on behalf of the teachers they represent.

The cases were originally filed individually in several Illi-

nois counties but were later consolidated into Sangamon County Circuit Court.

At issue is whether school districts are violating state law by implementing orders from Gov. JB Pritzker and guidelines from the Illinois Department of Public Health and Illinois State Board of Education to impose certain mitigation measures in order to hold in-person instruction.

Those measures include requirements that all students, staff and visitors wear face coverings in school buildings, that students and staff be excluded from buildings if they test positive for COVID-19 or have been in close contact with someone else who has, and that school personnel be vaccinated or submit to weekly testing.

In the suit, DeVore argues that exclusions amount to a kind of "quarantine" and that under the Department of Public Health Act, schools cannot exclude students for public health concerns without their parents' consent or a quarantine order from a public health department.

He also argues that schools have no legal authority to require vaccinations or the wearing of masks unless a public

health department has issued a quarantine order.

"The plaintiffs have a right to insist the students not be excluded from school, and denied their right to an in-person education, except as provided by law," the lawsuit states.

"Quite simply, the defendants are infringing upon the lawful right of the students, and of their parents or guardians, to be free to choose for themselves whether mask wearing as a treatment, or type of modified quarantine, for the purpose of limiting the spread of an infectious disease, is, absent a court order, appropriate," the lawsuit states.

DeVore has been the attorney in numerous lawsuits representing businesses and individuals challenging Pritzker's executive orders during the pandemic. In one, he represented state Sen. Darren Bailey, R-Xenia, a Republican candidate for governor.

Judge Grischow, however, threw out that case in December 2020, finding that the governor has the authority to issue multiple, successive disaster proclamations stemming from one ongoing disaster.

In a motion to dismiss the case, the Illinois Education As-

sociation argued that masking and exclusions are not "quarantines" and therefore are not preempted by the Public Health Act. It also argues that the joint guidance issued by IDPH and ISBE gives school districts lawful authority to impose mask and exclusion mandates.

In a separate filing, the Illinois Federation of Teachers argued that the public health interest involved in preventing the spread of COVID-19 outweighs any individual right of the students and parents who are challenging the mandates.

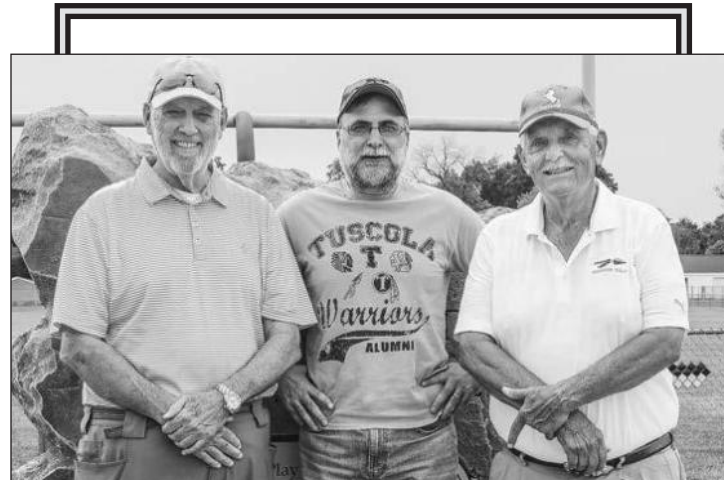
"Those parents, students, teachers and staff who are not before the court have a compelling interest in the enforcement of mitigation measures that reflect the best judgments of policymakers facing rapidly changing circumstances," attorneys for the IFT wrote.

The case against the school districts has generated significant public interest. During a hearing on Jan. 5, Grischow noted in a journal entry, "the court and the court's receptionist began receiving emails from outside sources setting forth their position on the issues being argued in the case."

"The court did not review the emails and turned them

over to the U.S. Marshals office to review for security reasons," Grischow wrote. "The emails will not be kept or reviewed by the court. Any opinion rendered in these matters will be based on the law and not personal opinions."

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