

# Kentucky agriculture commissioner talks food as medicine, foster kids, why he'll run again

By Sarah Ladd  
Kentucky Lantern

In 2026, Kentucky Agriculture Commissioner Jonathan Shell hopes to work with the General Assembly on improving school nutrition, retaining Kentucky Department of Agriculture employees and economic development in the agricultural sector.

In an end-of-year interview with the Kentucky Lantern, Shell said his "number one priority in the budget cycle" is keeping his department's employees. His team is still finalizing details on a request to the legislature to improve the department's salaries, he said.

"We continue to lose employees to other state government entities. They're doing the same job here, and they're leaving and going somewhere else and making more money doing that same job somewhere else — in state government," Shell said. "Helping retain those employees that do an amazing job for us here at the department, not having to retrain ... is really important in these jobs, and consistencies for the people that we represent, the partners that we have."

During the 60-day legislative session that begins Jan. 6, Kentucky lawmakers will draft and pass the next state budget. Shell is working on other budget proposals around his Food is Medicine initiative with the Kentucky Hospital Association, which aims

to get more nutritious food in the hands of medical facilities for patients and staff.

"What we're looking at is nutrition as a health intervention," Shell said. "Getting people healthy, fresh food on the front end of their problem, post patient care ... looking at chronic illnesses around diabetes, hypertension, blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, and seeing those lifestyle changes that we can make through local, healthy, fresh food."

## One Big Beautiful Bill

Shell said it "remains to be seen" what impact the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, passed by Congress this summer, could have on Kentucky farmers.

Congress cut the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also known as food stamps, by \$187 billion through 2034. "I think that looking at SNAP from a local purchasing standpoint of local foods is extremely important — finding a way to get more of our products in agriculture that qualify (and) are available in places where they are able to put into that system," he said.

In Kentucky, the Double Dollars program allows SNAP recipients to shop at farmers markets or other eligible shops and double the purchasing power of that benefit, incentivizing farm-fresh food.

He wants the state to "maximize those dollars

for our local farm community" while simultaneously supporting more nutritious food for vulnerable people.

"Looking around SNAP reforms and ways in which to get local fresh food more available for them is something that we're always interested in doing. But I think the impact from ... changes that would happen on the federal level, with Medicaid and also with SNAP, is yet to be seen until we get out of this legislative session to see how our state government kind of handles some of that."

## Working with foster kids, other youth

Two of Shell's children are adopted, and he sits on the board of CASA of Lexington. (CASA stands for Court-Appointed Special Advocates.)

"We've got somewhere between 8 - 9,000 kids in the state of Kentucky that are in the system that ... don't need superheroes. They just need somebody," Shell said. "They just need someone to show up for them and care about them and really pour into them."

As of Dec. 7, the Cabinet for Health and Family Services reported 8,692 children were in out-of-home placements.

Because of his passion for child advocacy, Shell is working to connect children with food education in his role as commissioner, he said.

Last year, the de-

partment held its first All in Ag Week, which focused on bringing various agricultural experts into schools to teach youth about food, the business of farming and much more.

While it's important to teach kids where food comes from and how food affects the human body, he said, schools also need ways to embed agriculture concepts into normal learning routines to show students the importance of agriculture, both as a career and as a source of sustenance.

"If they're teaching math, we want it to be ag math," Shell said of teachers. "If they're teaching science, it's ag science. With reading, it's ag reading."

The department's two Ag Weeks in 2026 will be March 16-20 and Sept. 21-25.

## On his political future

Shell, a Republican, was elected agriculture commissioner in 2023. He was previously a state representative.

"If there was a commissioner of foster and adoption, I'd have probably ran for that instead of commissioner of ag," Shell joked. "It's really my first love, but there's not."

Shell said he is "definitely running for reelection" in 2027 and "wishes we didn't have term limits."

"I wish I could do this for the rest of my life."

# Flower seeds are on my 2026 shopping list



**Kara Back**

University of Kentucky Horticulture Agent

The warm days after Christmas put me in the mood for spring. The cold days afterward gave me a reality check. However, I am taking this opportunity to flip through catalogs and order my seeds for this year.

In no particular order, the first flower on my list is globe amaranth. I am looking to order the Audray series mix which contains globe amaranths in the colors of pink, white, and purple-red. These annuals do well seeded as transplants 6-8 weeks before planting outside. Globe amaranth needs full sun, grows 18-28 inches tall, and needs 6-12 inches between plants for proper spacing. I love the shape of the blooms, and I think they will look very cute in my flower garden or in a container.

The second flower on my list is bee balm. I plan to order some called Panorama mix. It is a multipurpose perennial with similar double blooms. Bee balm requires full sun and can reach heights of 36-44 inches. Bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds use bee balm as a food source. I enjoy giving the hummingbirds I feed flowers as food options beside just

the sugar water. My plan is to start some seedlings indoors to plant as transplants outside after the last frost.

I want to plant some sunflowers this year, too. I am going to order the ProCut Orange DMR sunflowers. The height of this sunflower is 64-74 inches tall. Flower size is 4-6 inches in diameter. Days to bloom are 52-62. Sunflowers obviously need full sun. One of the reasons I chose the ProCut Orange DMR is its resistance to downy mildew.

Finally, the last flower I want to try this year is the Benary's Giant mix of zinnias. I love the colorful cheerfulness zinnias bring to a garden. These zinnias will have long, sturdy stems with 4-6 inches of fully double blooms. I love the look of the double blooms. These zinnias are supposed to last well after they are cut for floral arrangements. They are also claimed to hold up well in the summer heat and rain. These zinnias are listed as having a lower susceptibility to powdery mildew. Powdery mildew often plagues zinnia leaves each year. Especially the wet seasons promote this disease. Zinnias need to be planted in full sun.

None of the flowers listed above are endorsed by me. They are just some seeds I want to try this year and have fun with. I will be sure to report back and let you know how they performed.

# Kentucky Fish & Wildlife increases incentive for invasive carp removal

Commercial fishers now have more incentive to catch and remove invasive carp from Kentucky waters.

The Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources has increased the commercial fishing incentive from \$.10 to \$.15 per pound for the harvest of invasive carp from Kentucky Lake and Barkley Lake.

This change aims to keep pressure on invasive populations of silver carp, bighead carp, black carp and grass carp, which threaten native fish and aquatic habitats.

"We have several lines of evidence suggesting our management strategy is reducing invasive carp populations in both lakes," said Joshua Tompkins, coordinator for the Aquatic Invasive Species Program. "To keep that trend going, we're adapting our efforts to maintain harvest at effective levels. Our success is due to the hard work of our commercial fishers and strong federal support."

In 2024, commercial fishers harvested more than 15 million pounds of invasive carp through Kentucky's Invasive Carp Harvest Program, bringing the total to more than 74 million pounds since 2013.

Recent data show

signs of population decline: no young silver carp have been detected in either reservoir since 2015 and average catch rates have dropped sharply since 2019. Another indication of lower population numbers is that invasive carp are showing improved body condition, indicating less competition for food.

The use of deterrent technology is also paying off. The BioAcoustic Fish Fence at Barkley Dam along the Cumberland River, which uses sound, light and bubbles to deter fish movement, has reduced upstream migration by about 50 percent.

In addition, the department's Experimental Commercial Fishing Methods Program is testing new gear and techniques that allow large-scale removal of invasive carp while minimizing impacts on na-

tive species. Some commercial fishing crews have proven capable of removing more than 60,000 pounds of invasive carp per day from Kentucky waterways.

"Increasing the incentive to commercial fishers will help ensure we keep suppressing invasive carp numbers," said Dave Dreves, director of the Fisheries Division for Kentucky Fish and Wildlife. "It's a big win for anglers and boaters that recreate on Kentucky and Barkley lakes, as well as for the vital \$940-million tourism economy of the Western Waterlands Region."

For more information about invasive carp eradication efforts visit the Invasive Carp Information webpage on Kentucky Fish and Wildlife's website (fw.ky.gov) or call 1-800-858-1549.

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