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Fairs Bring Us Together

County fairs hold a unique charm. It's where people from all walks of life come together to celebrate the things that make rural communities great—hard work, shared traditions and agriculture. At MFA Oil, we've seen firsthand the value these events bring to local communities, and we're proud to support them.

There's something almost enchanting about walking around the fairgrounds: the glow of the Ferris wheel churning in the night sky, the sweet and salty smell of fresh kettle corn filling the air, and the roar of engines at the tractor pull. For me, nothing beats the crispy fried dough of a funnel cake. And then there's the demolition derby, another favorite, where crowds cheer as fearless drivers create chaotic collisions.

Of course, fairs are much more than enjoying carnival rides and good food. They are a chance to boost local businesses, bring neighbors together and

teach kids valuable life skills. County and state fairs are a big deal for young people, offering them a chance to showcase months of hard work, whether it's in raising livestock or other agricultural pursuits. These experiences provide invaluable learning opportunities for our future agricultural leaders.

Fairs are also about preserving local traditions and culture. They shine a light on what makes rural communities unique, like local food, arts, crafts and music, offering a window into the heritage and values we all share.

Our cooperative has long supported local communities and county fair boards through MFA Oil Foundation grants that have helped fund capital improvements to livestock barns, grandstands, restrooms, cattle pens and much more.

MFA Oil's commitment to rural communities is also reflected in our support for organizations like the Missouri Agriculture Hall of Fame and the Missouri State Fair Foundation's 1901 Society, named for the year of the state's first fair. The society honors those who have made significant contributions to agriculture, provides scholarships and supports educational programs and fairground improvements.

At MFA Oil, we're proud to support the fairs that bring us all together. These events will continue to play an important role in the lives of our farmers, families and communities for years to come. When the fair rolls into town, it's more than just a good time. It's a celebration of everything that makes rural America great.

Jon Ihler,
President and CEO



Summer 2025 • Vol. 10 No. 3

This magazine comes to you courtesy of MFA Oil Company, a farmer-owned cooperative providing energy solutions to customers for more than 90 years. We deliver high-quality propane, fuels and lubricants to farmers and other customers across an eight-state region stretching from Indiana to Kansas. Momentum is an information service for farm families, published by MFA Oil.

Momentum is digitally published three times annually. For story ideas or other inquiries, email editor@mfaoil.com or call 800-366-0200.

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BluSphere Expands Services to Meet Growing Energy Needs

As solar energy systems become more common across rural Missouri and beyond, BluSphere Energy is stepping in to fill a growing service gap left by defunct or unresponsive solar installation companies. MFA Oil's renewable energy division is now offering solar repair, maintenance and warranty work—even for systems it didn't install.

"Some companies from out-of-state don't want to return to Missouri to do small jobs here and there, so they have asked us if we could do their warranty and repair jobs for them," says Will Reniker, MFA Oil's vice president of enterprise risk management. "At the same time, we've heard from customers who have asked for our assistance because an out-of-state competitor has been unresponsive to repair requests."

BluSphere's expanded solar services include panel testing, system diagnostics and reinstallation of dislodged or damaged panels. For example, if strong winds knock panels off a customer's roof, BluSphere can inspect the equipment and reinstall it securely, giving peace of mind to customers who may have nowhere else to turn.

BluSphere's expanded solar services include panel testing, system diagnostics and reinstallation of dislodged or damaged panels.

Adding Standby Power with Generac Generators

In addition to solar repair services, BluSphere has launched a new offering: the installation of Generac standby



generators powered by propane. This service is tailored for residential customers seeking reliable backup power in case of outages.

The seamless integration with MFA Oil's propane services sets the BluSphere generator offering apart from competitors.

"If customers get their generator from us, we do all the labor for installation, including the transfer switch and the engineering," Reniker explains. "Then, our bulk fuel division can provide a propane tank and propane delivery services. You can't get that from other companies offering generators."

BluSphere provides an all-in-one, upfront price that includes everything a customer needs to get their generator up and running if the customer already has a propane tank on site. If the customer needs a 500-gallon propane tank, the local plant can provide a quote for installation. For customers who

want to use the tank for home heating or other appliances, rental options may be available. Generator installation is currently available across Missouri.

Looking Ahead

BluSphere continues to provide turnkey solar installations for agricultural, commercial and residential customers. With the addition of solar maintenance, third-party repairs and propane-powered generator installations, the division is expanding its reputation as a trusted energy partner.

However, changes could be on the horizon. Proposed federal legislation may eliminate residential solar tax credits after 2025 and speed up the phase-out of commercial incentives. BluSphere will continue quoting and installing solar systems, but customers should be aware that grant and credit programs may soon look very different.

For more information on BluSphere Energy's services, visit blusphereenergy.com.

Fields of Fun

From Pony Rides to Tulip Picking, Lucky Ladd Farms Entertains Children and Adults With a Message About Where Food Comes From

BY PAUL WESSLUND





From tulips to turkeys, parakeets to ponies, there's no shortage of sights to see at Lucky Ladd Farms. Located just west of Murfreesboro, Tenn., this farmstead is home to Tennessee's largest petting farm attraction, featuring hundreds of friendly animals and exotic livestock. Seasonal activities like tulip picking in the spring and strawberry harvesting in early summer keep families coming back throughout the year. Whether you're wandering through flower fields or making new four-legged friends, Lucky Ladd Farms offers fun for all ages. *Photos courtesy of Lucky Ladd Farms.*

Jason Ladd drives his weathered golf cart around the 100 acres of Lucky Ladd Farms in the middle of Tennessee, describing what it takes to make a successful agritourism attraction. But he keeps interrupting himself. "People always want to know what's next. What's the next thing?" he says.

He stops the cart and gets off to move a rock from a small patch of grass back to the border around it.

"The last big project was the new reptile building, with snakes, small mammals, some chinchillas," he continues as he returns to the driver's seat. "Next is this new gift barn coming up. It's going to have a coffee shop and a pizza area."

A few moments later, he stops again near a pot with a small tree planted in it. The sapling has come loose from the support rod, and he carefully reties it. A few minutes later, he spots a lawn chair that has tipped over. He sets it upright.

Lucky Ladd Farms announces itself as a big deal right away, beginning with the 3,000-vehicle-capacity parking lot (with another 1,000 spots at an off-site lot), and then with an entryway fence lined with brightly colored event banners for tulip picking, breakfast with the Easter Bunny, a sunflower festival, a pumpkin patch, a corn maze, and cookies and cocoa with Santa.

LOOKING THROUGH A CHILD'S EYES

Jason talks about his business in even, measured tones that contrast with the whimsy around him. A large sign over the ticket booth declares, "The Fun Starts Here." Just inside the gate, large, colorful, cartoonish cutout figures form a bluegrass trio, with a singing cow, fiddle-playing sheep and banjo-picking pig.

"You try to look at things through a child's eyes," he says, as he lists the events and attractions on the site. "They want to have fun, so you've got to try to make it fun but educational at the same time."



TOP LEFT: Signs and whimsical figures greet visitors at the entrance to Lucky Ladd Farms. RIGHT: Bryan Cerecedo and his daughter Talia hold out sticks of birdseed in the parakeet enclosure. BOTTOM LEFT: Ariana Leonard walks alongside her son Ace as he enjoys a pony ride. *Photos by Paul Wesslund.*

That priority of education is more than just words to Jason. If you talk to any farmer long enough, they'll eventually say something like, "Kids today think food comes from a grocery store."

Jason says that's true, and he sees Lucky Ladd as a way to spread a wider understanding of what animals and the outdoors mean.

In the 13 years since the launch of Lucky Ladd Farms, it's grown to bring in 70,000 visitors a year and employ 17 year-round, full-time staff. The number of employees rises to 125 during the fall season, which is busy with Halloween and Christmas activities and displays.

While growing up on a small farm raising cows, hay and tobacco, Jason didn't appreciate the farm life. "I didn't like it," he says. "I thought I was working like hell for free, but it teaches respect for life and that hard work doesn't kill you."

Jason met and married Amy, whom he describes as a city girl who loved animals and thought about becoming a veterinarian. When they were first married, he was doing well running a trucking business while also tending their small farm. Amy added a pig to their operation, then she wanted some sheep and goats. She thought others might even pay to visit and learn about farming and animals.

FOOD COMES FROM WALMART?

Turns out, Amy was right. When a church group visited their small plot, Jason heard them saying food came from Walmart and Kroger. "A light bulb went off in my head," he says.

As Jason worked to turn that bright idea into a business, he would be reminded regularly why it all started.



TOP LEFT: Lucky Ladd Farms owner Jason Ladd; daughter, Jacey; son, William; and wife, Amy. TOP RIGHT: Tulip and tulip bulb picking is one of the popular attractions. Last year 1 million bulbs were planted at the site. BOTTOM ROW: The Lucky Ladd Farms gift shop offers a range of souvenirs from its most popular, the stuffed animals, to jams, jellies, sauces and caps. *Photos by Paul Wesslund.*

“I was doing school tours with the children, and they were calling sheep ‘buffalo,’” he recalls. “They wouldn’t know what an actual horse was, or a pony, or a cow. It kind of touched pretty deep, and I try to have several different educational programs.”

Those programs might involve elementary school students sitting in an outdoor classroom learning in detail about sunflowers, or a large group of squealing children holding popsicle sticks of birdseed out to a blizzard of colorful parakeets under the direction of the farm’s zookeeper.

In the 13 years since the launch of Lucky Ladd Farms, it’s grown to bring in 70,000 visitors a year and employ 17 year-round, full-time staff. The number of employees rises to 125 during the fall season, which is busy with Halloween and Christmas activities and displays.

And Lucky Ladd Farms is a family affair. Amy is regularly on business calls. Their daughter Jacey, 14, and son William, 12, also help out.

It’s a long and seemingly improbable leap from raising cows and hay to an enterprise that includes peacocks, chinchillas, llamas and even a Lucky Ladd Radio station playing over the PA. But in Jason’s matter-of-fact recounting, what seems like a giant leap was just one logical step after another.

For instance, in addressing Lucky Ladd Radio, he says it is all app-driven. “It comes through Neptune Radio,” he says. “You write your own scripts and pick out your music.”

As for developing the expertise to run the other new pieces and parts of the farm, he credits “just research.”

HELP FROM FAMILY AND AROUND THE WORLD

Jason is also not shy about getting advice and ideas from others—anywhere in the world he can find it.

He hired a specialist to oversee populating the new reptile building. When a group of college professors visited and told him about the plants unique to the area, he gave his mother-in-law



LEFT: A portion of Lucky Ladd Farms is home to rare Tennessee Cedar Glades, a unique ecosystem that supports endangered native plants. Walking trails with educational signs let guests explore and learn about this remarkable habitat. RIGHT: The Animal Barnyard at Lucky Ladd Farms lets children (and adults) feed a variety of farm animals, from goats to alpacas. *Photos by Paul Wesslund.*

the project of creating a nature trail. He's part of an international agritourism group that gave him the idea for what is now four-and-a-half acres of tulips.

That international group also offers hard-won business wisdom. One reason he chose tulip-picking was to fill the springtime, which keeps the tourist traffic flowing before summer strawberry picking and late-year holiday events. The group's conferences cover employee management and government regulatory compliance.

He even learns what to avoid as he hears about other agritourism ventures that struggle because they're too deep into farm country. Lucky Ladd is located in the middle of Nashville, Franklin and Murfreesboro. The center of each city is about 30 minutes away, and each city is dense enough to draw a reliable stream of visitors.

"We have three-and-a-half million people [living] within an hour [of us], which helps," he says.

Those visitors come in school buses as well as family cars to walk the dirt paths that lead to a different attraction around every curve, including a pen to feed goats, a narrated wagon ride, a playground and pony rides. The gift shop sells jars of Lucky Ladd-labeled products from Four Pepper Jelly to Honey Habanero BBQ Sauce to Queso Extreme to B.E.A.R. Jam (that's Blackberry, Elderberry, Apple and Red Raspberry). The products

are not made directly by the farm but by a company specializing in gift shop products. The shop's best-selling items, though, are the lineup of brightly colored stuffed animals, such as parrots, pigs, eagles and cows.

Like so much else on the farm, the shop's inventory has been pieced together over the years with the help and insights of others.

"We educated ourselves on what other people were doing," Jason says. "We try to learn before we jump in. You can't do it all, so you have to have good people working for you."

As Lucky Ladd Farms has expanded its attractions and offerings over the past 13 years, it has become a premier agritourism destination. Supporting that growth behind the scenes is a steady supply of propane from MFA Oil, which helps power the farm's operations.

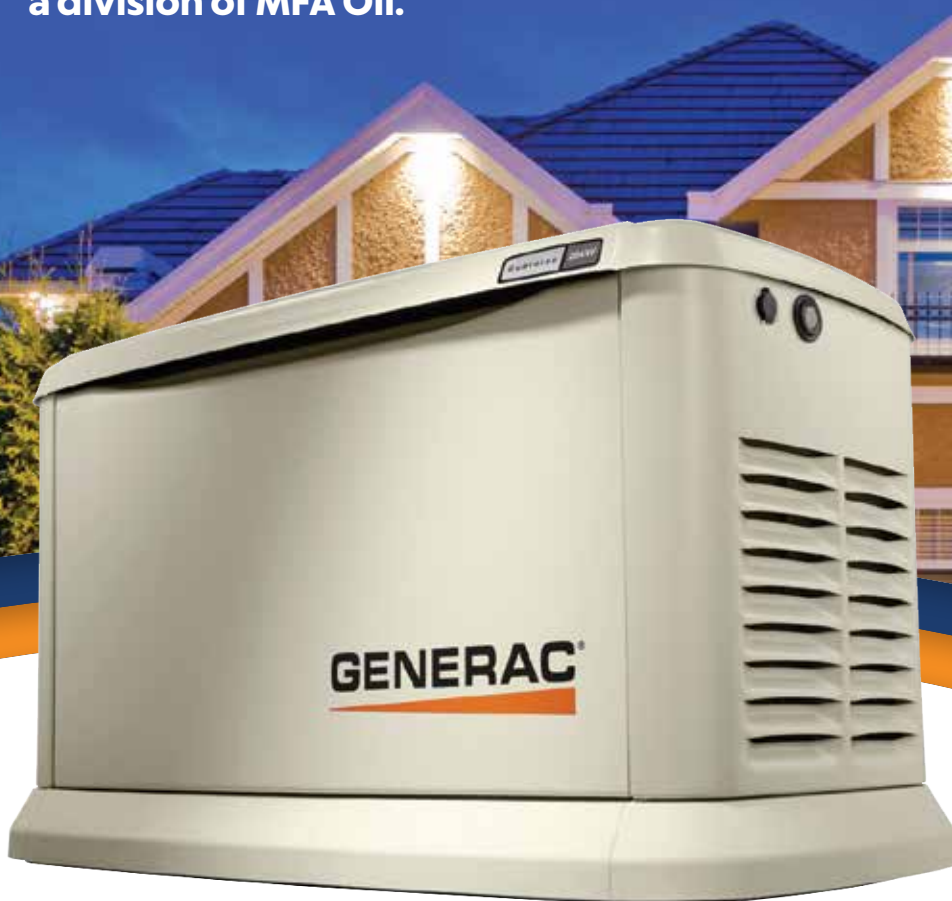
SMALL THINGS, BIG IMPACT

The pieces and parts that make up Lucky Ladd Farms are as big as planting an incredible 1 million tulip bulbs, or as small as interrupting a magazine interview to move a rock out of the grass.

Lucky Ladd Farms was built on the small things—one small step at a time. Jason hopes to keep taking those steps, keep building, keep educating one school group at a time, so the appreciation for where food comes from is felt for a long time to come. **M**

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A photograph of a herd of bison in a lush green field. In the background, there is a dense forest of trees with varying shades of green and brown, suggesting a transition between seasons. The sky is overcast with soft, grey clouds. The bison are in the foreground, some looking towards the camera. One bison in the center-right has a bright orange tag on its ear.

FROM *Bombs* TO **BISON**

A Veteran's Second Act

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ADAM BUCKALLEW

The massive bull could have charged at any moment.

Anyone familiar with American bison knows it's best to keep your distance. A full-grown bull weighs up to a ton and can run three times faster than the average human. These aren't domesticated animals—they're the living descendants of the massive herds that once thundered across the Great Plains and the largest land mammals in North America. Muscle-bound and horned, bison are not to be taken lightly.

But C.J. Gallen, a seasoned Navy bomb technician who had faced peril countless times during his 23-year military career, wasn't thinking about danger that day in Montana while visiting a buddy. Against his friend's warnings, and with a bit of liquid courage, he extended his hand over the fence toward the bull.

"I turned to say something to my friend," C.J. recalls. "When I looked back, the bull's head was right there in my hand, nuzzling me."

That unlikely moment of connection in 2016 would completely rewrite the retirement plans of a man who had spent decades defusing explosives, "from pipe bombs all the way up to nukes."

"Right then, I knew," he says. "That's what I wanted to do."

Today, C.J. runs Cedar Stone Bison in Lenox, Mo., where he's developed a special bond with his small herd.

"Most producers have bigger herds and don't have the same relationship that we do with our bison," explains Tina, C.J.'s wife of nearly 30 years. "What we have here is special."

Bonds of Trust

C.J. spent his Navy career in the high-stakes world of explosive ordnance disposal. He dove nearly 300 feet into the Arabian Sea to handle underwater threats. He parachuted from 27,500 feet. He earned a master's degree in terrorism with a concentration on weapons of mass destruction.

The hands that once handled explosives such as sea mines and torpedoes now gently stroke the woolly body of a bison heifer. C.J. moves among his herd with ease. "It's about familiarity and mutual respect," he explains as he confidently strides through emerald pastures bursting with fresh growth. The bond he's formed isn't accidental; it's the product of years spent learning his herd's body language, respecting their boundaries, and building trust with them from the days when they were calves.

As the bison move unhurriedly through a verdant buffet of grass, their contentment is evident in their leisurely pace and the occasional soft guttural grunt. As they graze, their hooves leave temporary impressions in the earth softened by nearly 20 inches of April rain. The tree line bordering the pasture shows its own signs of interaction with the giants of the plains. The lower trunks of many cedars bear a distinctive "bison line," a horizontal boundary about six feet high where branches and bark remain intact above but are noticeably absent below. Wisps of shaggy brown winter coats cling to the trunks where the animals have rubbed themselves in their seasonal shedding ritual.

C.J. and Tina have been living their dreams as bison ranchers since December 22, 2018, when their first six bison calves arrived—one bull and five heifers, all about six months old.

"We chose young animals because we wanted to learn as they learned," C.J. explains. "We wanted to grow together."

Putting Down Roots

The Gallens lived in the high desert of California at China Lake Naval Air Weapons Station, until a job as a military contractor brought them to Missouri. The couple fell in love with the rolling green hills near Lenox, Mo., where they found a property that fit their needs. The 117-acre parcel of land had plenty of room to raise bison and represented something C.J. had never truly had before—permanence.



"This isn't just a ranch. We're building something here—something we can pass on to our kids and grandkids." —C.J. Gallen





LEFT: C.J. and Tina Gallen share a moment amid their bison herd at Cedar Stone Ranch in Lenox, Mo. The Gallens have forged close bonds with their bison, allowing them to move safely among the herd. ABOVE: With a bucket of alfalfa pellets in hand, C.J. rewards his bison with a treat, deepening the mutual respect that defines daily life on the ranch.

“When you grow up as a military brat and then serve for over two decades, you’re always moving,” he explains while gazing over his pastures and the cedar groves encircling his property. “This isn’t just a ranch. We’re building something here—something we can pass on to our kids and grandkids.”

Though the previous owners tried to dissuade them from making the purchase, the Gallens were undeterred. “They didn’t think we could handle it,” C.J. says with a knowing smile. “Obviously, they didn’t know me. When I set my mind to something, it gets done.”

C.J. and Tina closed on the property in August 2017 and immediately began preparing it for bison. The property came with a name already etched on a sign: Cedar Stone. The Gallens initially took the sign down, planning to rename the ranch. But after spending a year working the land, they had a realization.

“We kept running into cedars and plenty of rocks,” C.J. says, chuckling. “We decided the name would stay. There was also a lot of poison ivy, but

we didn’t think we could work all three into the name.”

Built for Bison

There was a full year of work to be done before the bison arrived: clearing fence lines, installing reinforced fencing and establishing a watering system. While clearing an area under a tree, C.J. discovered a hidden treasure: a 96-foot-deep, hand-stacked rock well that predates the Civil War.

“We tested the refresh rate and water quality and found it was good,” C.J. says. The historic well now supplies water exclusively for ranch use, where it’s filtered and UV-sterilized before being delivered to the herd. A separate well provides water for the home. Two solar arrays—one for the house and another for the water system—help power the operation, with battery backups for cloudy days.

What began as one large open pasture gradually transformed as the Gallens implemented rotational grazing techniques. C.J. has strategically cross-fenced his pastures into eight sections, which the

bison will graze for a couple of days—or until the grass reaches about 4 inches in height—before moving to fresh growth.

Across the ranch, bison-proof fencing, hay feeders and a custom-built handling system are made of reinforced steel to withstand the strength of bulls, which can weigh up to 2,000 pounds.

“You don’t see these on a cattle ranch because they aren’t needed,” C.J. says, pointing to the crash gate at the end of his handling chute. “Bison are far more athletic than cattle. We discovered the hard way that they’ll smash through standard equipment.”

Finding a Niche

The business remains intentionally small-scale to preserve the unique relationship the Gallens share with their herd. They maintain about 30 bison throughout most of the year.

That choice has proven pivotal. The manageable herd size allows the Gallens to know their bison well and vice versa. “We’ve known each other since they were all babies,” Tina says.



TOP: C.J. Gallen fuels up his ATV with gasoline from MFA Oil before heading out to check on his herd—just one of the ways the cooperative helps keep daily ranch operations running smoothly. CENTER LEFT: A custom-built hay feeder provides a steady supply of feed in winter, and even into spring, as the bison transition to fresh forage. CENTER RIGHT: Durability is key when working with bison. Reinforced steel fencing and gates, like this handling chute, are essential tools that allow the Gallens to care for their herd safely and effectively. BOTTOM: Young bison roam the pastures of Cedar Stone Ranch, where careful breeding and attentive management help shape a herd known for quality and calm demeanor.

That uncommon connection has allowed the couple to raise even-tempered calves prized for their calm demeanor and distinctive dark coats. The Gallen's bull, Atlas, serves as the foundation for the couple's breeding program, siring plenty of calves. The bull's fur, reminiscent of burnished mahogany, has become a genetic hallmark, passing similar shades of coloring to his progeny.

Some of the bison are sold at auction, a few are raised for meat processing and the others are used to create "starter herds" for prospective ranchers. The Gallens provide six animals per starter herd, working with a partner in Mountain Grove, Mo., to ensure genetic diversity.

"We help new ranchers get into the business," C.J. says. He's delivered two starter herds so far and already has a buyer lined up for his next set of calves.

To prepare the animals, C.J. groups them together to teach them to become a "cohesive unit." He personally delivers the calves to their new homes, typically around the first week of December. The service doesn't end with delivery—C.J. provides ongoing mentorship to new owners.

"They can call and ask any questions," he says. "We want them to be successful."

The Future

In the next couple of years, the Gallens hope to open a ranch store selling bison meat, eggs from their 27 chickens, homemade jellies and jams, and bison byproducts like hides and skulls.

There also will be more Gallens available to lend a hand in the near future. Two of the couple's three adult children plan to move onto the ranch, reinforcing their hope that the property will be home to future generations.

"We're a family-owned operation—we're nothing big," C.J. says while reflecting on what he and Tina have built together. "There's been ups and downs, but it's been fun, and we've learned so much."

To outsiders, ranch life may seem quaint compared to defusing bombs for a living and diving into dangerous waters. But watching C.J. move among those majestic creatures—confident, respectful and completely at home—it's clear he's landed exactly where he's meant to be. **M**

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Minnesota File No. F-5829

The 2025 Missouri *Agricultural* Hall of Fame Inductees

The Missouri Agricultural Hall of Fame was created in 2023 to recognize farmers, ranchers and agribusiness leaders who have made an outstanding contribution to Missouri Agriculture. The Hall of Fame is a celebration of the vitality of the agricultural industry in Missouri. Inductees into the Hall of Fame are selected by a committee and are honored annually in a ceremony in front of state leadership and their peers.



David Baker



Richard Kampeter & Gary Schell



Lowell Mohler



Mike Parson



Eddie Sydenstricker

DAVID BAKER

Dave Baker's vision for collaboration has earned him a place in the Missouri Ag Hall of Fame. As a University of Missouri Extension state agricultural safety specialist for over 20 years, he built a top U.S. agricultural safety program, authoring over 100 publications. He taught agricultural safety and occupational health for 27 years and later served as assistant dean, program director for Agricultural and Natural Resources Extension (1994–2015), and director of commercial agriculture (2013–2015). His investment in innovative pasture-based dairy and heifer replacement programs generated \$75–121 million and over 1,000 jobs for Missouri. Nationally, Baker fostered ties with Congress, government and agricultural groups and co-founded the Extension Disaster Education Network. Following his retirement from MU, Baker served for five years with the Missouri Department of Agriculture, leading special projects for directors Richard Fordyce and Chris Chinn.

RICHARD KAMPETER & GARY SCHELL

From humble beginnings in Meta, Mo., the family-owned Diamond Pet Food Company has risen to become the world's fourth-largest pet food manufacturer. Founded on April 1, 1970, by brothers-in-law Gary Schell and Richard Kampeter, the company has roots that lay in "Diamond Feeds," where livestock feed took center stage and pet food was a mere sideline. Imagine: In those early days, kibble was scooped into plain paper bags with a shovel.

But the landscape shifted dramatically. By 1980, pet food was no longer an afterthought; it was a burgeoning business. A pivotal \$180,000 bank loan fueled their ambition, propelling Gary and Richard into a new era of growth. Initially, Diamond competed with commodity brands. However, by 1987, the emergence of "super-premium" brands signaled a turning point. Recognizing the opportunity, Gary and Richard strategically pivoted, targeting a higher-end clientele. They elevated their recipes, incorporating superior protein sources and higher energy density formulations. Notably, this transformation was deeply rooted in their Missouri heritage, with ingredients sourced from local agribusinesses and freight handled by Missouri-based haulers. The Meta workforce carried themselves with the typical tenacious Missouri work ethic. From the very beginning, Gary and Richard treated their employees like family, with world-class healthcare benefits and profit-sharing, long before such things were commonplace.

This strategic shift to higher-value products unlocked nationwide and international markets. While their original distribution tilted toward the Farm & Fleet sector, Diamond navigated the evolving retail landscape, forging partnerships with Costco Wholesale, Tractor Supply, Petco, PetSmart, Walmart and Sam's Club. In recent years, the company brands of Diamond Naturals and Taste of the Wild have found a strong online presence on platforms such as Chewy and Amazon. The steady and sometimes rapid growth necessitated significant expansion. In the summer of 1999, Diamond's second facility launched in Lathrop, Calif., followed by Gaston, S.C., in 2002. Diamond's second West Coast facility in Ripon, Calif., came online in 2012. Dumas, Ark., launched in 2016, and Frontenac, Kan., in 2022. Diamond's latest facility, their seventh, will be operational later this year in Rushville, Ind.

Throughout this remarkable journey, Gary and Richard remained steadfast in their family-centric approach to business and their unwavering commitment to their faith in God, principles that continue to define the Diamond Pet Food Company today.

LOWELL MOHLER

Lowell Mohler delivered a lifetime of impact to Missouri agricultural leadership. Born in Holt County, he and JoAnn, married since 1958, raised three Mizzou grads. Beginning at Northwest Missouri State, he transferred to MU and led its meats team. After graduating in 1959 with a B.S. in agriculture, Mohler worked with the National Livestock and Meat Board and Kansas Department of Agriculture. In 1966, he joined Missouri's Department of Agriculture, launching May Beef Month and many other programs. At Missouri Farm Bureau (1966–late '90s), he grew membership significantly. As director of agriculture under Governor Holden, he depoliticized the agency, refocusing its mission. On the Conservation Commission (2003–2009), he balanced farming and conservation, earning the Lowell Mohler Wetland Unit namesake. He helped shape the Missouri State Fair, establishing its foundation and invigorating the fair as a state showcase of Missouri agriculture. His work for organizations at the MU College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources focused on youth programs and infrastructure, leaving a lasting legacy.

MIKE PARSON

57th Governor of Missouri

A true farmer and true leader. Governor Mike Parson joins the hall of fame retired from office and back on the farm. Parson is a veteran who served six years in the U.S. Army. He served more than 22 years in law enforcement as the sheriff of Polk County. A strong advocate for agriculture throughout his career in Jefferson City, he served in the Missouri House of Representatives from 2005 to 2011, in the Missouri Senate from 2011 to 2017, and as lieutenant governor in 2017–2018. He was sworn in as Missouri's 57th governor in 2018 and was reelected by a historic margin in 2020. Governor Parson and First Lady Teresa live in Bolivar. Together they have two grown children and six grandchildren. He was raised on a farm in Hickory County and graduated from Wheatland High School in Wheatland, Mo. He is a small-business owner and a third-generation farmer who currently owns and operates a cow/calf operation in Bolivar.

EDDIE SYDENSTRICKER

Eddie Sydenstricker's agricultural journey began in 1952, inspired by the trade of two registered Angus pairs for a Super C Farmall at his father's International Harvester dealership. In 1966, the family acquired a John Deere dealership in Mexico, Mo., setting the stage for Eddie's dual impact on both the cattle and machinery industries. He expanded the John Deere business to 13 dealerships before merging with Nobbe in 2020, forming Sydenstricker Nobbe Partners (SNP). By 2024, SNP reached 38 locations, earning the "North American Farm Equipment Dealer of the Year" award in 2021. Sydenstricker Genetics, now with 900 cows, remains a national leader in performance genetics. At 85, Eddie remains active, guided by his principle, "Do what you say you're going to do." **M**

Cattle Theft

Not Just a Thing of the Wild West



BY JACOB KLAUDT, K-STATE RESEARCH
& EXTENSION NEWS SERVICE



In 2025, cattle producers continue receiving record prices for their livestock at local sale barns and auction markets. While many enjoy the spoils of their labor after years of discouraging events like drought and herd reduction, this surge in value beckons unwanted attention.

Scarlett Madinger, the vice president of communications at the Kansas Livestock Association, says producers always hold their cattle and livelihood in high regard. However, current market conditions provide thieves an opportunity to take advantage of those lucrative and unattended livestock.

“Some people see it as an ‘easy way to earn a dollar’ by stealing cattle; they think that they can make a quick turnaround on some dollars,” she says. “Livestock especially at risk are those that are easily accessible.”

With calving season wrapping up, young animals and cow/calf pairs might be more likely to fall victim to theft, depending on what criminals think they can get away with.

The first step in preventing livestock theft involves permanently identifying cattle through techniques like hot brands and ear notches. On the other hand, thieves can easily remove ear tags and other temporary identifiers.

“Branding is the most surefire way to positively identify cattle,” Madinger says. “If someone is trying to sell them at a regional auction market, somebody else is most likely to recognize that brand and know that ‘hey, that isn’t who dropped them off.’”

Another crucial step in warding off theft includes restricting access to pens and pastures by using locks, chains and other security measures.

“Anything that causes someone to take an extra step that’s looking to steal cattle serves as a deterrent,” Madinger says. “Especially if you have portable facilities or movable pens, chain those up so they’re not easily accessible to somebody looking to back up and load your cattle out.”

Other livestock theft prohibition methods:

- Do not leave cattle penned overnight.
- Be extra vigilant of activity near pens or pastures that sit near high-traffic areas like highways or interstates.
- Check and count cattle frequently, keeping written records, especially if housed in multiple locations.
- Take note of any suspicious or unfamiliar vehicles driving by a property, within reason.

After a suspected crime, Madinger says producers should first contact their local county sheriff’s office, then their state Department of Agriculture’s Division of Animal Health.

“Call that county sheriff, so that they can come out as quickly as possible and take down any details,” she says. “The Division of Animal Health is the next one because they can send information about stolen livestock to auction markets, so they are aware of them.”

Various state organizations, such as the Kansas Livestock Association, Missouri Cattlemen’s Association and Missouri Farm Bureau, offer reward programs that lead to the arrest and conviction of cattle thieves. **M**





Summer Wonder

Across farm country, summer is when hard work begins to show. Months of planning and planting take shape in row after row of green—and sometimes gold. It's a time to monitor, manage and trust in the process, knowing that every sunrise brings you one step closer to harvest. Summer doesn't guarantee success, but it reveals effort. It tests your patience and rewards your persistence. And in fields like these, full of life and promise, you can see why the work is worth it. **M**

MAKING THE CONNECTION

BY NEIL FANDEK

Aaron Medsker, ag teacher and FFA advisor, probably impacts more students at DeKalb High School, a smaller school in the Buchanan County (Mo.) R-IV School District, than anyone else. Out of about 90 students in total, 51 are in FFA or in his classes.

“He’s a good FFA advisor and does a lot within our chapter,” one student says. “He really helps us out individually as well as the entire group, and he has really made me enjoy my time in FFA.”

“I just had a really good experience with FFA in high school,” says Medsker, who grew up on a farm outside Savannah, Mo. “I really enjoyed the contests, learning about public speaking, and I actually liked helping friends with homework.” So when it was time to go to college, his mother and father encouraged him to do something he liked. “I thought ag education would be a good fit.”

It was. He graduated with a bachelor’s degree in agricultural education from the University of Missouri, then went on to earn a master’s in secondary leadership from Northwest Missouri State University. That latter degree qualifies him to be a principal, if he so wishes. He does not wish, right now, though.

“I enjoy doing what I do,” he says. “I like the variety of teaching ag in a small school like I’m at now. It’s the only place I want to teach. There’s only one ag teacher here, that’s me!”

“One hour we’re in the greenhouse propagating plants, the next we could be doing electrical units for ag systems, the next welding and woodworking, and the next animal science. I like the variety, how it’s different every day. And to train students, watching them get better and better and gain confidence,



Medsker helping students identify a common shrub used in landscaping.

see their excitement, see them be successful in FFA, that makes it all worthwhile.”

He’s been the rock of this FFA chapter for 20 years, having joined DeKalb in 2005. When he accepted the position, the chapter was not in good shape. “Prior to me, we had five different ag teachers,” he says. “It was a revolving door. The facilities were inadequate, the shop small, the classroom tiny. But I stayed, showed my commitment.”

That commitment has earned him the trust of the students, school and community, and in 2015, the district built a new and larger ag building.

“Now we have an amazing shop area, a fantastic greenhouse, a great classroom,” he says. “I have really good facilities, better than a lot of larger schools.”

That greenhouse was partially purchased by a grant from the MFA Oil Foundation, which provides support to nonprofit organizations working to improve communities where MFA Oil has a significant concentration of members and employees. In it, his students raise a variety of vegetables and plants, which are sold to the community.

The year 2024 was exceptional in terms of sales.

“We sold out of everything but vegetables within the first three days,” he says, demonstrating the community’s support.

Medsker adds that greenhouse experience is essential. He knows most of his students do not live on farms and may never have a career in production agriculture.

“That’s where I try to make the connection,” he says. “I try not to forget that the basis of all ag is production. That’s where I can make a connection point. All of us are consumers, so it’s good to know about the production side no matter what. Whenever in doubt, I try to attach (production agriculture) to teaching, to demonstrate that’s how food is grown and how it gets to the dinner plate.”

Medsker is similarly focused in private life. A lifelong runner and former cross-country coach, he joined the Measly Mile Mafia, which is based in and around St. Joseph. The goal of this group is to run one mile or more every day no matter the weather. When interviewed, he was on Day 298. “I have a family (a wife and twins) now, school and FFA, but I still get up at 5:30 in the morning and run a mile,” he says. “It gets my morning off to a good start.” **M**

Agriculture teachers are vital to developing their students’ understanding and appreciation for the agricultural industry. In recognition of their important role, MFA Oil is profiling the amazing work ag teachers do to prepare the next generation of leaders in agriculture.



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A Place of Belonging

Nestled on a scenic peninsula surrounded by Council Grove Lake in the heart of Kansas prairie country, White Memorial Camp offers something far deeper than a place to pitch a tent or paddle a canoe. It offers a place of belonging, growth and connection.

“This land has always been a place of gathering,” says Danielle Waller, the camp’s director.

Long before it became a summer camp, the site was a home for Indigenous people, including the Kanza (Kaw) tribe. Burial mounds found on the grounds serve as reminders of the land’s deep spiritual roots.

In 1962, the CH White and WW White families donated the first 114 acres to the Kansas-Oklahoma Conference of the United Church of Christ. By 1967, White Memorial Camp was among the first interfaith, church-planned camps in the nation to offer summer programs for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD).

Today, the camp spans 168 acres, a portion of which is preserved tallgrass prairie, one of the most endangered ecosystems in North America. Here, waves of big bluestem and switchgrass ripple in the wind, the song of meadowlarks drifts through the air and limestone outcroppings rise from the hills like weathered bones. Native stone buildings dot the landscape, trails wind through the prairie and the peninsula waterfront offers a serene setting for reflection.

White Memorial Camp serves more than 500 youth each summer and an additional 70 to 80 adults with IDD. Throughout the year, another 1,000 people visit for retreats, family reunions, church events, school field days, mental health workshops and cultural gatherings. “We tailor our programs for every group,” Waller says, “but our focus always comes back to faith,



community, nature, leadership, inclusion and personal growth.”

What sets White Memorial Camp apart isn’t just its stunning natural backdrop; it’s the mission behind everything it does.

“Many of our campers come from underprivileged backgrounds. For some, it’s their first time seeing nature or having a meal they didn’t have to worry about,” Waller says. “We want them to try new things, grow stronger in their values and faith, build confidence and friendships, and feel like they belong.”

Waller’s journey to camp leadership began through her husband, who provided IT services on-site. Her connection deepened as she began offering staff training based on her 19 years of experience in disability care. That led to volunteering at adult IDD camps, serving on the board and ultimately accepting the director role in 2022 after much reflection and prayer. “I believed in the mission, I lived the mission, and then I became the mission,” she says.

One of Waller’s favorite memories at camp is a personal one: Her 2016 wedding took place at White Memorial. But she says nothing compares to evenings spent at Vespers Point, where campers gather at sunset each night for worship. “It’s always my favorite moment—watching people grow in their relationship with God in the middle of nature, surrounded by the water. It’s special.”

Though it was once owned and operated by the Kansas-Oklahoma Conference

of the United Church of Christ, White Memorial Camp became an independent religious nonprofit in 2014. Now governed by its own board of directors as a 501(c)(3) organization, the camp continues to carry on its legacy of building skills, friendships, faith and character in its campers.

Running such an impactful program comes with challenges, particularly financial ones. That’s why community support is vital. Recent contributions from the MFA Oil Foundation helped the camp purchase a new Speed Queen washer and dryer to meet the needs of its many guests.

“Without donations, a place like this couldn’t exist,” Waller says. “Our families are often on fixed incomes. Scholarships, facility upkeep, programming—it’s all made possible by people who believe in what we do.”

Success, Waller says, isn’t measured in numbers alone. “It’s in the shy camper who finds their voice. It’s in connections built between two people with different abilities. It’s in the laughter, the teamwork, the sense of belonging,” she says. “Yes, we track surveys and testimonials. But in the end, success is about lives changed, not just beds filled.”

White Memorial Camp continues to fulfill its mission of helping others experience God’s love, enrich their lives, and grow in a safe, inclusive environment—thanks to a community that believes in the power of camp. To learn more about the camp, visit whitememorialcamp.com. **M**


MFA Oil Foundation Distributes Grants to 54 Organizations

The MFA Oil Foundation provides cash grants to non profit organizations that are working to improve communities where MFA Oil has a significant concentration of members and employees. In January 2025, the foundation approved \$120,800 in grants to 54 organizations.

1. Area Agency on Aging, Region X—Joplin, Mo.
2. Ashland Optimist Club—Ashland, Mo.
3. Atlanta C-3 School—Atlanta, Mo.
4. Barton Township Baseball Club, Inc.—Mackey, Ind.
5. Blue River Services, Inc.—Corydon, Ind.
6. Brookfield Junction Park—Brookfield, Mo.
7. Carroll County 4-H Council—Carrollton, Mo.
8. Cass County Dental Clinic—Belton, Mo.
9. Central Perry Volunteer Fire Department Inc.—Leopold, Ind.
10. Clearwater R-1 School Foundation—Piedmont, Mo.
11. Clinton Christian Academy—Clinton, Mo.
12. Creative Arts Therapy Center, Inc.—Monett, Mo.
13. Dade County ArtConnect—Greenfield, Mo.
14. Ava Senior Center—Ava, Mo.
15. Dwight Library—Dwight, Kan.
16. Eminence R-I School—Eminence, Mo.
17. Faith Bridge—Moberly, Mo.
18. Forest Grove Cemetery Project, Inc.—Raytown, Mo.
19. Friends of Higbee FFA—Higbee, Mo.
20. Friends of the Pharis Farm—Liberty, Mo.
21. Gilman City R-IV School District—Gilman City, Mo.
22. Hearts with Hooves Inc—Matthews, Mo.
23. Isaiah 117 House—Dale, Ind.
24. Jackson Township Fire—Ravenwood, Mo.
25. Kingston K-14 School District—Cadet, Mo.
26. Lincoln Community Care Center—Lincoln, Mo.
27. Main Street Albany—Albany, Mo.
28. Mexico School District—Mexico, Mo.
29. Missouri State Fair Foundation—Sedalia, Mo.
30. Monett Area YMCA—Monett, Mo.



MFA Oil Plant Manager Dan Schaefer presents a grant to Faith Bridge Executive Director Andie Jamerson (Moberly, Mo.).

31. Morris-Chase 4-H Sharp Shooters—Council Grove, Kan.
32. North Callaway R-1 School District—Kingdom City, Mo.
33. Olive Volunteer Fire Department, Inc.—Drumright, Okla.
34. Ozark County Volunteer Library—Gainesville, Mo.
35. Palmyra R-1 School District—Palmyra, Mo.
36. Perry County Rural Fire Department—Perryville, Mo.
37. Perry County School District #32—Perryville, Mo.
38. Pilot Grove C-4 School District—Pilot Grove, Mo.
39. Pleasant Hope Fire Protection District—Pleasant Hope, Mo.
40. Putnam County Fair—Unionville, Mo.
41. Putnam County Public Library—Unionville, Mo.
42. Radical Life Inc.—Emporia, Kan.
43. Scotland County R-1 School FFA—Memphis, Mo.
44. Shining Light Outreach Center—Charleston, Mo.
45. South Crawford Elementary—Leavenworth, Ind.
46. Southeast Kansas Mental Health Center—Humboldt, Kan.
47. Southern Boone County School District—Ashland, Mo.
48. St. Lawrence Catholic School—Monett, Mo.
49. Sullivan County Memorial Hospital—Milan, Mo.
50. Sweet Springs Fall Festival—Sweet Springs, Mo.
51. The Creator's Studio—Moberly, Mo.
52. Walker Rural Fire Department—Walker, Mo.
53. Wapello County Rural Fire Department—Ottumwa, Iowa
54. YMCA of Harrison County—Corydon, Ind. 

Farming Side by Side

In the rolling farmland of southeastern Daviess County, Mo., brothers Drew and Colby Dixon are carrying forward a four-generation farming legacy with resilience and a strong bond that keeps their operation running smoothly.

Together with their uncle, Lanny Dixon, the brothers raise corn and soybeans on 2,200 acres. Drew and Colby grew up with a love for agriculture, and farming has been their dream for as long as they can remember.

The Dixons got their start with land passed down from their grandfather and mother. Drew, 44, began farming through a sharecropping agreement with their grandfather. Colby, 42, later joined Drew, and they gradually added acreage over time.

The brothers officially formed Dixon Bros. Farms LLC in 2018 after farming together informally for a few years. “We did it for legal liability reasons, but we were already working side-by-side,” Colby says of their working relationship. “We just do what needs to be done—everything flows pretty naturally.”

They acknowledge that while acquiring new ground can be difficult these days, they are committed to steadily growing their operation, especially with an eye toward the next generation.

“We would like to expand enough so that if our kids want to farm, we can make that happen,” Drew says.

Between them, the brothers have three children: Drew and his wife, Amy, have a son, Harris, and a daughter, Ida; Colby and his wife, Micha, have a son, Sutton.

Despite challenges like high input costs and commodity prices near four-year lows, the Dixons remain optimistic. They cite improving crop genetics and new technology as bright spots on the horizon. “There are always positives,”



Photo by Morgan Jeffers

Drew and Colby Dixon

Colby says. “You just have to ride the lows with the highs.”

Drew and Colby support the cooperative model and have served as MFA Oil delegates since 2018 and 2019, respectively. The brothers value their relationship with the co-op, which provides them with fuel, lubricants and other supplies critical to keeping their equipment running. They also appreciate the cooperative’s structure and benefits.

“We like the products and service we get from MFA Oil,” Drew says. “Our local staff take great care of us. They are quick to respond whenever we call or text.”

Drew says they also enjoy “getting the money back at the end of the year,” referencing patronage dividends, which he says, “really helps out our operation.”

Colby adds, “It’s nice having a voice, too. We’ve had two board members who live nearby, and it’s good to know we have someone looking out for the farmers in our area.”

Outside of farming, the brothers stay active in their community. Colby coaches a local youth baseball team, and Drew serves on the Jamesport Junior Livestock Show board. Both are members of their respective churches—

Drew attends Lifepoint Church in Chillicothe, Mo., and Colby is a member of Jamesport United Methodist Church in Jamesport, Mo.

Looking back, the Dixons say they are proud of what they have built together.

“We’ve been able to update some of our older equipment and get into some of the newer technology that I never would have imagined when I was a kid,” Drew says. “It’s gratifying to make those investments in our future.”

Colby agrees. “Just knowing where we started—with not a lot of acres—and to see how we’ve grown while working together as brothers. That’s special.”

When asked what they would tell young or aspiring farmers, the answer is simple: Believe in yourself, work hard and treat people with decency. That approach has worked out well for them.

“Don’t let anyone tell you ‘You can’t do it,’” Drew says. “Agriculture is always evolving, and so are we. There’s more than one way to get the job done.”

The Dixons will keep pushing forward, not just for themselves, but for the family who came before them—and those they hope will follow. **M**



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Everyone's Talking Tariffs

On April 2, 2025, President Trump held his “Liberation Day” press conference in the White House Rose Garden to announce a sweeping round of tariffs on 57 countries, including a universal 10% tariff on all foreign imports. Since that date, conversations around tariffs have become nearly inescapable. What was once a relatively niche topic, often confined to policy circles and trade journals, has become a daily headline in the economic and political discourse.

For those who don't know, tariffs are essentially taxes that a government places on goods imported from other countries. When a foreign product enters the country, the government charges a fee, which is usually a percentage of the product's value. The idea is to make imported goods more expensive so that consumers are more likely to buy domestically made products instead.

Overall, the uncertainty surrounding energy-related tariffs has made markets uneasy.

I am a bit apprehensive to write about tariffs because we've already seen the Trump Administration change course on announced tariffs on Canada and Mexico in a matter of days in March. This process repeated itself when the reciprocal tariffs went into effect on April 7 and were paused for 90 days on April 9. With this administration, everything comes down to the dealmaker-in-chief. President Trump could make the entire conversation moot in months or even days.

As of this writing, the clock is ticking on the administration's trade negotiations. The paused tariffs will resume on July 8, when dozens of countries will see tariffs rise to as high as 50%. In a May 6 appearance before Congress,



Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said the administration was in talks with 17 countries and the tariff deals were “proceeding very well.” When asked what Americans can expect to see on tariffs a year from now, he said, “I would be surprised if we don't have more than 80 or 90% of those (trade deals) wrapped up by the end of the year.”

While it remains to be seen how the negotiations will unfold, the markets—and the public—are left to wonder how much prices will rise and to what extent tariffs might contribute to inflation.

When it comes to energy prices specifically, tariffs carry more risks than rewards. In general, energy-related tariffs are more disruptive than protective. For example, if refiners move away from Canadian crude oil and instead source supply from the Middle East, the shift certainly adds cost, geopolitical risk and supply chain instability.

Waivers and selective enforcement make it difficult to predict how tariffs will ultimately affect us. For instance, China relies heavily on U.S. ethane and propane. While China has alternative sources, it's unlikely to fully cut off American imports. In fact, China recently waived the tariff on ethane due to this dependency, and a similar waiver on propane appears likely

in the near future. While tariff talk has supported prices in the near term, waivers could leave many energy products outside the scope of the tariffs.

Overall, the uncertainty surrounding energy-related tariffs has made markets uneasy. Prices have been influenced more by speculation and fear than by actual policy changes. If tariffs remain in place, the market will eventually adapt, but likely with elevated costs. Even without finalized tariffs, the ongoing tariff conversation has contributed to price increases and heightened volatility.

The broader effects of these tariff threats are already being felt. Inflationary pressure and concerns about a possible recession are weighing on energy markets. These headwinds do not support higher prices. Many analysts are forecasting weak demand and soft prices through the rest of 2025. In the bigger picture, however, a downcycle could set the stage for a longer-term rebound—especially if the economy returns to stronger growth, and energy producers find themselves scrambling to catch up. 



Tim Danze
is the hedging manager
for MFA Oil.



FROM LEFT: Jon Ihler, President & CEO of MFA Oil; Ashley Bower, Senior Marketing Manager, MFA Oil; Jennifer Bach, Vice President of Break Time Operations; Chris Baker, Resource Development Manager, Feeding Missouri; and Kenny Steeves, Senior Vice President of Operations, MFA Oil. Photo by Jody Confer.

MFA Oil Marks 11th Annual Charity Event with \$150,000 Donation to Fight Hunger

MFA Oil raised \$150,000 in donations for Feeding Missouri at its 11th Annual Charity Golf Scramble and Concert. Over 240 golfers attended the event, which was held on June 2, 2025, at The Club at Old Hawthorne in Columbia, Mo.

“MFA Oil is committed to strengthening the communities we serve and supporting our neighbors in need,” says MFA Oil President and CEO Jon Ihler. “Our collaboration with Feeding Missouri reflects our dedication to fighting hunger and making a lasting difference. Through this \$150,000 donation, we are honored to help expand access to nutritious food for individuals and families across the state. Together, we are working toward a stronger, healthier Missouri.”

The event featured a golf tournament, a dinner and a private concert by country music artist Chris Lane.

“MFA Oil’s ongoing support is a crucial lifeline during these uncertain times,” says Feeding Missouri Executive Director Heather Hargrove. “We are profoundly thankful for their dedication to our mission to transform hunger into hope. With over 951,000 Missourians experiencing food insecurity, the need is greater than ever. Generous partners, like MFA Oil, allow our food banks to provide much-needed assistance and ensure we can support our neighbors working hard to make ends meet.”

Feeding Missouri is a coalition of Missouri’s six regional Feeding America food banks. Through a coordinated network of more than 1,200 community and faith-based feeding programs, it provides hunger relief to every county in the state and the city of St. Louis.



New Propane Plant Opens in Tennessee

MFA Oil expanded its footprint with the opening of a new office in Big Rock, Tenn., on April 21, 2025. The location offers propane delivery services to homeowners, farmers and businesses in Stewart County and the surrounding area.

The new office is located at 2231 US-79 in Big Rock and is strategically positioned to improve service efficiency in northern Tennessee and southern Kentucky.

“The addition of the Big Rock office is another step in our commitment to meeting the energy needs of farmers and rural communities,” said Kenny Steeves, senior vice president of operations. “This location helps bridge a service gap in our operational area and will enhance our ability to serve customers in this region more effectively.”

Big Rock becomes the cooperative’s second office in Tennessee, joining its location in Murfreesboro, and adds to its regional presence alongside the Central City office in Kentucky. **M**

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