

ISSUE 90 • SPRING 2026

THE LEAD REVIEW

Official Newsletter of the Nebraska LEAD Program

From the Director's Desk

BY KURTIS HARMS

Time has a way of picking up speed this time of year. It feels like we were just celebrating the Christmas season, and in what seems like a blink, we've moved through an international seminar with Class 43, a national seminar with Class 44 and several in-state seminars—bringing us right into another spring recruitment season. The pace is a great reminder of the energy and momentum behind the Nebraska LEAD Program and the people who make it so impactful.

This season also brings a meaningful—and somewhat bittersweet—milestone as we celebrate the graduation of Nebraska LEAD Class 43. This group holds special significance for me, as they were the first class I had the privilege to work with from start to finish. From sitting in on their interviews and welcoming them into the program, to watching them grow as leaders and ultimately cross the stage on March 13, it has been incredibly rewarding to be part of their journey. I am proud of each of them and look forward to seeing the ways they will contribute to agriculture, their communities and our state in the years ahead.

At the same time, I continue to be humbled by the support and engagement of our alumni and friends. Getting to know the depth, reach and impact of the Nebraska LEAD network has been one of the most rewarding parts of my role. The strength of this program is not only in the experiences we provide, but in the people who stay connected and continue to lead long after their time as Fellows.

As we move into planting season, I hope this time brings renewed energy and optimism for the work ahead. Thank you for all you do to support agriculture and the Nebraska LEAD Program. I wish you a safe, successful and productive spring.



Nebraska Agricultural Leadership Council

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A Message From the Chair of the Board

BY JESSICA GROSKOPF, NEBRASKA LEAD 33

As we celebrate the completion of Nebraska LEAD Class 43, we do so with immense pride and optimism for what lies ahead. This outstanding group of leaders has invested the past two years in deep learning, meaningful dialogue and transformative experiences across our state, our nation and beyond. They have explored agriculture from every angle: policy, production, innovation and global markets, while strengthening their understanding of leadership, service and responsibility.



Class 43, you have represented the very best of Nebraska agriculture. You asked thoughtful questions, built authentic relationships and embraced the uncomfortable moments that produce real growth. Leadership development is not simply about gaining knowledge; it is about cultivating perspective, courage and character. Each of you has demonstrated those qualities in abundance.

As you complete the program, know that Nebraska needs you. Our communities need leaders who listen first, who bridge divides and who are willing to step forward when challenges arise. Whether you lead in your operation, your organization, your school board or at the State Capitol, your voice matters. The Nebraska LEAD experience does not end at graduation. In fact, it is just beginning.

On a personal note, this milestone also prompts reflection as I wind down my time serving on the Nebraska Agricultural Leadership Council board and conclude my year as chair. Serving in leadership with NALC has been both an honor and a responsibility I have never taken lightly.

This past year as president has been especially meaningful. I have had the privilege of witnessing firsthand the dedication of our board members, staff and supporters who work tirelessly to sustain and grow this program. Together, we have continued to invest in leaders who will carry Nebraska agriculture forward.

To Class 43: thank you for your commitment, your curiosity and your heart for service. As you step into the next chapter, lead boldly and humbly. Stay engaged. Stay connected. And never underestimate the impact you can have when you choose to lead with integrity.

Congratulations, Class 43. Your journey is just beginning and Nebraska is better because of you.

IT'S TIME

TO HELP SHAPE
NEBRASKA AGRICULTURE.

JUNE 2026

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY
14	15	16

NEBRASKA LEAD
APPLICATION
DUE!

Applications are open for Nebraska LEAD Class 45! If you're ready to take your leadership to the next level, this is your opportunity to gain invaluable experiences, connect with industry leaders and explore the challenges and opportunities shaping our state.

Apply today (or nominate a worthy candidate!) and join a legacy of leaders who are making a difference in Nebraska and beyond. Class 45 begins in September 2026. Don't miss your chance!

**CALL 402-472-6810 OR VISIT
LEAD.UNL.EDU TO APPLY.**

Time for a New Name Tag?

JOHN SMITH
SCOTTSBLUFF, NE
LEAD 45

Need a replacement magnetic name tag? Due to increased supplier costs, all new name tags are **now \$25**. If you'd like to order a replacement, please contact the Nebraska LEAD Program office and we'll get one on the way.

LEADing the Way

CONGRATS TO OUR ALUMNI FOR MAKING AN IMPACT

- **Leland Poppe (LEAD 13)** was named president and executive director of the Mid-Nebraska Community Foundation.
- **Dick Helms (LEAD 1)** was re-elected to his third term on Concordia University's Board of Regents.
- **Robyn Dvoracek (LEAD 24)** was elected president of the Nebraska Land Title Association.
- **Troy Kane (43)** was elected to a state director position with the Nebraska Corn Growers Association.
- **Lucy Kimball (43)** began a new job with Raising Nebraska.
- **Trey Bahler (44)** started a new role as an account manager with Highland Ag Services.

Congratulations!

CELEBRATING MILESTONES & LIFE ACHIEVEMENTS

- **Katie (LEAD 44)** and Caleb Hespe who were wed on Nov. 15, 2025.
- **Logan (LEAD 42)** and Bri Reed who were married on Nov. 15, 2025.
- **Rachel (LEAD 40)** and Luke Prosser on the birth of their son Benjamin Isaac on Nov. 19, 2025.
- **Kelby (LEAD 42)** and Cortney Sudbeck on the birth of their daughter Raelynn Shae on Nov. 20, 2025.
- **Kelsey (LEAD 44)** and Jordon Harms on their Dec. 13, 2025, wedding.
- **Trey (LEAD 44)** and wife Ruby Bahler on their Feb. 23, 2025, marriage.
- **Curtis (LEAD 40)** and Gentry Welsh on the birth of their daughter Harlie Haines born Nov. 12, 2025.
- **Matt (LEAD 42)** and Hailey Oswald on the birth of their daughter Konner Kay born Feb. 25, 2026.
- **Cale (LEAD 38)** and Rachel Buhr on the birth of their daughter Bridget Marie born Mar. 6, 2026.

Condolences

SHARING OUR SYMPATHIES WITH OUR LEAD FAMILY

- **Bob Rikli (LEAD 12)** on the passing of his wife Marlene.
- **Larry Sitzman (LEAD 3)** who passed away on Dec. 25, 2025.
- **Dr. Irv Omtvedt** died Apr. 6, 2026. Dr. Omtvedt was the former Vice Chancellor for IANR at UNL and was the "Allen G. Blezek Friend of LEAD Award" recipient in 2002.

LEAD 44 REFLECTIONS



"The Nebraska LEAD Program has been a truly incredible experience. I've enjoyed learning about agriculture while traveling the state and nation with our amazing class. I'm looking forward to next year's seminars to learn more about our energy grid with Cooper Nuclear and the world with our international seminar."

-Kelsey Harms, LEAD 44
Glenvil, Nebraska
Nebraska Farm Bureau



"LEAD has been an incredible journey so far, and the 27 members of LEAD 44 are truly exceptional. My perspective of Nebraska has been forever changed by this amazing program."

-Jake Beam, LEAD 44
Byron, Nebraska
Reinke Manufacturing



"Nebraska LEAD has been a great experience. I've learned so much about Nebraska agriculture and all that it has to offer."

-Colt Foster, LEAD 44
Hemingford, Nebraska
Legacy Coop



2026 ANNUAL RECOGNITION BANQUET



Celebrating Nebraska LEAD Class 43

On March 13, the Nebraska LEAD Program celebrated the graduation of Class 43 during the Nebraska Agricultural Leadership Council’s Annual Recognition Banquet on UNL’s East Campus. Hosted in partnership with the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, the evening brought together Fellows, alumni, supporters and partners to recognize the accomplishments of this outstanding group of leaders.

The 30 Fellows of Class 43 officially completed their time in Nebraska LEAD, reflecting on an experience that took them across Nebraska, the United States and around the world. Throughout the evening, members of the class shared personal insights and stories, highlighting the growth, connections and perspectives they gained along the way.

With the addition of Class 43, the Nebraska LEAD Program now has more than 1,200 alumni across its 40+ year history. These individuals continue to serve in leadership roles throughout agriculture, business and public service—strengthening industries and communities across Nebraska and beyond. **LEAD 43 Graduates** (by hometown):

CALLAWAY: **Lucy Kimball**

CARLETON: **Troy Kane**

DENTON: **Payton Schaneman**

EDISON: **Amy Warner**

ERICSON: **Neleigh Gehl**

FREMONT: **Chandler Maly**

GOTHENBURG: **McKinley Harm**

GRETNA: **Brennan Costello**

HASTINGS: **Lily Ziehmer**

HAY SPRINGS: **Austin Weyers**

HOWELLS: **Tyler Morton**

HUMPHREY: **Eric Wemhoff**

KEARNEY: **Anthony Finke**

KEARNEY: **Dustin Rohde**

KEARNEY: **Trevor Spath**

LINCOLN: **Luke Baldridge**

LINCOLN: **Sally Welsh**

LONG PINE: **Spencer Shifflet**

LOUP CITY: **Cale Harrington**

MONROE: **Courtney Nelson**

MILFORD: **Jared Stauffer**

MINATARE: **Austin Kniss**

MULLEN: **Kyle Phillips**

NEHAWKA: **Sophia Svanda**

NORFOLK: **Jake Judge**

ORD: **Ben Edwards**

OSCEOLA: **Anthony Mestl**

SUPERIOR: **John Sullivan**

WAHOO: **Jacobi Swanson**

WAYNE: **Bobby Reifenrath**

The banquet also gave us the opportunity to look back, as we recognized Nebraska LEAD Class 14 in honor of their 30-year anniversary. Their continued impact is a powerful reminder of the lasting influence of the LEAD experience.



A special moment of the evening came through a prerecorded message from former U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, who offered his congratulations and encouragement to the graduating class as they step into continued leadership roles in their communities and industries.

WATCH THE VIDEO →



Thanks to our Banquet & Table Sponsors!

We extend our appreciation to AKRS Equipment, Nebraska Corn Board, Nebraska LEAD Class 3, Nebraska Dry Pea & Lentil Commission, Nebraska Association of Natural Resources Districts, Pioneer/Corteva Agriscience and Reinke Manufacturing Company for helping to support the annual banquet.

Table Sponsors

Central Nebraska Public Power & Irrigation District, Courtney Nelson, Farm Credit Services of America, Judge Land & Cattle, Mosaic Company, Nebraska Agribusiness Club, Nebraska LEAD Alumni Association, Nebraska Public Power District, Nebraska Soybean Board, Spencer Shifflet, Tyler Morton and Wieseman Farms



At the recognition banquet on March 13, the Nebraska LEAD Alumni Association named Dr. Randy Bertolas as the recipient of the organization’s Allen G. Blezek Friend of LEAD Award. As chair of the History, Politics and Geography Department at Wayne State College, Dr. Bertolas has played

a key role in shaping the Global Perspectives seminar for more than 25 years. His dedication has helped generations of Fellows better understand the global forces influencing agriculture and rural communities.

Nebraska LEAD Class 43 Gains Global Perspectives After Visiting Morocco, Portugal and Spain

Nebraska LEAD Class 43 began 2026 by taking part in a life-changing experience through the International Study/Travel Seminar. From January 6–20, 30 Fellows traveled to Morocco, Portugal and Spain, gaining a firsthand look at global agriculture, natural resource management and the leadership systems that shape food production around the world.

This two-week seminar is a cornerstone of the Nebraska LEAD Program, designed to push Fellows beyond their day-to-day operations and immerse them in unfamiliar environments. The goal is simple but powerful: broaden perspectives, challenge assumptions and bring global insight back to Nebraska agriculture.



A Global Perspective on Agriculture

Throughout the seminar, Fellows engaged directly with producers, researchers, agribusiness leaders and policymakers. From arid desert farming systems to highly coordinated European agricultural policy, each stop offered a different lens on how agriculture adapts to local challenges and opportunities.

“Seeing agriculture firsthand in different parts of the world changes how you think,” said Lucas Baldrige, LEAD 43 Fellow. “Whether it was farming in the Moroccan desert or large-scale irrigation projects in Portugal, it reinforced how innovative producers have to be—and how much we can learn from one another.”

Morocco: Innovation in an Arid Climate

The seminar began in Morocco, where Fellows quickly saw the realities of farming under water-limited conditions. Visits included citrus and olive operations, a high-tech orange export farm and conversations with researchers at the National Institute for Agricultural Research.



Fellows also explored irrigation strategies, soil management and alternative cropping systems designed to succeed in arid environments. These experiences highlighted both the challenges and the ingenuity required to produce food in regions with limited natural resources.

“One of the biggest takeaways for me was water management,” said Payton Schaneman, LEAD 43 Fellow. “Water issues look very different in Nebraska than in Morocco or Spain, but the importance of managing it wisely is universal.”



Portugal: Scale, Sustainability and Water Systems

In Portugal, the group examined agriculture on a broader scale, visiting one of the country’s largest farming operations encompassing crops, cattle, forestry and wine production. Fellows also met with leaders from the Confederation of Portuguese Farmers to better understand how agricultural policy is shaped at both the national and European Union levels.

A highlight of the Portugal experience was the Alqueva Multipurpose Project, Europe’s largest strategic water reserve. The system supports irrigation across thousands of hectares while also contributing to renewable energy production and regional development.



The group also explored cork production, dairy farming and family-run operations, offering a balance between large-scale infrastructure and generational agriculture.

Spain: Policy, Processing and Production

The final leg of the seminar took Fellows to Spain, where the focus expanded to include agricultural cooperatives, food processing and policy.

Visits included grain and citrus cooperatives, olive oil production facilities, fisheries and canning operations, and one of the region's largest beef cattle operations. A meeting with Spain's Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food provided insight into how national policy influences production, trade and sustainability.

Leadership Beyond Borders

While the seminar is rooted in agriculture, its deeper purpose is leadership development. Fellows participated in group discussions and reflections throughout the experience, connecting what they were seeing abroad to their roles at home in Nebraska.

"International study is a cornerstone of the Nebraska LEAD Program," said Director Kurtis Harms. "This experience challenges Fellows to think beyond borders, understand agriculture in a global context and bring those lessons home to strengthen Nebraska's agricultural industry."

Just as important as the site visits were the relationships built along the way. Traveling together through three countries created opportunities for Class 43 Fellows to deepen connections, share perspectives and grow as a cohort.

Bringing It Home

As Class 43 returned to Nebraska, the impact of the International Study/Travel Seminar will continue to unfold. The lessons learned—about water use,

innovation, policy and leadership—will shape how these Fellows lead in their operations, communities and industries.

"This experience pushed me to think bigger—about agriculture, leadership and my role in it," said Jake Judge, Class 43 Fellow. "I'm incredibly thankful for the opportunity and for everything this experience taught me. Seeing how producers around the world adapt, innovate and lead challenged my perspective and gave me lessons I'll carry forward in both my personal and professional lives."



From desert farms in Morocco to irrigation systems in Portugal to policy discussions in Spain, one theme remained consistent: agriculture is deeply local, yet undeniably global.

And for Nebraska LEAD Fellows, understanding that connection is what leadership is all about.



Scan here for photo and video reports from Nebraska LEAD Class 43's visit to Europe and Africa.

Nebraska LEAD Class Class 44 Completes National Study/Travel Seminar

Nebraska LEAD Program Class 44 Fellows recently completed their National Study/Travel Seminar, a 10-day experience designed to expand their understanding of leadership, public policy and the broader food and agriculture system.

Held February 4–13, the seminar took Fellows to Kansas City, Washington, D.C., Chicago and Moline, Illinois. One of the capstone experiences of the two-year program, the national seminar connects Fellows directly with leaders, policymakers and industry experts.

Throughout the seminar, Class 44 engaged with organizations across agriculture and public life, including the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, United States Department of Agriculture and national commodity groups. In Washington, D.C., Fellows also met with members of Nebraska’s congressional delegation and visited the Embassies of Mexico and Canada to better understand global trade relationships.

“This seminar brings leadership to life,” said Kurtis Harms, Nebraska LEAD Program director. “There’s no substitute for hearing firsthand how policy is shaped and connecting that back to Nebraska agriculture.”

The experience also emphasized history and civic responsibility. A visit to Gettysburg National Military Park offered perspective on leadership during pivotal moments in U.S. history.

“The visit to Gettysburg was especially impactful,” said Shane Wohlgeomuth, LEAD 44 Fellow. “It reminded me that decisions matter—and that strong leadership can shape the course of a nation.”

For many Fellows, time spent in Washington reinforced the importance of engagement in the policy process.

“Meeting with national organizations helped me better understand how Nebraska agriculture fits into the bigger picture,” said Erika Coulter, LEAD 44 Fellow. “It gave me confidence to be more involved in policy discussions at home.”

The seminar concluded in Illinois, where Fellows explored food access initiatives, urban agricultural education and global manufacturing through visits to the Greater Chicago Food Depository, Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences and John Deere.

“We want Fellows to see the full food and agriculture system—from production to policy to consumer engagement,” Harms said. “They return with new perspective, valuable relationships and a renewed commitment to lead.”

Class 44 Fellows who participated include:

Ainsworth: Katie Hesse | Albion: Jaclyn Frey | Aurora: Amanda Schultz | Bassett: Erika Coulter | Bridgeport: Alexis Corman | Butte: Britanie Brewster | Byron: Jake Beam | Callaway: Stacey Guthard | Champion: Daniel Hogsett | Clarks: Tana Pankoke | Columbus: Valerie Bohuslavsky | Funk: Shane Wohlgeomuth | Glenvil: Kelsey Harms | Hemingford: Colt Foster | Howells: Justin Morton | Kearney: Garrett Elfeldt, Chase Hoffschneider, Camille Koehn | Leigh: Matthew Cross | Lincoln: Jacob Schlick, Dillon Kuehn, Katelyn Leibhart | Mason City: Sarah Zimmer | Merna: Brandon Miller | North Platte: Trey Bahler | Omaha: Peter Martin | Red Cloud: Erin Slieter





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The Nebraska LEAD Program's fiscal year of operations runs July 1 – June 30.

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Become a member of the Nebraska Agricultural Leadership Council (NALC) with a gift of \$100 or more. Your support directly impacts the Nebraska LEAD Program's annual operations—helping us develop, prepare and inspire the next generation of leaders for Nebraska agriculture.

Support LEAD. Strengthen Nebraska Agriculture.

Late last October, Nebraska LEAD Program administrative associate Shana Gerdes was honored with the International Association of Programs for Agricultural Leadership (IAPAL) Program Support Award. With more than 17 years of service, Gerdes plays a key role in coordinating seminars, travel and program logistics while supporting Fellows and staff alike. Her attention to detail and commitment to excellence have made a lasting impact on the program. The award recognizes outstanding support professionals who strengthen agricultural leadership programs around the world.



Gerdes Receives International Recognition