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## Every drop counts – Belleville entrepreneur creates app to track water usage

By Donna Sullivan, Editor

An incident of accidentally over-pumping an irrigation well back in 2019 was a catalyst for Chase Larson to develop an app that would track, manage and report water usage on Bestifor, his six-generation family farm near Belleville. The result was VandWater, and Larson's solution is moving water management away from Excel spreadsheets and shoeboxes of documents to an all-encompassing platform for producers.

Bestifor is located in one of the most highly regulated places in the state for water, according to Ashton Redd, operations manager for VandWater. "It's very intensely managed through the season and year to year," she explained. "The Republican River is the last flowing sand bottom river in the state of Kansas, and it will always flow water. That means that irrigation is very intensely managed. If it's a dry year with less rain, less snow pack, that heavily affects some of the junior permits that are basically first to get shut off in order to maintain stream flows."

Redd says the over-pumping incident was a turning point for Larson.



Described as a serial entrepreneur, Chase Larson developed an app to track water usage in irrigation and file the water-use reports with the state.

He was determined to become more proactive about making management decisions based on how much water they could pump and doing the most they could with the water they were allocated. He began putting together ideas of

how an app could work and created what Redd called a very crude, rudimentary version of what they have now, just intending to use it on their own farm. He had previously worked with software developers for another project on the



A smart phone app reads VandWater's tokens at each meter and tracks water usage. Vand is the Danish word for water and reflects the Danish and Swedish roots of Bestifor.

Courtesy photos

farm, so he knew where to turn to turn his concept of a water management app into a reality. "Chase's initial idea was that if this doesn't go anywhere, at least it solves our issues and makes us better within our own operation, and he was happy with that," Redd continued.

But that wasn't what happened.

The app caught the attention of Kansas Division of Water Resources, and they had him tour the western part of the state, visiting with Groundwater Management Districts and presenting his app to them. By the time he was done, he had producers interested and ready to buy the app. "Chase had to make the

decision of, are we going to commercialize it or is it just going to remain an in-house tool for Bestifor," Redd said. "And if you get to know Chase a little bit, the answer is pretty obvious that of course he's going to commercialize it. Of course, he's going to let it help other farmers solve their issues and support them as they hopefully go forward and make better management decisions related to water."

The 2023 growing season was the first irrigation season with VandWater being commercially available. Now heading into their fourth growing season, Redd says they've experienced tremendous growth and continue to

develop new ideas. "When it comes from a producer in your home state, it's producer-created and producer-led still, I think that really shines through," she stated. Their system is in place on farms in Kansas and nine other states.

VandWater is a water management program that tracks the amount of water that is pumped at each well, and how much of each allocation remains. It sends warnings if a well is getting close to its limit. Then at the end of the year, their water-use report is compiled and turned filed with the state.

Redd said often the biggest hurdle is getting a producer to just sit down and take a look at the app to see for themselves how easy it is to use. Once they do, they often call their neighbors to recommend it.

"If producers want to get started with us, it's extremely easy," Redd described. "Over the past four years we've built a really good working relationship with the state. All producers need to supply us with is their water rights numbers and the well names. There are times that customers will send us that stuff in the morning and by the afternoon we have them set up."

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## A farm for the future: Rooted in the first chapters of Kansas agriculture, the Flickner family is an invaluable partner for K State's next-generation agricultural research

The way Ray Flickner tells it, he must be one of the luckiest farmers in all the state, because his life has been a front-row seat to the future of Kansas agriculture.

It's both a blessing and a responsibility for the fifth-generation Kansan farmer. His great-great-grandparents — Anabaptists from Ukraine and among the state's first homesteaders — took a boat to Ellis Island, a train to Halstead and a hike to fertile prairie fields near present-day Moundridge in central Kansas. There, using Turkey Red winter wheat seeds from back home, they established Kansas as a new breadbasket for the world.

Later generations of Flickners were some of the first farmers to install irrigation wells in the area, and more recently, Ray was among the first to adopt strip-till methods and sub-surface drip irrigation in managing the nearly 1,000-acre corn, soybean and wheat operation.

Throughout that century-plus history, the Flickners have been pioneers not out of a desire to be first, but to protect the land and advance new methods for their fellow Kansas farmers. Through a partnership with Kansas State University researchers, the family sees yet another opportunity to build the next generation of Kansas agriculture.

For the past several years, the family's Flickner Innovation Farm has been a farm-sized proving ground for some of K-State's cutting-edge research, allowing faculty and graduate students to put innovative agricultural techniques and technologies into practice.

"When we can work with real-world conditions on a real farm, our research is that much better, but much more important



Ryan and Ray Flickner, respectively the sixth and fifth generations in a family that has pioneered Kansas agriculture, continue to build on the family's legacy through the Flickner Innovation Farm near Moundridge in central Kansas.

Courtesy photos

have been the Flickners," said Dorivar Ruiz Diaz, interim head of K State's Department of Agronomy. "Beyond allowing us access to their farm, they've been critical members of our team, and their generosity with their time and insights has allowed us to shape our research in a way that helps farmers make the decisions they need to be successful."

### Providing a blank canvas for research opportunities

Kansas agriculture, for all its variety, is a land of extremes. In much of

western Kansas, where water resources are in limited supply, dryland farming is becoming increasingly prevalent, while irrigated farming is more feasible in other areas of the state, said Gaurav Jha, assistant professor of precision agriculture.

Flickner Innovation Farms in central Kansas has the climate for both.

"When you think of Kansas and the many situations farmers face, Flickner Innovation Farm is uniquely located to represent those different

environments," Jha said. "The Flickners are especially well-tuned into their agricultural landscape, and when they allow us to use their farm as a field laboratory, we get practical perspectives into how we can make this research useful."

Much of the K State research at Flickner Innovation Farm has focused on precision agriculture, which uses advanced technologies such as biodegradable soil sensors, targeted irrigation and satellite-based imagery to grow more with less.

K-State projects at Flicker Innovation Farms include:

- Tracking watersheds, testing practices — A long-term study at Flickner Innovation Farm, in partnership with KCARE and the Kansas Water Office, tracks water quality and farm management in real-world conditions. By pairing watershed monitoring with trials of widely marketed biological products, researchers are generating trusted evidence to help farmers protect water without sacrificing profitability.
- Smarter spraying —

Field-scale research shows "See & Spray" technology can treat just 30–50% of a soybean field while still achieving over 90% weed control and maintaining yields. The results point to a promising way to cut herbicide use without sacrificing performance.

• Building better soils — Research at the farm shows that cover crops improve soil health, with noticeable benefits emerging after five years. The results help producers and advisors set realistic expectations for soil health improvements and inform carbon measurement and verification efforts.

"These test sites have

been like a living library for us," Jha said. "We can do research at the experimental or greenhouse scale, but if it stays there, it can only ever be hypothetical. The Flickners allow us to translate this work to the field."

Although the farm has been in the family for generations, the Flickners formally began calling it the Flickner Innovation Farm in 2018, especially as they began to look more closely at irrigation and water-conservation practices, said Ryan Flickner, Ray's son, who represents the family's sixth generation of farmers.

The family retains the

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## DeRouchee honored as Distinguished Alumni at SDSU Ag Week banquet

Joel DeRouchee, above left, of Wamego was honored during the CAFES Prexy Council Ag Week banquet recently at South Dakota State University. The banquet is part of a week full of student-run events celebrating all things agriculture. DeRouchee was awarded the inaugural Distinguished Alumni Award for his contributions to the swine industry.

DeRouchee's nominator called him a "valued resource" for the SDSU swine program and stated that his career "reflects the land grant mission at its finest... to create meaningful and lasting impacts across agriculture and rural communities."

Originally from Pukwana, S.D., DeRouchee received his bachelor's degree from SDSU's Department of Animal and Range Sciences before going on to complete master's and doctoral degrees at Kansas State University. He is currently a professor and State Animal Science Extension Program Leader at Kansas State, along with being the co-founder and co-owner of Primo Feeds. DeRouchee is an internationally recognized leader, having been named a National American Society of Animal Science

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K-State agronomy researchers like Dorivar Ruiz Diaz, left, regularly travel to Flickner Innovation Farm to conduct field-scale agricultural research.

# Insight

Kansas Farm Bureau  
The Voice of Agriculture

## Every Day is Earth Day

By Greg Doering,  
Kansas Farm Bureau

The old proverb "Society grows great when old men plant trees in whose shade they know they shall never sit," recognizes the small contributions of past generations in forming the outline of the world we live in today and that shapes all of us.

Four individuals — Jennifer Mathes, Mona Owens, Pam Dougan and Ron Betzen — received recognition for their roles in creating a lot of shade over the past three decades by helping to create a five-

county Earth Day program in Parsons.

When the local community Earth Day event was discontinued, the Young Farmers and Ranchers of Labette County, led by Mathes, decided to keep the event going with a focus on agriculture and conservation. Her original purpose was to promote agriculture, educate children that today's agriculture is environmentally friendly and to educate teachers and provide them with curriculum ideas to use throughout the year.

The event has mostly

dodged serious spring weather with only one rain-out. A tornado tore through Parsons only hours after students marked Earth Day in 2000. The event also wasn't held in 2020 and was threatened again in 2021 until volunteers created a virtual option dubbed "Agriculture 4 All" that met the goals of the original mission and is still available to view on YouTube.

Starting with the motto, "In agriculture, every day is Earth Day," the group hosted more than 1,000 attendees of all grade levels in the inaugural year, and the young farmers group continued hosting the event until the turn of the century.

That's when Farm Bureaus from Crawford, Montgomery, Neosho and Wilson counties joined the effort to provide

area schools with a day of ag-centered lessons and manage the army of volunteers necessary to host stations featuring livestock, crops and conservation demonstrations.

Eventually the Earth Day event was pared back to fourth-graders to better manage logistics, and nearly 600 attended the most recent event on April 16. The event also included more than 150 area FFA students who volunteered to run stations, serve lunch and help manage 600 fourth-graders. Or at least attempt to manage them after they ate dessert.

The four honorees were recognized for their contributions over the previous 30 years. Mathes was honored for her vision to reimagine and continue an event that others didn't see value in. Dougan and

Owens, Farm Bureau coordinators representing Neosho and Labette counties respectively, poured hours of their time into planning and coordinating the event over the years. Betzen, formerly a district administrator for Kansas Farm Bureau, helped connect county Farm Bureaus and provided plenty of behind-the-scenes support.

In addition to teaching students about agriculture, conservation and environmental stewardship, the Earth Day event also sent every attendee home with one other thing: a sapling. Most often the saplings were eastern redbuds, which are generally showing off their brilliant pink petals this time of year.

Fittingly, the four people honored for the

30th anniversary of the five-county Earth Day will have a redbud dedicated in their honor in the park that's served as the host site. Hopefully someday they get the chance to enjoy its shade where they can consider the thousands of other trees that were planted because of the event.

Shade is a great benefit from past plantings, but a better marker of a society's greatness is an ability to inspire the next generation and have them know that for farmers and ranchers, every day is Earth Day.

"Insight" is a weekly column published by Kansas Farm Bureau, the state's largest farm organization whose mission is to strengthen agriculture and the lives of Kansans through advocacy, education and service.

## Kansas wheat growers urged to scout for rust as spring conditions shift risk

By Pat Melgares,  
K-State Extension  
news service

As Kansas wheat breaks dormancy and fields begin to green up, a Kansas State University plant disease expert is urging growers to keep a close eye on a familiar set of threats: wheat rusts.

Wheat pathologist Kelsey Andersen Onofre said spring marks a critical window for monitoring stripe rust, leaf rust and stem rust — three diseases that can significantly affect yield if conditions favor their development.

"This is the time of year when we start to think about wheat rusts," Andersen

Onofre said. "We're coming out of dormancy, and this is when we really start watching not only what's going on in Kansas, but what's happening in the states to our south."

Stripe rust has been the most common wheat rust in Kansas in recent years. The disease is easily identified by its bright orange spores that form distinct stripes along the veins of wheat leaves.

"That's the rust that looks like orange Cheeto dust in stripes on our wheat leaves," Andersen Onofre said. "If you run your finger along the leaf, it comes off on your fingers and turns them orange."

Despite its prevalence in past seasons, Andersen Onofre said the outlook for stripe rust is lower this year, largely due to unfavorable conditions in Texas, where the disease often begins its northward movement.

Wheat rusts typically do not survive Kansas winters, instead migrating north each year from southern regions such as Texas or even Mexico. Monitoring disease pressure in those areas can provide an early indication of what Kansas producers might expect.

"We'll see the pressure in Texas in February and in Oklahoma this time of year, and that gives us a pretty good indicator of

what we're going to expect here in Kansas," she said.

So far, stripe rust activity in Texas has remained low. However, leaf rust — another common disease — has been more active there and could pose a greater risk if weather conditions shift.

Leaf rust tends to appear later in the growing season and prefers warmer temperatures. Unlike stripe rust, its orange to brown spores are scattered across the leaf rather than forming stripes.

"It seems like leaf rust will potentially be a higher risk for our crop than stripe rust this year," Andersen Onofre said.

That risk could increase if Kansas experiences wetter weather in April, which would favor disease development and spread.

Adding to the concern is the presence of leaf rust in some Kansas fields last fall. While most of that infection likely did not survive the winter, Andersen Onofre said there is a small

chance it persisted under snow cover or dense crop canopies.

"If you had leaf rust active in your field in the fall, those are important fields to start scouting again this spring," she said.

Early detection is key. Andersen Onofre recommends that producers regularly scout fields and use wheat variety ratings to determine whether fungicide applications are warranted.

"If it starts to get going again, especially if we have some wetter weather, that would be the time to think about a fungicide application," she said.

Leaf rust can cause substantial yield losses if left unmanaged. Andersen Onofre noted that when about 5% of a field shows infection, growers should consider treatment. In severe cases, losses can reach 20%.

Stem rust, the third major wheat rust, remains relatively rare in Kansas and typically appears late

in the season. It primarily affects susceptible varieties and is identified by darker brown spores forming along the plant's stem.

While stem rust is less common, Andersen Onofre said it still warrants attention as part of an overall disease management strategy.

Ultimately, she emphasized that staying informed and proactive is the best defense.

"Scouting and knowing your varieties are really your first line of defense," Andersen Onofre said. "That's what helps guide those management decisions throughout the season."

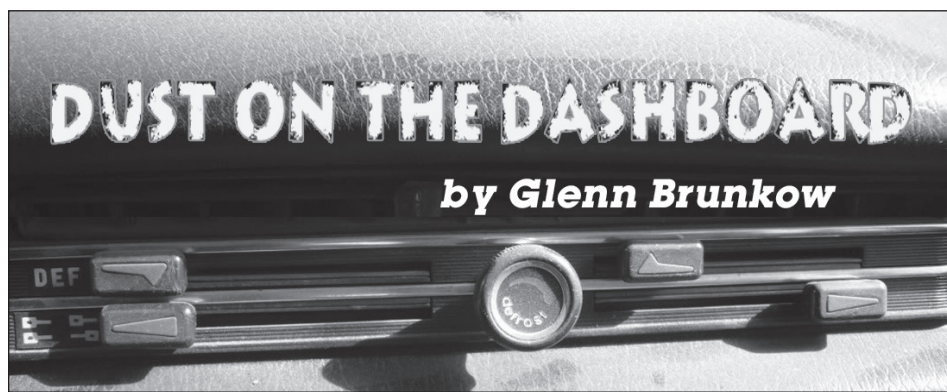
More information on Kansas crop conditions is available from local K-State Extension offices in Kansas.

## AMS launches feeder and stocker dashboard

The Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) recently launched their national feeder and stocker cattle dashboard. This interactive tool will replace the text and PDF reports currently posted on the AMS market news website.

With the dashboard, producers will have instant access to dynamic, visualized data, with price movements, volume changes and market comparisons. Producers also can create customizable filters to refine their view by date, sale type, region, class and weight, giving them the flexibility to focus on the data that matters most to their operation.

To access the feeder and stocker cattle dashboard, visit [https://mymarketnews.ams.usda.gov/National\\_Feeder\\_Stocker\\_Dashboard](https://mymarketnews.ams.usda.gov/National_Feeder_Stocker_Dashboard)



My father-in-law passed away very unexpectedly last week. His passing was just one week after my dad, but the pain was much deeper. We had mourned for my father for eight years; grief is much different when it is sudden.

My relationship with my father-in-law started off a bit rocky. Well, rocky for him; I was in love and blissfully unaware. A five-week courtship would do that to a father and, now that I am a father of a twenty-something daughter, I understand. In fact, I apologized to him last fall for the angst I caused thirty-one years ago.

Randy could be summed up in two words: family and commitment. Without a doubt his family was first, and I feel blessed to have been a part of that. The fact that I love to bird hunt softened him up, but it was the grandkids that fully won his favor.

Jennifer's grandfather died the summer we dated so I was never around him. Randy was the head of the family and protector at least from that summer on. He was the glue that kept the family together, no matter what the crisis was.

He could fix just about anything, a trait Jennifer often wished that I had. I do not know how many broken pieces of furniture or appliances he fixed for us. If Jennifer told him she need-ed something and we could not find one, he would build it.

He adored his grandkids and worried about them constantly. I know their phones will ring a lot less now without Grandpa checking on them. He never missed a county fair and attend-ed a lot of sporting events, school programs and miscellaneous other things. His grandkids were the most important thing in his life.

He and Ruth made quite a team. They complemented each other in many ways, and a stronger partnership was never formed. His love for her was quite apparent. In her last few years when he was her caretaker and protector even when it was not easy. He was there for her and would not have had it any other way.

I mentioned the other word was commitment. Randy was committed to anything he decid-ed to undertake. The one thing I think of is his work with Kansas Gas Service. I do not know how many bird hunts ended with us at his office

while he fixed something. It did not matter whether it was a Saturday or Sunday, he answered the call and took care of the problem. I also remember a lot of late nights when we were visiting, and I heard the phone go off and his footsteps down the hall. His commitment to his work rubbed off on his daughter; you work until the job is done no matter the time of day or the day of the week.

He was also committed to his church. If something needed fixing, he was on it. If the nativity needed to be put out or the Christmas lights turned on, Randy was there. Truly, whatever their little church needed, either Randy or Ruth would take care of it. The same could be said for us when we needed help on the farm. If I asked Randy would make sure he was there.

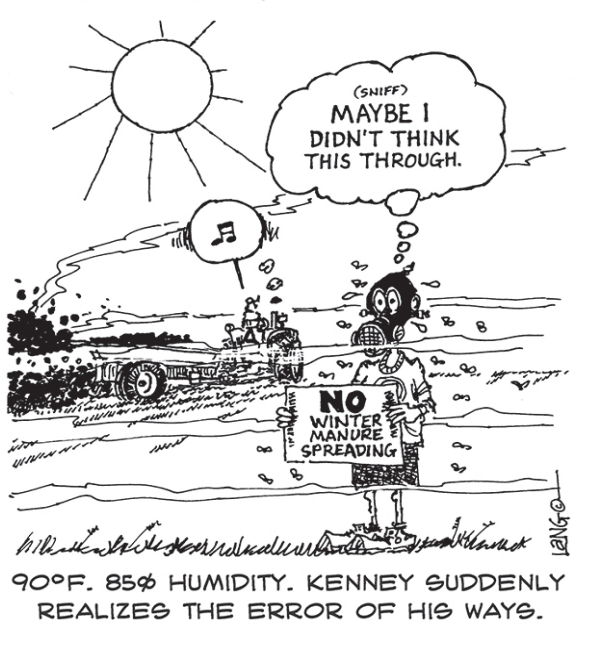
My favorite memories with my father-in-law were out in the field hunting pheasants and quail with our dogs. We both believed in hunting the same way, at a slower pace. We were out there more to watch our dogs work than we were to harvest birds. It was meant to be relaxing, and it was. Over the years we both had several dogs, but the peacefulness of the hunt never changed.

The last eight years he was my father, especially as my own father slipped further into de-mentia. We had deep discussions about family, faith and just about everything else. Our tradition in the last couple of years was to take a road trip to Isaac's annual production sale. He must have had fun because in the second year he just told me he was coming so we could go, he never asked me if I planned to attend. That was okay because I would not have dreamed of missing it.

I keep telling myself that it is much better for him to have gone this way rather than the way my father did. I believe that but the shock was much tougher to take. It is hard to believe that he is gone, that he is not a phone call away. It is difficult to think that we will not play another round of pitch or watch another rodeo.

It was hard to see my wife and kids mourn him and hide my own heartbreak. My father-in-law was one of the best, most honorable, loving men I have ever had in my life. I know that I was blessed to have been a part of his family.

## Corn Time



## EARL...



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## DeRouche honored as Distinguished Alumni at SDSU Ag Week banquet

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Outstanding Extension Specialist, and receiving the American Feed Industry Nonruminant Nutrition Research Award and North Central Region Excellence in 4-H Volunteerism Award among many other honors. DeRouche's commitment to the agriculture industry and his alma mater led to him receiving this most recent recognition.

"I am deeply grateful to the College of Agriculture, Food and Environmental Sciences at South Dakota State University for this

Distinguished Alumni Award," DeRouche said. "The university's land grant commitment to teaching, research and extension has shaped my career and will continue to impact future generations of young professionals. I am truly humbled to be recognized with this distinction."

This is the first year a Distinguished Alumni award was included in the annual Ag Week event. Nominations for all the awards were collected by the CAFES Prexy Council, a group made up

of representatives from student organizations within the college, earlier this spring. The alumni awards were chosen by a committee made up of college alumni, faculty and staff.

A full list of the banquet's honorees can be found on the SDSU news page. More information about the CAFES Prexy Council and the College of Agriculture, Food and Environmental Sciences can be found on their respective websites.

## Every drop counts – Belleville entrepreneur creates app to track water usage

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Redd said that once they have that information she does an audit of their water rights and looks for any special regulations or limitations they might have, organize it all and set up their account. "The next step is to sit down with the producer face to face and clear up any questions I might have. During that time we teach producers how to use it, how to navigate through the system, make sure they understand the app and everything." From there they go out and tag each well with their tokens that must be placed on each meter. "Then at that point, they're off to the races," she said. "They can take meter readings as often as they want to, and then by the end of the year their water use report is basically completed for them."

At this time, the meters must be read manually, but the app works even without cell phone service. "So, standing there at the well, even if you're in a bad spot, you can take your meter reading and know how much water you've used, but more importantly, what do you have left to pump."

Pricing for VandWater is a \$185 per meter annual subscription due yearly on March 1. It's pro-rated for users who sign up throughout the year. The tokens are \$8 apiece and have a lifespan of nine years. Everything automatically resets yearly. Cost-share is available within the bounds

of GMD 1 and GMD 4. "Both of those GMDs have cost-shared VandWater up to fifty percent of our subscription," Redd said. "I think that's a little bit of a testament to what the local producers that sit on those boards think of VandWater and the services we offer."

"I think as a whole, our mission is to empower

producers to make their own decisions on their operations to manage their water," Redd concluded. "VandWater supports them and helps them sleep better at night, knowing there's someone else looking out for them, looking out for the numbers."

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## APHIS releases updated NWS response plan

After receiving extensive industry feedback, the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) has released an updated New World screwworm (NWS) response playbook. The plan was designed as a resource to help federal and state animal health officials manage and adapt their response if NWS is detected in the U.S. The first draft was released in October 2025.

"While we are aggressively safeguarding American agriculture and working with Mexico to prevent further northward spread, we must also ensure that our domestic response plans are ready for immediate activation," said USDA Under Secretary for Marketing and Regulatory

Programs Dudley Hoskins. "Strong coordination with states, producers, veterinarians, sportsmen and other partners is essential to achieving that goal."

The updated plan specifically outlines strategies for coordinating response operations, reducing the spread and preventing the establishment of NWS in new areas, managing the pest in infested animals, implementing NWS fly surveillance and control measures, maintaining business continuity, and supporting efficient information flow and situational awareness.

APHIS gathered feedback from animal health officials; livestock industry

groups, including NCBA; veterinary organizations; and other key stakeholders to prepare the updated playbook. Based on the information received, several key changes were made, including clarifying and expanding terminology; agency roles, responsibilities and authorities; animal movement requirements; and wildlife management.

To maintain alignment with state-level plans and industry practices, APHIS will continue to revise the playbook as preparedness activities advance and evolve. For more information about USDA's efforts to prevent and prepare for NWS, visit [www.screwworm.gov](http://www.screwworm.gov).

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