

Outlook strong despite various hurdles

Inputs and outputs are trending toward records

By RAY COONEY

The Commercial Review

War.
Weather.
Supply chain.
Interest rates.

There are many challenges for farmers as the 2022 growing season gets underway. But with commodity prices at or near record highs, it looks to be a strong year for agriculture producers.

"My outlook right now is positive for most of agriculture," said University of Missouri senior research associate for agricultural and applied economics Sr. Research Associate Ben Brown, who previously worked at Ohio State University. "There's very few commodities that I can look at and say that things are just depressing. I can't say that. What I can say is there's more risk to all of our commodities because the amount of money we're dealing with has grown to an expansive value that I don't think I expected. ...

See **Strong** page 4B



The Commercial Review/Ray Cooney

Sorting plants

Katie Haffner (left) and Kelsey Frantz work Thursday morning in the greenhouse at Jay County Junior-Senior High School. Students spend about 45 minutes each morning tending to the greenhouse. They will hold their annual plant sale from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. May 14, offering a variety of vegetables, herbs, hanging baskets, ferns and flowers.



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Fertilizer crunch risks food supplies

By GEOFFREY KAVITI,
CHINEDU ASADU
and PAUL WISEMAN

Associated Press
KIAMBU COUNTY, Kenya — Monica Kariuki is about ready to give up on farming. What is driving her off her 10 acres of land outside Nairobi isn't bad weather, pests or blight — the traditional agricultural curses — but fertilizer: It costs too much.

Despite thousands of miles separating her from the battlefields of Ukraine, Kariuki and her cabbage, corn and spinach farm are indirect victims of Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion. The war has pushed up the price of natural gas, a key ingredient in fertilizer, and has led to severe sanctions against Russia, a major exporter of fertilizer.

Kariuki used to spend 20,000 Kenyan shillings, or about \$175, to fertilize her entire farm. Now, she would need to spend five times as much. Continuing to work the land, she said, would yield nothing but losses.

"I cannot continue with the farming business. I am quitting farming to try something else," she said.

Higher fertilizer prices are making the world's food supply more expensive and less abundant, as farmers skimp on nutrients for their crops and get lower yields. While the ripples will be felt by grocery shoppers in wealthy countries, the squeeze on food supplies will land hardest on families in poorer countries. It could hardly come at a worse time: The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization said last week that its world food-price index in March reached the highest level since it started in 1990.

The fertilizer crunch threatens to further limit worldwide food supplies, already constrained by the disruption of crucial grain shipments from Ukraine

and Russia. The loss of those affordable supplies of wheat, barley and other grains raises the prospect of food shortages and political instability in Middle Eastern, African and some Asian countries where millions rely on subsidized bread and cheap noodles.

"Food prices will skyrocket because farmers will have to make profit, so what happens to consumers?" said Uche Anyanwu, an agricultural expert at the University of Nigeria.

The aid group Action Aid warns that families in the Horn of Africa are already being driven "to the brink of survival."

The U.N. says Russia is the world's No. 1 exporter of nitrogen fertilizer and No. 2 in phosphorus and potassium fertilizers. Its ally Belarus, also contending with Western sanctions, is another major fertilizer producer.

Many developing countries — including Mongolia, Honduras, Cameroon, Ghana, Senegal, Mexico and Guatemala — rely on Russia for at least a fifth of their imports.

The conflict also has driven up the already-exorbitant price of natural gas, used to make nitrogen fertilizer. The result: European energy prices so high that some fertilizer companies "have closed their businesses and stopped operating their plants," said David Laborde, a researcher at the International Food Policy Research Institute.

For corn and cabbage farmer Jackson Koeth, 55, of Eldoret in western Kenya, the conflict in Ukraine was distant and puzzling until he had to decide whether to go ahead with the planting season. Fertilizer prices had doubled from last year.

Koeth said he decided to keep planting but only on half the acreage of years past. Yet he doubts he can

make a profit with fertilizer so costly.

Greek farmer Dimitris Filis, who grows olives, oranges and lemons, said "you have to search to find" ammonia nitrate and that the cost of fertilizing a 25-acre olive grove has doubled to \$310. While selling his wares at an Athens farm market, he said most farmers plan to skip fertilizing their olive and orange groves this year.

"Many people will not use fertilizers at all, and this as a result, lowers the quality of the production and the production itself, and slowly, slowly at one point, they won't be able to farm their land because there will be no income," Filis said.

In China, the price of potash — potassium-rich salt used as fertilizer — is up 86% from a year earlier. Nitrogen fertilizer prices have climbed 39% and phosphorus fertilizer is up 10%.

"We can hardly make any money," said the manager, who would give only his surname, Zhao.

Terry Farms, which grows produce on 2,100 acres largely in Ventura, California, has seen prices of some fertilizer formulations double; others are up 20%. Shifting fertilizers is risky, vice president William Terry said, because cheaper versions might not give "the crop what it needs as a food source."

As the growing season approaches in Maine, potato farmers are grappling with a 70% to 100% increase in fertilizer prices from last year, depending on the blend.

"I think it's going to be a pretty expensive crop, no matter what you're putting in the ground, from fertilizer to fuel, labor, electrical and everything else," said Donald Flannery, executive director of the Maine Potato Board.

In Prudentopolis, a town

in Brazil's Parana state, farmer Edimilson Rickli showed off a warehouse that would normally be packed with fertilizer bags but has only enough to last a few more weeks. He's worried that, with the war in Ukraine showing no sign of letting up, he'll have to go without fertilizer when he plants wheat, barley and oats next month.

"The question is: Where Brazil is going to buy more fertilizer from?" he said. "We have to find other markets."

Other countries are hoping to help fill the gaps. Nigeria, for example, opened Africa's largest fertilizer factory last month, and the \$2.5 billion plant has already shipped fertilizer to the United States, Brazil, India and Mexico.

India, meanwhile, is seeking more fertilizer imports from Israel, Oman, Canada and Saudi Arabia to make up for lost shipments from Russia and Belarus.

"If the supply shortage gets worse, we will produce less," said Kishor Rungta of the nonprofit Fertiliser Association of India. "That's why we need to look for options to get more fertilizers in the country."

Agricultural firms are providing support for farmers, especially in Africa where poverty often limits access to vital farm inputs. In Kenya, Apollo Agriculture is helping

farmers get fertilizer and access to finance.

"Some farmers are skipping the planting season and others are going into some other ventures such as buying goats to cope," said Benjamin Njenga, co-founder of the firm. "So these support services go a long way for them."


Governments are helping, too. The U.S. Department of Agriculture announced last month that it was issuing \$250 million in grants to support U.S. fertilizer production. The Swiss government has

released part of its nitrogen fertilizer reserves.

Still, there's no easy answer to the double whammy of higher fertilizer prices and limited supplies. The next 12 to 18 months, food researcher LaBorde said, "will be difficult."

The market already was "super, super tight" before the war, said Kathy Mathers of the Fertilizer Institute trade group.

"Unfortunately, in many cases, growers are just happy to get fertilizer at all," she said.



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Strong ...

Continued from page 1B
“Even with high input prices ... the value side ... seems to have been keeping up.”

Factors that are driving up producer costs include interest rate increases and supply chain issues.

Interest rates have gone up and are expected to continue to do so. The Federal Reserve bumped up rates last month — the first increase in three years — to 0.5% from the previous 0.25% and laid out a plan to continue to make gradual increases in an effort to fight inflation.

The result is that land values are decreased, lowering the amount of equity a farmer has available for loans for equipment or other needs. The higher rates also increase debt service, i.e. financing gets more expensive.

Supply chain issues that have impacted virtually all products are hitting the agriculture industry as well. There is a backlog at ports, not enough ships to send products and not enough space to unload ships, Brown said.

As a result, shipping space is going to the highest bidder, which in many cases is not the agriculture industry, he added. Chinese companies, in fact, have been willing to pay increased rates for ships to return to ship more products rather than wait to be reloaded.

“That’s really a symbol of how strong demand of products all around the globe is,” Brown said. “Everybody’s got money that they want to spend on goods.”

Meanwhile, the war in Ukraine has created uncertainty. Ukraine is unable to produce and export its staple commodities, and there are various sanctions against Russian exports.

Ukraine is the world’s leading producer of sunflower oil, which is part of the vegetable oil sector. Because of lack of production coming out of the country, vegetable oil prices, which impact both corn and soybeans, have increased to about 80 cents per pound. In the past, 30 cents per pound had been considered high.

Also, Brazil had its second consecutive year of lower-than-expected soybean yields.

Those factors have pushed commodity prices to near-record highs.

Corn, which was in the low \$3 range per bushel at the height of coronavirus pandemic shutdowns in 2020, has soared to an average price

‘As of right now, we are getting very close to a national average price that we have never seen before in this country.’

—Ben Brown,
University of Missouri

of \$7.90 as of April 11. (The record was \$8.24 in July 2012.)

Soybeans have been on a similar path, nearly doubling in price per bushel in the last two years. Prices have come in around \$17 for the last few weeks. (The high, also in 2012, was \$17.39.)

“As of right now, we are getting very close to a national average price that we have never seen before in this country,” said Brown.

Overall, that means higher costs to produce now and likely stronger returns in the fall — greater risker, greater reward.

In response to those circumstances, some growers have shifted to soybeans and away from corn.

Soybean acreage is expected to be at an all-time high this year. And that’s happening despite market factors favoring corn and the largest crop insurance guarantee ever for the commodity.

“It’s actually happening a little bit more than I anticipated, across the country,” said Brown, adding that he feels it’s the biggest story of the planting season. “Soybeans are a crop that doesn’t take as much input ... but consistently soybeans will have a less volatile yield than corn.”

“There’s a comfort level with soybeans compared to corn.”

“We’re seeing that with some other crops as well, the dry land crops like wheat ... It’s really struggled to keep acres even though we have record high wheat prices.”

So far, though, not much of anything has been planted in eastern Indiana and western Ohio.

The crop progress report the United States Department of Agricul-

ture released Monday shows virtually no acres of corn or soybeans have yet been planted. That’s because of wet and cold weather, with average temperatures hovering around 50. (There was snowfall in Jay County on Monday.)

On average, only 6% of corn and 3% of soybeans are planted by this time each year. So, there’s no cause for concern, yet, but Brown noted that habits may change with fewer days to get crops in the ground.

“Our spring application window just continues to shrink,” he said, referencing fertilizer. “Now if you’ve got a window ... of good weather, you’re probably going to get the planter rolling instead of worrying about fertilizer application.”

He added that because many farmers will not be planting in ideal conditions — while the eastern corn belt is wet, the western corn belt is extremely dry — and may also skip some fertilizer applications, yields are likely to come up short of what trends would project.

The story is much the same for livestock, where costs for producers are high but prices are as well.

Demand for meat has soared since the height of the coronavirus pandemic. That has not changed despite record high prices.

Brown said that when consumers see meat cases in stores empty, it’s not because of a lack of supply. It’s simply selling in a hurry.

“It’s not because we’re not processing meat,” he said. “It’s not because we’re into moving product through the system. ... Demand for meat has just been at such a level that frankly we haven’t seen.”

He said that’s especially surprising given that it has occurred prior to the summer grilling season truly getting underway. So demand is likely to get even greater in the coming months. Eventually, it will have to drop off, but for now Brown is projecting that this year could be special for meat producers, especially those in the beef sector.

“We are now flipping that script a little bit to where some of those profits and prices are beginning to show up at the producer level, especially on cattle,” said Brown. “We could end up in a period later this summer, through the end of the year and into the next year where beef prices could be at an all-time high for producers.”

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Herald Bulletin/Andy Knight

Sam Johnson, owner of Sam's Organic Soil, inspects an English lavender plant on his property north of Anderson. He uses byproducts from the plants in his composting service.

Going organic

Indiana farmers have been embracing methods as demand continues to grow

By **ANDY KNIGHT**

Herald Bulletin (Anderson)

ANDERSON — For Sam Johnson, organic farming isn't only a practical way of protecting the environment. It's also a vital part of a healthy lifestyle.

"My main reason for doing it is just to get away from all these

problems we're having with herbicide and pesticide resistance," Johnson said. "We're just getting back to the natural ways our bodies process food."

Organic farming is becoming undeniably more mainstream in the U.S. agriculture industry. According to an analysis of data in

the USDA's 2019 Survey of Organic Agriculture by commodity.com, the number of organic farms in the U.S. rose by more than 50% in the last decade. The country's estimated 16,500 organic farms now cover about 5.5 million acres, a 38% increase from 2008.

See **Organic** page 6B

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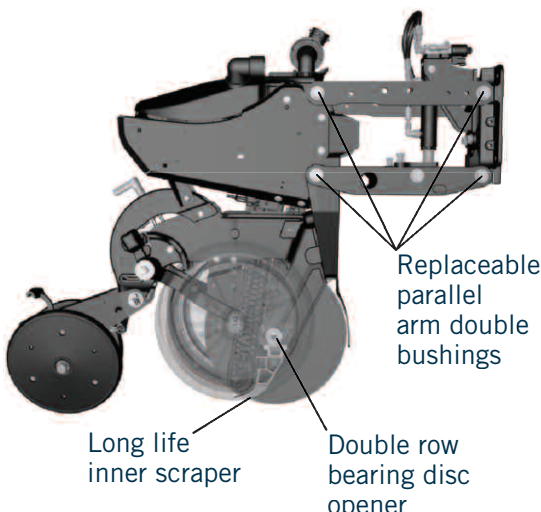
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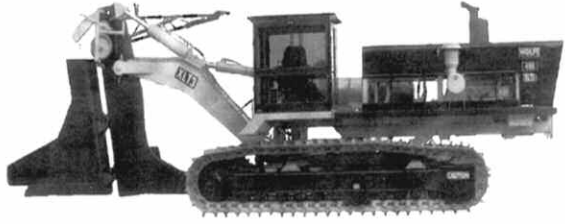
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Organic ...

Continued from page 5B
That growth has mirrored rising consumer demand in the same time frame, with sales of organic products nearly tripling to an estimated \$9.9 billion.

With approximately 600 certified organic farms covering about 43,000 acres, Indiana ranks roughly in the middle of the country in those categories. California, the nation's top state for overall agricultural sales, also leads in organic production, with more than 3,000 farms covering nearly 1 million acres.

Environmental advocates say that while some areas of the country have more temperate climates which make organic farming practices easier to institute and maintain, several other factors should also be considered in evaluating the data.

"Culture, climate, and infrastructure all play a role," said Ashley Adair, an extension organic agriculture specialist at Purdue University. "I think the biggest obstacle for many folks interested in small scale organic farming is land access. In some places land is expensive and the market is competitive. It's a difficult issue to address."

Johnson, a Noblesville native, spent three years managing a hemp farm in Colorado before moving back to the area, settling north of Anderson in part, he said, because the land was so inexpensive compared to other parts of the country.

He started with a 10-acre field, then bought another 10 acres nearby. He currently has about 25 acres that serve as the hub for an organic farm and composting service where, in addition to growing crops that are free from pesticides, he converts food waste into materials that keep soil healthier. Those

practices, he said, help microbes in the soil transport nutrients to plants more effectively.

"The plant won't give up those carbohydrates without these microbes bringing something in return," he said.

When it's not growing season, Johnson keeps cover crops on a portion of his fields to maintain microbe health and keep the soil permeable during the winter months.

"The big thing is, not all those nutrients are readily available for the plants," he said. "We try to pay attention to how we're feeding the bacteria and the fungi, where we're trying to create an environment that they can thrive in, because they will mine these minerals and bring them up (to the plants)."

An overlooked advantage with organic farming practices, many advocates say, is pest control. Healthy soil, the thinking goes, naturally engenders a healthier overall landscape.

"Having that natural landscape healthy is important," said Chuck Pease, who owns Free Folk Farm, a small urban farm in Anderson that supplies local food markets and other outlets with organically grown produce. "You want to have predators of your pests as much as you can."

Pease said he uses physical barriers instead of chemicals to control insects, weeds and other

irritants that can harm crops.

"We are constantly using landscape fabric techniques to control weeds," he said. "Herbicides do move in the water ... they get washed off the field, and I'm sure they degrade at some point. It goes to the surrounding environment, and that environment is important to keep in balance."

Adair noted that, as consumer demand for organically grown products increases, lawmakers — including those in the Indiana General Assembly — can put incentives in place to encourage more farmers to incorporate organic practices into their operations.

She pointed to the USDA's Whole-Farm Revenue Protection Program, which last year added a policy allowing smaller farms — mainly those with less than \$8.5 million in annual revenue — to insure their operations with a simplified record-keeping system. The new policy, she said, should especially help organic farmers who sell their produce locally.

"Historically, small farmers have had virtually no access to crop insurance due to these record-keeping requirements," Adair said. "Policies like this can go a long way to helping farmers transition to organic with the least risk and most reward. We just need to make sure the policies in place are accessible to everyone considering organic farming."

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Continued from page 8B
"Indiana contains 22,403,502 acres. The Yearbook of Indiana for 1917 credits the state with 1,664,886 acres of timberland. This area had shrunk in 1920 to 1,387,248 acres — an average decrease of 92,456 acres. Our area of timber in 1920 was a little over 6% of our area..." said Charles Deam, Indiana's first state forester in the 1922 Dept. of Conservation Annual Report.

Deam also predicted that at the rate at which Indiana's forests were being cleared, Indiana would be treeless within the span of 15 years.

Although thanks to the Classified Forest Program of 1921, which was Indiana's way of protecting the forest and reducing the rate of deforestation, Deam's concern of a treeless Indiana never came to be.

But with the forest protected, this still didn't stop the bleeding of Indiana's maple industry. After World War I, many men still left the farm due to the Great Depression and World War II. With the lack of innovation, the maple industry fell to the wayside of Indiana's major producers.

How to revitalize Indiana's maple syrup industry

One of the biggest issues that held back the maple industry from thriving in Indiana was the number of workers needed to collect the sap from each tree.

If a farm had three workers, but a hundred acres of land to collect from daily, that would be an almost impossible task.

But Hart believes that there is a resurgence in the industry thanks to the innovation of incorporating plastic tubing when collecting maple sap.

"As the plastic industry started to develop, they started experimenting

... the Indiana Maple Syrup Association and Purdue University's College of Agriculture want to bring awareness to consumers and producers of Indiana's growing industry.

with plastic tubing in the woods to plumb all the trees together so they could collect that sap that way. You're starting to see a resurgence of the maple industry because of the advancement of the equipment, that happened a hundred years ago in row cropping, but is now just happening with the maple syrup industry," said Hart.

"You got the plastic industry that's really helped with the collection of sap and efficiency of the collection. On top of that, we've learned that we could put a vacuum on the system which basically keeps a negative pressure going all the time and so that the tree will constantly admit sap as long as it's got the moisture."

Due to these innovations, what once took a few dozen workers to complete could now be completed with a fraction of the labor.

With the help of the grant, the Indiana Maple Syrup Association and Purdue University's College of Agriculture want to bring awareness to consumers and producers of Indiana's growing industry.

"We're trying to identify the consumers of maple syrup in Indiana and the producers in Indiana and try to work to hook those two groups up," said Hart.

"If we're able to increase consumption, then we have to also increase production."

As mentioned earlier,

another area that the pair will focus on is increasing the available land for maple production.

One worry that Hart highlighted was the threat of climate change to the industry.

In order for maple trees to produce sap, the ideal weather conditions are around 40 degrees Fahrenheit during the day and below-freezing temperatures at night, said Hart.

This allows the tree to produce safe-for-consumption sap. If the weather is warmer than ideal condition, the hole that allows the sap to escape will begin to produce bacteria, which could compromise the maple syrup.

Before, Hart would begin sap collecting around the beginning of January, but due to the inconsistent weather of recent years, the collecting season has grown shorter.

For this upcoming season, Hart will begin collecting in late November following research by the University of West Virginia.

At the end of the day, Hart's hope is that every family in Indiana will have a bottle of maple syrup in their fridge.

"Everybody should have maple syrup in their refrigerator. Not just for their pancakes but for their cocktails, for basting their meat, for their teas, for baking and cooking. It should be their go-to natural sweetener."



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Tapping in to syrup

Purdue, Association seek to use grant to help revitalize Indiana industry that was once the largest in the country

By **NOE PADILLA**
Journal & Courier (Lafayette)
LAFAYETTE — For those unfamiliar with the history of Indiana, it might come as a surprise that before World War I, Indiana was the country's largest maple syrup producer, but over the past century it lost that lucrative title.

In hopes of revitalizing the maple syrup industry in Indiana, the Indiana Maple Syrup Association and Purdue University's College of Agriculture have partnered to breathe new life into this once booming industry.

Earlier this year, they were awarded the Acer Access and Development Program grant by the U.S. Department of Agriculture for a total of \$500,000, the most one could receive. The grant aims to help the efforts of states, tribal governments and research institutions to promote the domestic maple syrup industry.

Specifically, the grant aims to promote research and education related to maple syrup production, natural resource sustainability in the industry, market promotion for maple syrup and maple-sap products.

It also encourages owners and operators of privately held land containing species of maple trees to either enter the maple-sugaring market or voluntarily make their land available, either by a lease or other means, to give new farmers access to maple trees.

"We want to get consumer awareness that there's an industry in Indiana and everything, but



Purdue University/Charles Jischke

Seth and Kelci Wright, from Firm Root Farm near Muncie, Indiana, work on maple syrup tubing that collects sap water. By using gravity, they are able to collect sap from many trees in one spot, saving on labor to gather from individual bags.

we also want to get more producers. The producers of Indiana are aging out, and there are not a lot of people getting into it. The problem is you have to have the trees. You can't just go out and plant a maple tree and have an orchard in eight years. It takes 40 years for that tree to get big enough to tap. So, it's not something anybody can do really in a lifetime," said Kevin Hart, the president of the Indiana Maple Syrup Association.

"New producers that come into it and everything, they need access to

those trees. You have a lot of farms that are cash rented for row cropping but have wood lots in them. Whether it's ravines that can't be tilled or low ground that has wood lots that can't be tilled. What we're hoping there is (to) make it aware to the landowners or the cash renters that during the off-season there is a potential for income off that unused land other than for timber."

What happened to Indiana's maple industry?

When settlers first

arrived in Indiana, the state was covered in trees. According to the Indiana Department of Natural Resources, in 1800 around 19.8 million acres of Indiana were covered by forest. The state as a whole had approximately 22.4 million acres of land; around 85% was forested.

Most of central Indiana was covered with beech and maple trees. This abundance of maple trees led to many small farms becoming maple producers inadvertently, said Hart.

"A lot of small family

farms in the state at the time (the late 1800s – early 1900s), and we had a lot more trees. Probably just about every farm made syrup because that was the sweetener that they had available. They had sugar cane and sugar beets, but that wasn't available to settlers and residences in Indiana at the time. The alternative was maple because we had the maple trees," said Hart.

Due to this abundance of maple producers, Indiana unintentionally had become the nation's

largest producer of maple syrup. But with the turn of the century, this title wasn't meant to last.

With the call of World War I, many of the men who had worked these maple farms left to join the war effort. At the time, maple farming was a labor-intensive job, which also needed amounts of workers to go out and collect the maple buckets, Hart said.

On top of the decrease in labor, much of the forest across Indiana was being chopped down.

See **Syrup** page 7B

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