



Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Mike Naig presents to a House appropriations subcommittee Jan. 29. (Cami Koons/Iowa Capital Dispatch)

Iowa Ag department asks for budget increase to expand Choose Iowa

By Cami Koons,
Iowa Capital Dispatch

DES MOINES -- The Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship asked lawmakers for a \$1.3 million increase to its total operating fund, with a bulk of the requested funding to cover operational costs and expansions to the Choose Iowa program.

Secretary of Agriculture Mike Naig spoke to a House appropriations subcommittee Thursday about the state's local food marketing program, the department's ongoing work to combat foreign animal diseases and water quality.

Naig has also proposed a comprehensive bill that would offer certain agricultural tax reliefs, further expand Choose Iowa, create agritourism definitions and enhance biosecurity responses. This "Iowa Farm Act" as it is nicknamed, advanced from a subcommittee Wednesday with broad support from agriculture industry groups.

CHOOSE IOWA

The majority of the department's 1.6% budget increase request, slightly over \$1 million, will go to operational costs and \$300,000 of the request is slated to expand Choose Iowa.

Naig said the operational costs cover a 2% across-the-board salary increase, a rise in health insurance costs, workers compensation and association fees.

"These are all things that we don't control," Naig said.

The \$300,000 request for the Choose Iowa program would help develop a retail and distribution system within the program, which Naig said would help growers sell larger quantities of their products "on a more predictive basis." He said part of this funding would also pay for a staff member who could facilitate retail and distribution infrastructure with members.

Choose Iowa is a state-run marketing program for local food producers to help promote Iowa-raised products. Choose Iowa also offers grants to these producers to help them expand their businesses.

Naig asked legislators to maintain funding for the rest of the program, the majority of which

goes to grants for dairy innovation, butchery innovation, value added products and the farm to food bank program.

According to the 2025 Choose Iowa report, every \$1 in state-funded grants had a \$1.97 private investment match. In total, 97 Choose Iowa members benefitted from the grant programs in 2025.

The report shows Choose Iowa has more than 300 members across 86 counties. Naig said the program, which started in 2023, saw 113% growth in membership in 2025.

"What we're finding is there's a real opportunity here for beginning, small, young farmers," Naig said. "A lot of rural impact here as well, it's growing an economy, it's creating more market opportunities for folks, and it's giving Iowans something they're looking for."

House Study Bill 588, Naig's proposed farm act for the state, would additionally expand the Choose Iowa program and establish a Choose Iowa school purchasing program to help schools purchase Iowa-grown protein, dairy, grain, produce, honey and eggs.

The department has conducted a pilot version of the school program, but it is not part of the department's funding request for the fiscal year. Specialty and small-sized farm operators have advocated for permanent funding for the program, especially after a similar federal program was canceled at the beginning of 2025.

The farm act would also prioritize young and beginning farmers for Choose Iowa grants.

FOREIGN ANIMAL DISEASE

Naig did not ask for an increase related to the department's responses to foreign animal diseases, but he said it is a constant threat.

Since 2022, IDALS has responded to ongoing outbreaks of the highly pathogenic avian influenza, which has affected more than 187 million domestic birds across the country since the start of the outbreak.

Naig said the department responded to foreign animal disease pressures, including the bird flu, for 80% of the year in 2022, 70% of the year in 2023, 60% of the year in

2024 and for almost 90% of 2025.

"This used to be something that you might deal with from time to time," Naig said. "It is something that we're dealing with – if we're not actively in a response, we are preparing for a response."

IDALS has already responded to two outbreaks of bird flu, both in Kossuth County, in 2026.

The fiscal year 2026 appropriations bill for the department, approved by lawmakers during the 2025 legislative session, created an Iowa Animal Disease Prevention fund, largely because of the threat of the highly pathogenic avian influenza.

Naig said IDALS was able to hire an additional assistant state veterinarian, a foreign animal disease response manager and acquire the equipment necessary to respond to outbreaks.

Many HPAI outbreaks in Iowa require the culling and disposing of thousands of birds at a time. In addition to highly pathogenic avian influenza, there are new threats that Naig said "aren't theoretical" like African swine fever, foot-and-mouth disease and the new world screwworm.

"Any one of those issues, even if it arrives in the United States somewhere other than Iowa, or even far away from Iowa, has an impact on us, because we're so connected to the country when it comes to livestock production," Naig said. "...It's a real threat, and we have to constantly be prepared for it."

HB 588, the Iowa farm act, would authorize the department to lease facilities to store the equipment used to respond to these outbreaks and give producers confidentiality when they report a foreign animal disease.

The bill also calls for a loan repayment program for Iowa veterinarians to help respond to what Naig said is a growing need for veterinarians in rural areas and across the state.

WATER QUALITY

According to IDALS' annual report on soil conservation and water quality, the department supported more than \$34.3 million in soil and water cost-share pro-

grams in 2025.

Naig said these programs continue to expand under the department as nutrient reduction strategies become more understood by Iowans.

The report notes that to date, the state has completed 147 wetland projects, with 94 more in development and has completed nearly 500 saturated buffers and bioreactors, with another 200 in development.

Naig said these projects leverage state, federal and private resources.

Rep. Adam Zabner, D-Iowa City, asked Naig how the department measures the outcomes of water quality initiatives and more pointedly, if he believes water quality is improving in Iowa.

Naig said progress is shown in the number of acres planted with cover crops or covered with wetlands, and in

the change in producer attitude toward adopting the programs. He also pointed to stream and lake monitoring from the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, which shows water quality data information over time.

"It's improving," Naig said the monitoring shows.

Naig said the state has "nearly achieved" its phosphorus reduction goals under the Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy, but nitrate reduction goals have been "tougher."

Part of the difficulty, he explained, is that prior to the onset of the Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy, nitrate was not a priority in soil and water conservation.

Things like water quality wetlands, bioreactors and saturated buffers are now a focus of the department, but they

haven't always been, according to Naig.

"We have, honestly in the past, and historically, said 'We've got to get rid of water as fast as we can,'" Naig said. "And now we're saying, we really need to filter water, we need to demineralize water, and those are different concepts."

Naig said data points around project implementation are "good indicators" because each point shows a new person that adopted these practices. Plus, according to the department's report for 2025, the number of projects it is able to help facilitate continues to increase.

"Clean water is non-negotiable," Naig said. "It is an absolute essential ... We need an approach that modernizes that whole system, from the farm to the faucet."

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STATE OF IOWA: COUNTY OF IOWA

January 23, 2026

The Iowa County Board of Supervisors met on January 23, 2026. Heitshusen called the meeting to order at 9:00 a.m. Degen, Heitshusen, Maas, Montross, and Meyer was all present.

Motion by Montross, seconded by Maas to **approve the agenda**. All aye, motion carried.

Motion by Montross, seconded by Maas to **approve the minutes** from January 16, 2026. All aye, motion carried.

Chair note: The board approved claims paid with warrant numbers 44494 - 44621 and handwritten claims paid with warrant numbers 44494 - 44621.

Motion by Montross, seconded by Maas to **accept resignation of Keith Stanerson as Hilton Township Trustee** effective January 1, 2026. All aye, motion carried.

Motion by Maas, seconded by Montross to **appoint Dan Pope as replacement Hilton Township Trustee** effective immediately. All aye, motion carried.

Motion by Meyer, seconded by Montross to **appoint newly hired E911 Director, Marisa Montgomery to the Radio Governance Board**, effective immediately. All aye, motion carried.

Motion by Montross, seconded by New Century fixed bid as follows:

Gasohol 20,000 gallons \$2.25/gallon

Diesel Ultra LS Diesel #1 50,000 gallons \$2.82/gallon

Diesel Ultra LS Diesel #2 50,000 gallons \$2.62/gallon

Additive DEF Additive 2,000 gallons \$1.99/gallon

Additive Premium Additive as needed \$0.05

Additive Winter Additive as needed \$0.04

All aye, motion carried.

Recess at 9:36 a.m.

Chairwoman Heitshusen called meeting back to order at 9:48 a.m.

Becky Fry, Iowa County Transportation director, met with the board to present monthly department update.

Deanna Robinson, ECICOG Executive Director, met with the board to present their annual report and present FY27 funding request for \$3,900.

Motion by Montross, seconded by Maas to **approve ECICOG funding request of \$3,900 for FY27**. All aye, motion carried.

Laura Sauer, Iowa County Community Development met with the board to present annual report and discussed previous and new and upcoming projects.

Heidi Kuhl, Northland Securities was present for the meeting via phone to answer any possible questions or concerns with regards to Resolution 2026-01-23 if needed.

Motion by Montross, seconded by Degen to **pass, adopt and approve Resolution 2026-01-23** for Resolution approving Distribution of the Preliminary Official Statement as follows:

Resolution 2026-01-23

RESOLUTION APPROVING DISTRIBUTION OF THE PRELIMINARY OFFICIAL STATEMENT

WHEREAS, in connection with the Underwriter, Northland Securities, Inc., the County has caused a Preliminary Official Statement to be prepared outlining the details of the proposed sale of the Notes; and

WHEREAS, the Board deems it in the best interests of the County and the residents thereof to approve the distribution of the Preliminary Official Statement in connection with the proposed sale of the Notes.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT

RESOLVED, BY THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS OF IOWA COUNTY, STATE OF IOWA:

Section 1. That the Preliminary Official Statement in the form presented to this meeting be and the same hereby is

approved as to form and deemed final for purposes of Rule 15c2-12 of the Securities and Exchange Commission,

subject to such revisions, corrections or

modifications as the Chairperson and

Auditor, upon the advice of bond

counsel and the Underwriter, shall

determine to be appropriate, and is

authorized to be distributed in

connection with the offering of the Notes for sale.

Motion by Montross, seconded by Degen to **adjourn** at 10:34 a.m. All aye, motion carried.

Kevin Heitshusen, Chairman

Brandy Enochson, Auditor

Minutes are unofficial until approved at the next Board Meeting.

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