

Iowa Department of Agriculture asks for budget increase to expand the Choose Iowa program

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,



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

but it is not part 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 screw-worm.

“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.”

HSB 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 programs 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 denitrify 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.”

UnityPoint raises \$4.1 million to renovate obstetrics unit

UnityPoint Health

GRINNELL — After a 2.5-year effort, UnityPoint Health — Grinnell Regional Medical Center Foundation completed its Delivering Our Future capital campaign for the expansion and renovation of GRMC’s obstetrics unit.

Funding for the \$4.1 million project came from a variety of sources: federal and state grants, donations and pledges from local businesses and community members and spendable distributions from the GRMC Endowment as directed by the GRMC Foundation board of directors.

This project is essential to the continuation of the maternity services provided in GRMC’s hospital and clinics. With a fourth labor, delivery, recovery and postpartum room, existing rooms right-sized and a redesign of the unit to increase efficiencies, GRMC will be well-positioned to welcome up to 400 new babies annually after the project is completed.

“The GRMC Foundation is very grateful to the 282 donors in our region (which includes more than 60 UnityPoint Health — Grinnell team members) who together donated more than \$930,000 for this vital project,” said Donna Fischer, director of de-

velopment.

“Their commitment to ensuring that GRMC can deliver an increasing number of babies close to home is inspiring,” said Fischer. “In particular, I salute Echo and the late Larry Jansen for catching the vision before the campaign even began and committed the first \$50,000 toward our goal.

“I also extend heartfelt thanks to the following longtime supporters: the estate of F. Addison Jones, F. Austin and Kim Jones and Grinnell State Bank for their combined commitment of \$50,000 as well as Grinnell College and Grinnell Mutual for their donations of \$100,000 each. And a special note of thanks to the very generous anonymous donor who contributed more than \$200,000 to the campaign.”

The Delivering Our Future campaign began in June 2023 with an initial goal of \$2.5 million. The decision to expand and renovate the OB project was born out of the GRMC board of directors’ decision to continue providing and growing this vital service to our region.

“I’m grateful to the GRMC board of directors for their vision and to the community members, local businesses and area legislators who have supported it,” said David-Paul Cavazos, UnityPoint Health — Grinnell president.

GRMC is proud to be able to increase our maternal health services to the families in this region thanks to the support of people and organizations in our communities. They are truly a part of creating something very special here at GRMC that will benefit generations to come.”

Pregnant women living in rural Iowa face unprecedented barriers to maternity care. As of November 2025, 62% of rural Iowa hospitals no longer have an OB unit, leaving only 35 rural hospitals still providing OB care.

In addition, 33% of counties in Iowa have no OB providers and no facilities offering delivery care, leaving women driving an average of 30 minutes to a birthing hospital.

GRMC is the only hospital with a labor and delivery unit in Poweshiek, Marshall, Iowa, Jasper and Tama counties. In 2020, 155 babies were born at GRMC, and that number has steadily increased each year since, with 326 babies born at GRMC in 2025 — a 31% increase over the previous year and a 116.7% increase from 2020.

Phase I of the obstetrics unit expansion and renovation project is nearly complete, providing a newly extended entrance to the unit and

a new postpartum/recovery room and clean supply room. The next phase is anticipated to begin in early 2026 and subsequent phases will begin as each preceding phase reaches completion.

GRMC anticipates completing all construction in 2027. Once all phases of the project are completed, the GRMC Foundation will schedule a ribbon cutting and donor recognition ceremony. Follow the progress of the construction online at uph.link/DeliveringOurFuture or follow UnityPoint Health — Grinnell on Facebook for project updates.

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