

Picture perfect day for Dunning Jr. Rodeo

Story & Pictures By:
Linda Teahon

It was a perfect weather day to rodeo at the July 4th Dunning Jr. Rodeo. Around 100 young cowboys and cowgirls competed in steer riding, goat tail untying, barrels, poles, goat tying, break away roping, dummy roping and team roping.

The competition started promptly at 9 a.m. and finished at 1:30 p.m.

Kallan Cox from Purdum, riding her horse Turbo, presented the American flag to all during the playing of the National Anthem.

Contestants came from all across Nebraska. The spectators consisted of parents, grandparents and many other family members.

Jayda Jordan, age 8, of Arnold riding Shorty, made quite an impression with a clean run in the girl's age 7-10 pole bending.

A local buckle winner of the age 0-6 girls was Cia Boeser. Her brother Trig Boeser won a head stall for the age group 11-14 boys.

This youth rodeo was established in 1955 and remains strong with many volunteers and sponsorship from local area businesses and individuals.



Scholarships awarded at 84th annual convention

For 83 years, the Sandhills Cattle Association has been holding its annual membership meeting, but over the years, we've added a trade show, cattle contests, educational speakers, and entertainment. Due to changing times and other reasons, we decided to make things a little different this year. On June 15th at the Cherry County Fairgrounds in Valentine, NE, we held our 84th Annual Convention & Banquet. We started the evening with a cocktail hour by Corner Pub & viewed all of the silent auction items. Then the Executive Board held the annual membership meeting. We updated our members on what the Sandhills Cattle Association has been doing this past year and welcomed Rick Marlatt as our 23-24 president.

Thank you to Dave & Brenda Masek for grilling and serving a delicious dinner. It was some of the best steaks we've had and our banquet wouldn't have been successful without them.

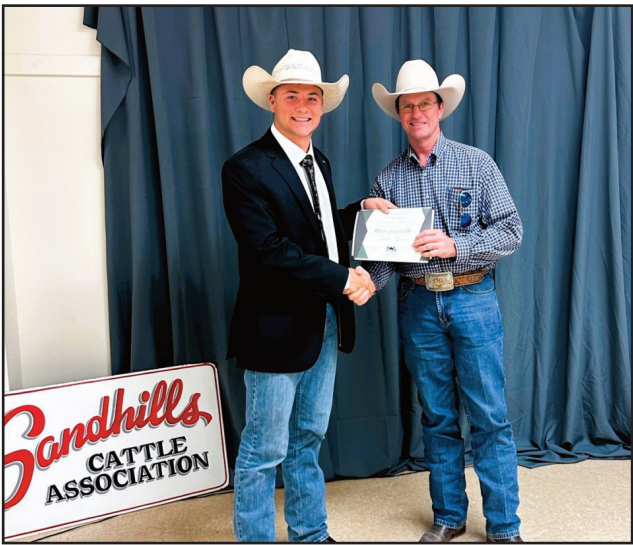
Clay Patton, Farm Broadcaster with KRVN, was our emcee for the evening and he spoke about the markets and

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COURTESY PHOTO

Megan Amos receiving her scholarship.



COURTESY PHOTO

Lance Jones receiving his scholarship.

Thomas County Fair

July 24 - 30, 2023

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Arrival of large-scale solar projects in Nebraska met with resistance

Story By: Nancy Gaarder
Flatwater Free Press

Dan Griffith is just scraping by.

His work restoring windmills and the income from his farmland has kept the lights on, he said, but not much more.

That could change - if Griffith's plans survive one of the latest controversies to grip rural Nebraska.

Griffith's 160 acres in Lancaster County, typically planted with corn and soybeans, are prime real estate for Nebraska's newest "cash crop": solar power.

"I've been working dead-end jobs since I got out of college," said Griffith, 40. "With the solar farm, once it gets going, I could see maybe in excess of six figures a year - steadily."

Long after wind power arrived in the state, large-scale solar energy is reaching Nebraska, with the first major project going on line next year. The 81-megawatt project will supply power to the Omaha Public Power District through solar panels situated across 500 acres. Six other large-scale projects are in the works, including the one Griffith is banking on in Lancaster County.

But where Griffith and others see opportunity, even necessity, some rural residents see betrayal. And it has sparked a backlash across the state, resulting in a lawsuit in Lancaster County, the recall of an elected official in Saunders County and solar zoning regulations in Kearney and Gage counties that are among some of the most restrictive in the nation.

The resistance factored into an OPPD proposal to back off its explicit commitment to add significant amounts of solar power. Instead the utility proposes to commit to "non-emitting" fuel, a change that it says will also give it more flexibility in responding to market conditions.

With solar, as with wind, Nebraska is at a crossroads: How - and whether - to integrate large-scale solar energy into the fabric of rural life? The issue is dividing communities in Nebraska and nationally as it raises larger questions about land rights, economic growth and the health of the planet.

Solar is not new in Nebraska. There are numerous small projects across the state and about 20 that generate at least 1 megawatt, according to the Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy. That includes Norfolk's 8.5 megawatt site, currently Nebraska's largest.

But the seven projects in the pipeline are exponentially larger than existing ones. If all materialize, they would generate about 1,900 megawatts of solar power, enough to equal about 18% of Nebraska's electric generation capacity as of 2021, based on state and federal data.

Whether they all materialize in light of the coalescing opposition remains to be seen.

The soon-to-be-completed Saunders County project and a much larger one getting underway in Cass County withstood challenges by some residents.

In Lancaster County, landowners opposing the \$320 million, 1,800-acre Salt Creek Solar project have filed a lawsuit seeking to stop it. They argue that they purchased their acreages based on documents indicating that the adjoining land would remain agricultural.

"The lawsuit brought by the homeowners is not in opposition to solar power or the planned solar facility as a whole," said their attorney, Damien J. Wright. "Rather, the lawsuit relates to whether solar-related equipment can be installed on outlots located within the subdivisions that were specifically reserved for agricultural and rural use."



Nebraska's largest operating solar farm is an 8.5 megawatt facility on the west side of Norfolk that went on line in 2022. It is a partnership between Norfolk and the Nebraska Public Power District and can power about 1,250 homes when operating at full capacity on a sunny day. Trees, shrubs and other landscaping are planned as a screen between the panels and the public's view. Next year, a facility in Saunders County will go on line and become the largest operating solar farm in the state.

Photo courtesy of the City of Norfolk

Attorneys representing the solar developer and four landowners contend that solar is indeed an agricultural use: "Salt Creek's project will harvest a natural resource, the sun," the attorneys wrote in court documents.

A judge is currently considering the case.

In Saunders County, Teresa Akeson and some of her neighbors tried to stop the project being developed for OPPD.

"The desire by big-money business to do and get what they want overruns local governments - all the way down to the little guy just trying to do the best they can for their families," said Akeson. Like many of those on both sides of the issue, Akeson's family has farmed in Nebraska for generations.

OPPD is experiencing unprecedented growth, and its leaders say it must double its output in the next decade. Renewable energy is among the most cost-effective solutions, according to OPPD.

When opponents failed to stop the project, they turned their attention to longtime Saunders

County Board Member Doris Karloff, whose family owns property where the solar farm is being built. Karloff recused herself from the board discussion and the vote, which was unanimous. Still, her neighbors vented their anger by recalling her from office in 2021. Karloff could not be reached for comment.

Opposition in a few counties has been so intense, officials have enacted extensive buffer zones between solar panels and the homes of non-participating landowners.

Kearney County has required a quarter-mile buffer for several years. At the end of May, Gage County adopted regulations that include a half-mile buffer.

Emily Haxby, a Gage County board member who has worked for stricter regulation of renewables, said solar developers can "shrink" the setbacks by securing waivers from neighboring landowners, including, possibly by paying those landowners.

"I'm a fifth-generation farmer and I want to protect what I'm going to be

passing along to my, hopefully, next generation," she said. "I want to make regulations based on community decisions."

The Gage and Kearney County setbacks are among the strictest solar buffer zones in the nation, said Matthew Eisensohn, an attorney who leads the Renewable Energy Legal Defense Initiative at New York's Columbia University.

Outside of those two counties, Eisensohn said Nebraska "appears to have relatively few serious restrictions on solar energy."

One of the primary criticisms of solar power is the amount of land it requires and whether renewable energy is a proper use of that land.

"(Solar) doesn't produce electricity 24 hours a day, and they are trying to put it on the best dryland ag land in the state," said Duane Murdoch, who is in his third term on the Cass County Board. "If you put it on poor land, I'm all for it."

Utilities say solar is valuable because it generates power during the day when electrical demand

is highest and it does so at a lower cost than building a coal or nuclear plant.

Some opponents go a step further than Murdoch and say large-scale solar doesn't belong in rural areas.

"When you move out to the country, ag is there, it's not a new industry," said Haxby. "You're making an informed decision that farming will occur in the place you are choosing to live. When you bring in a new industry, that's not something you choose to live next to."

Griffith, one of the landowners hoping to lease his property for the Lancaster County project and whose land is not a target of that lawsuit, said neighboring acreages shouldn't be able to dictate how he uses his land.

"(Neighbors) are fighting it tooth and nail because they think they have more say over it because of their 5 acres, quite honestly," he said.

Murdoch was among those who lobbied for stricter setbacks when Cass County wrote zon-