Decades of groundwater depletion mean hard choices ahead for states

By Tim Anderson (tanderson@csg.org)

On a recent visit to the western Kansas town of Garden City, Burke Griggs asked local leaders a question that may have first sounded like a joke. “Where do you plan on moving Garden City in 50 years?” asked Griggs, a leading expert on water law.

He was deadly serious, though, about a problem that the Washburn School of Law professor says a growing number of communities will face in the coming years and decades without shifts in how a state manages, allocates and conserves its resources, particularly groundwater.

“You can’t think about a hundred years of urban planning on 40 years of water,” he said.

“And it’s a problem that’s facing the Great Plains as a whole. If we don’t start refocusing our water policy around our public, we’re going to be in serious trouble.”


He said one county in his state is on pace to lose its groundwater in as little as seven years. In other areas, estimates show that a continued depletion of the Ogallala Aquifer means a total loss in 10, 14 or 50 years.

“All of this started with over-allocation of water resources back in the days when we didn’t know what we were doing,” Highland said. “Nobody’s to blame. It happened. Now we’ve got to deal with it.”

‘GENERATIONAL TEST OF OUR DEMOCRACY’

Addressing the problem of limited, and dwindling, groundwater resources was the focus of the recent MLC session. Kansas Sen. Carolyn McGinn, who chose water policy to be the subject of her 2022 MLC Chair’s Initiative, joined three panelists in leading the discussion.

“It offers a generational test of our democracy,” Lucas Bessire said about the challenge of water scarcity. He grew up in southwest Kansas, on a farm where generations of his family were raised and relied on what seemed like an endless supply of water from underground.

“My great-grandfather was an early pioneer in deep-well irrigation,” Bessire said. “He believed the water would never run out, and he pumped it.”

The region’s state and provincial legislators will next meet July 9-12, 2023, in Detroit.
It's going to take a lot of inventiveness, " he said. "That is really tough for you making policy in the states, to make sure the policy works in all these different communities."

Chinni's message to legislators: The varying needs and realities of these diverse sets of communities need to be taken into account by government and politics. "What's happened is we've increasingly moved to places of like-minded people, places with people like ourselves," Chinni said during his keynote presentation at the Midwestern Legislative Conference Annual Meeting.

The impact of this geographic self-sorting has been compounded by other trends: the rise of social media and niche marketing, and a subsequent big shift in how people consume their information. "The net result is we don't just live in different communities; we live in different realities," Chinni said.

Through his work as director of the American Communities Project, Chinni uses a mix of data analysis and on-the-ground reporting to explore these differences. For example, he classifies the nation's 3,106 counties into one of 15 "types." The political, cultural and socioeconomic disparities among these varying community types are often stark, as Chinni showed by honing in on a single Midwestern state, Kansas, the site of this year's MLC Annual Meeting.

In Kansas' 23 "aging farmlands" counties, less than one-quarter of the residents have bachelor's degrees, and the median household income is $50,372 a year. Compare that to Kansas' single "exurban" county (Johnson), where people are more than twice as likely to have a college degree and median household income levels are $40,000 higher. Kansas also has areas classified as "working class," "rural middle America," "Hispanic centers," "evangelical hubs," "college towns," "big cities" and "African American South."

The same kind of diversity exists across the country. Some of these U.S. communities have considerable internal wealth, as measured by factors such as asset ownership (dividends, interest and collected rent). In others, community wealth is paltry. Another striking difference is seen in communities' number of intensive care posts. In Kansas, there are 486 in the exurban county versus 39 in the rural farmland county.

"There is a desire for the country to come back together again, to get everybody back to the same page, and to have a return to normalcy," Chinni said. "But these differences are really deeply woven into these communities, on an economic level, on a cultural level, and those differences are growing."

Navigating these divisions requires strong political leadership, he said, and an end to the "all or nothing game" often seen in politics today.

**CHINNI: DEEP DIVIDES IN THE COUNTRY ARE REAL, AND WILL ONLY CLOSE WITH SOUND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP**

At the dawn of the internet era, one may have thought that "place" would soon no longer matter. "You're a citizen of the online world," Dante Chinni said during a July talk to legislators. "You could read whatever newspaper you want to online and communicate with your groups of affinity online."

But as it turns out, in many respects, where a person lives is more relevant today than ever before — including how he or she views government and politics. "What's happened is we've increasingly moved to places of like-minded people, places with people like ourselves," Chinni said during his keynote presentation at the Midwestern Legislative Conference Annual Meeting.

"What does it mean to be a good person?" Brands asked. "What does the good man do in the face of evil? What do you do when you see something in your world that isn't right?"

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"When you see [the presidents] together, what they have in common is so much more powerful than anything that divides them," Gibbs said — yet another valuable lesson during today's turbulent political era. "I don't think a democracy can function if its citizens don't trust each other." Gibbs said. "Helplessness is a dangerous disease in a democracy, incredibly dangerous."

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**HISTORIAN H.W. BRANDS TAKES AUDIENCE BACK TO THE 19TH CENTURY, WITH MORAL QUESTIONS FOR THE AGES**

On the surface, John Brown and Abraham Lincoln had little in common beyond their loathing of slavery and births in the 19th century’s opening decade. A closer look reveals they’re more like mirror images of each other, and still pose relevant moral questions for 21st-century Americans to ponder, historian and award-winning author H.W. Brands said in July to lawmakers at the Midwestern Legislative Conference Annual Meeting in Wichita.

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it like there was no tomorrow." To this day, Bessire added, some common "myths" persist, standing in the way of the policy adjustments needed to "cut groundwater consumption to sustainable levels."

Among those myths: Family farmers are responsible for the problem and don’t want to address it, and only continued depletion of the Ogallala Aquifer makes economic sense for these producers. "Farmers know it’s a problem; they know what to do about it," said Bessire, author of the book "Running Out: In Search of Water on the High Plains."

"They also realize individual action is insufficient to [address] the scale of depletion. In other words, depletion cannot be solved by policies that only incentivize voluntary, individual actions by producers," according to Bessire, the interests of far-away agribusiness owners and commodity-market investors have held too much sway — at the expense of local farmers, business owners and residents. For independent producers, growing irrigated corn in a dry range can sometimes feel like betting against a stacked deck," he said. "Most of our losses are papered over by farm subsidies, crop insurance and bank loans. Such aid can compel farmers to double down on wasteful practices, but even most of these short-term gains don’t stay in our communities."

A FRAMEWORK FOR RESHAPING STATE WATER POLICY

A restructuring of farming finance was one of several ideas offered by Bessire to end what he called a current "race to the bottom." He also said states must have policies and water-permitting systems that reflect "the real value of groundwater," and must ensure that any incentives for reducing water use be tied to "collective, fair and enforceable benchmarks."

Another priority of Bessire’s: ensuring that local groundwater districts (such as those in place in Kansas) represent all interests in the community, not just a select few water users. In Kansas, Rep. Highland led the work of a special legislative committee that took a deep-dive into Kansas’ water challenges and future. That led to this year’s introduction of HB 2686. It did not pass, but Highland expects many of the proposals to reappear in future sessions — creating a cabinet-level Department of Water and Environment, imposing new or increased fees on water users to raise revenue for water conservation and recovery, requiring groundwater districts to develop plans to reduce groundwater declines by 50 percent, and demanding more reporting by these districts as well as additional state oversight. "Good bills take time," said Highland. "We all know that, and I think we’ve laid the groundwork." According to Griggs, groundwater depletion should no longer be thought of as only a "western" or "Great Plains" problem. It is spreading. For example, the most recent interstate disputes have involved Georgia, Florida, Tennessee and Mississippi. "If you’ve ever been to these regions, you know they’re not lacking for water, but what they’re lacking is regular precipitation," Griggs said. "And one of the things that groundwater does is allow producers to irrigate when they need to."

With a state, he urged lawmakers to craft policies with the view of groundwater, just like surface water, as a public resource. "Dairies move. Meat plants burn down and move. Farms move, he said. "But cities can’t move. Neither can rural communities."
Before the COVID-19 pandemic began, federal, state and provincial policymakers recognized and began responding to a growing need for mental health services among school-age children.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found in 2019 that persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness among high school students had increased 40 percent since 2009; over that same decade of time, the number of young people who reported planning a suicide in the past year had risen by 44 percent.

Kansas was among the many states that began trying to address this public health problem, one that has only worsened due to the many effects of COVID-19. In 2018, legislators launched the Mental Health Intervention Team Pilot Program, authorizing $10 million to deliver mental health services directly to K-12 students in Kansas. The pilot initiative began in nine school districts, including the state’s largest, Wichita Public Schools. (As of December 2021, 55 districts were participating.)

Three people leading the new effort in Wichita were featured speakers at a July meeting of the Midwestern Legislative Conference Health and Human Services Committee: Stephanie Anderson, program specialist for school counselors; Holly Yager, program specialist for school psychologists; and Melissa Ziemermmann, director of behavior. Wichita Public Schools began in 23 school buildings in neighborhoods identified as having the greatest needs; it later expanded to 37 buildings for the 2021-22 school year.

In all, Wichita Public Schools serves 47,334 students, 77 percent of whom come from homes at or below the federal poverty level. Its goals with the new state dollars: provide each school with mental health professionals, and connect students and their families to nearby services and providers.

Students are seeking the newly available help, Ziemermmann said. In 2021-22, the school’s crisis counselors, psychologists and social workers provided more than 100,000 mental health services. “Mental health is not remove” among reasons for students seeking the help, Anderson said, adding that de-escalation of anger or grief also ranks high among students’ needs.

Yager said the district has also used a mix of state and federal funding to:

- train teachers and staff to recognize mental health problems among young people and how to intervene;
- create a district-wide crisis response team;
- begin community outreach efforts to designate such seeking help for mental health; and
- create suicide prevention programs, including a system to monitor the district’s WiFi system for search terms indicating a possible safety concern. In 2021-22, 36,040 such alerts were released by the district’s monitoring team, with 1,054 referred for specific schools for follow-up.

The overall program is showing some success; of 672 students in the program, not one has dropped out of school, Ziemermmann said. The district said the district tries to reach students of all ages, but one key to destigmatizing mental health services is connecting with high school students on their preferred social media platforms. They, in turn, can influence their peers or younger siblings more than teachers or even parents.

The impact of athletics and other famous people who talk about mental illness on social media is also helping. “It’s a slow crawl, but it helps,” Anderson added.

“We really emphasize relationships” to better both students’ mental health and connections to the broader community, Ziemermmann added.

Saskatchewan MLA Betty Nipp-Albright said her province has placed school wellness teams in local communities, but a shortage of service providers has hampered plans to expand the program. This problem is particularly acute in First Nations communities, she said, where suicide rates are high.

Manitoba MLA Len Ileson said the province’s health ministry established a Department of Mental Health and Community Wellness, which released a five-year plan in February to expand wellness and health promotion programs and strengthen the province’s substance use and addiction recovery system.


In Minnesota and elsewhere, high-impact tutoring is making a difference in student achievement by Tim Anderson (tanderon@csg.org)

For families with the financial means, tutoring often is the intervention of choice to help a child catch up or get ahead in school. About $42 billion is spent on it in a single year.

Wendy Wallace noted in July as part of a presentation to the Midwestern Legislative Conference Education Committee. “(It’s) more effective than any other kind of academic intervention that researchers have found,” she added, comparing it to practices in technology and health supports. “The effects are shown across grade levels and subject areas, and range from a half a year to more than a year of learning [growth] over one year of academic tutoring.”

Often, though, the child who needs the tutoring the most — one at risk of falling behind and failing academically — does not receive additional supports. The goal of growth as the National Student Support Accelerator, a project of Brown University’s Annenberg Institute for School Reform where Wallace works. Ensures every student has access to high-quality, high-impact tutoring. Perhaps more than ever before, Wallace said, states have the opportunity to overcome the obstacles that traditionally have blocked the expansion of tutoring in their K-12 systems. Schools have become more open to scheduling changes, and unprecedented amounts of federal assistance are available (via the American Rescue Plan Act).

In addition, education leaders now have information on the essential elements of a high-impact tutoring program.

In the “No Child Left Behind” era of education policy, many students were offered, and participated in, government-backed tutoring initiatives. The problem was a lack of quality, Wallace said, causing the impact on student achievement to be “close to zero.”

What works?

Many of the essential elements can be found in long-running, successful programs run by ServeMinnesota, which oversees all AmeriCorps programs in that state. Through the organization’s early-learning, reading and math corps, tutors are embedded in schools across Minnesota.

People of all ages and backgrounds serve, Lindsay Dolce, chief advancement officer for ServeMinnesota, said to legislators. “A lot of our tutors have never spent time in school and don’t have an education background, but they have a passion to serve their community,” she added. “They want to give something back.”

Each tutor receives intensive, week-long training before ever stepping foot in a classroom. Then, he or she gets ongoing training and feedback, including from a staff person in the school building and from a “coaching specialist” at ServeMinnesota. Tutors also have access to high-quality materials and “scripts” to guide instruction.

Through the Reading Corps, students in kindergarten to third grade get 20 minutes of tutoring every school day. Math Corps provides a total of 90 minutes of tutoring each week to students in grades four through seven.

ServeMinnesota has expanded the reach of these tutoring programs, partnering with more schools in Minnesota while also speaking to states such as Iowa, Michigan, North Dakota and Wisconsin.

North Dakota Sen. Kyle Davison said the program has proven to be a “game changer” in parts of his state.

“We look at the kids on the bubble (of academic success or failure), and try to help them with this program,” he said.

“One of the strengths of AmeriCorps is that these volunteers want to be in your schools, and the effect of a student’s relationship with that adult in that school every day, for 20 minutes (of tutoring), is just incredible.”

In Minnesota, the Legislature has gradually increased appropriations for these tutoring programs. (Most of the funding comes from federal AmeriCorps dollars; private donations have bolstered that total.)

Across the country, Wallace said, there has been an uptick in state support for high-quality tutoring — in the form of new grant programs and matching funds for schools.

In addition, a handful of states now have laws defining “high-impact tutoring” and/or requiring that certain students have access to it.

Other options for states include training tutors that can be deployed in the schools, or bringing more college students into programs through new partnerships between K-12 and postsecondary systems.

South Dakota Sen. Jim Bolin and Ohio Sen. Neal Derrow are co-chairs of the Midwestern Legislative Conference Education Committee. Tim Anderson is CSG Midwest staff liaison to the committee.
Leadership, including from legislators, is needed to launch mental health courts — and make them work

For many justice-involved people struggling with their mental health, incarceration is not conducive for recovery.

“[It] disconnects [offenders] from whatever community they had in the community, their Medicaid might be terminated, and we see rates of homelessness among people who’ve been incarcerated are seven times [higher than] the rate of people who have not,” Megan Quattlebaum, director of the Council of State Governments’ Justice Center, said during a session at the Midwestern Legislative Conference Annual Meeting.

Often at the local level, a lack of resources limits the availability of mental health services in county jails. In state prisons, much of the programming works best for offenders with long sentences. And the number of people in need of treatment is notable.

According to a study released in 2021 by the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics: 43 percent of state prisoners had some history of a mental health problem. One option for states: Invest in and expand the reach of mental health courts.

In lieu of incarceration, these dockets allow judges to compel offenders to attend psychiatric therapy, develop behavioral change plans with case workers, or pursue other treatments.

Along with Quattlebaum, four other experts took part in the MLC session’s panel discussion, sharing their experiences with mental health alternatives and answering questions from legislators.

For these mental health courts to work, former Ohio Supreme Court Justice Evelyn Straton said, they need a “champion” — whether it is a legislator, a judge, or someone else who rally stakeholders and identifies funding resources.

During her tenure on the bench, Straton helped create the Ohio Supreme Court’s Advisory Committee on Mental Illness & the Courts (now a task force run by the attorney general). “The [CSG Justice Center] helped us get some grant monies that we used to get.”

Straton told lawmakers.

That was one recurring message to legislators during the session: Outside resources are available to local communities and states looking to expand the reach of criminal justice-based mental health services.

“There are so many free resources and so much free support out there. You do not have to struggle in the dark,” Quattlebaum said. (The CSG Justice Center is among the groups available to help.)

At the federal level, the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration administers the GAINS Center for Behavioral Health and Justice Transformation. Through these programs, state and community leaders are able to access training, launch peer-support services (matching offenders with former patients), and learn how best to connect individuals with local mental health resources.

“You can gather at any municipality level and meet with other municipalities that are working toward establishing mental health courts, or drug courts, or trauma-informed courts,” Kim Nelson, a SAMHSA regional administrator and session panelist, said.

As to the role of state lawmakers in advancing mental health courts, Quattlebaum emphasized the importance of establishing statewide structures — not only securing sufficient appropriations and staff supports, but also establishing standards that are unique from other specialized dockets in a state’s court system.

In Georgia, for example, the Council of Accountability Court Judges sets criteria and best practices for the state’s mental health court operations.

Each of the panelists also stressed that mental health courts are only one piece of the puzzle, and that lawmakers should also prioritize early-intervention strategies that occur long before a person goes before a judge.

For example:

- investing in co-responder models that pair behavioral health specialists with law enforcement;
- securing operators for the new national 988 suicide and mental health crisis hotline; and
- supporting local intervention groups and mental health community centers such as the Wichita-based, county-run COMCAR program.

FISCAL AFFAIRS

‘Stress tests,’ long-term budget forecasting position states to handle ups and downs of economy

by Tim Anderson (tanderson@cs.org)

The best of fiscal times may be the ideal period for budget leaders to prepare for the worst, and smart planning means more than building up state rainy day funds and other reserves.

According to Anlie Loiaconi of the Pew Charitable Trusts, two emerging best practices in states stand out: long-term forecasting and budget “stress testing.”

“You already have the building blocks [to implement these practices], it’s just a matter of bringing them all together,” Loiaconi said during a presentation in July at a meeting of the Midwestern Legislative Conference Fiscal Affairs Committee.

The session was held a few weeks after many states closed the books on a historically strong fiscal year. But legislators during the MLC session also expressed cautions about what may soon lie ahead: a slowdown in consumer spending due to inflation and other factors, and a “fiscal cliff” when the additional federal dollars stop flowing to states.

Among the 50 states, Loiaconi singled out Utah as being the “gold standard” in fiscal planning and analysis. To a mix of statutorily required policies, she said, budget leaders get the information they need to “think long-term and avoid crisis-driven decisions.”

Every three years, for example, the Office of the Legislative Fiscal Analyst evaluates the budget impacts of a moderate recession, a severely adverse downturn and a protracted slump. A five-year time frame is used.

A fiscal crisis occurs when the balance in one period changes by more than 1.5 percent of gross state product; a severe crisis occurs when the balance changes by 4.9 percent of GSP.

“Stress tests’ aims to capture the scenarios that revenue levels are similar from year to year, and a high score indicates that revenue growth or decline is modestly hits a high of 6.0 percent and a low of 4.6 percent. Planning for states to follow when implementing these forecasts. They include:

- looking ahead at least three years (Utah’s time frame is five years);
- distinguishing, and perhaps defining in statute, one-time vs. ongoing revenue streams;
- establishing a “current services” baseline that shows how much money will be needed to maintain existing programs in the future;
- accounting for any known policy changes, such as tax cuts or new state programs; and
- identifying any looming structural budget deficits, as well as determining the specific causes.

Minnesotta Rep. Fue Lee and Kansas Rep. Troy Waymaster serve as co-chairs of the Midwestern Legislative Conference Fiscal Affairs Committee. Mike McCabe is CSG Midwest staff liaison to the committee.
by Mitch Arvidson (marvidson@csg.org)

International trade and supply chains are often considered the foundations of federal governments and multinational corporations. After all, notable trade deals, including the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), were negotiated largely at the national level, and often included input from large corporations in the automobile, technology and pharmaceutical industries. However, there is space for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) — as well as states — to get involved. Policymakers learned how at the 76th Annual Meeting of the Midwestern Legislative Conference, during a session held by the MLC Midwest-Canada Relations Committee and led by two expert speakers: Corinne Pohlmann of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business and April Chiang of the Kansas Department of Commerce. Pohlmann, whose nonprofit, non-partisan association counts 95,000 small businesses as members, says a boost from export activity would be a much-needed antidote for some firms reeling from the effects of COVID-19. According to a recent federation survey, 62 percent of small- and medium-sized firms in Canada reported pandemic debt, 78 percent still had not recovered from pandemic-related stress, and 54 percent had less-than-normal revenues. Exporting is not for all businesses, Pohlmann said, but some that could expand to foreign markets report being hampered by a “lack of resources or expertise” or a “lack of appropriate contacts.” State and provincial interventions can help overcome these obstacles, including getting SMEs engaged in the vast (and potentially lucrative) Canada-U.S. supply chain. One example of this kind of assistance: the Saskatchewan Trade and Export Partnership. Funded by the province but run as a nonprofit with businesses themselves on the board, the program provides funding to Saskatchewan firms looking to access foreign markets. It also offers education, training, trade missions and customized advice. Chiang said the Kansas Department of Commerce’s International Division (where she works) has three main export-assistance functions: educate, promote and support. She recognizes Kansas enterprises. The education component is done through webinars, company visits and customized counseling. Promotion may be of most interest to SMEs, and that is done through state grant programs. The State Trade Expansion Program (funded by the U.S. Small Business Administration, administered by the state Department of Commerce) offers export-focused training, assistance with market entry, and trade missions and shows. Other grants reimburse businesses for participation in trade shows or export-related marketing. The state also administers a Kansas Governor’s Exporter of the Year Award. For policymakers on both sides of the border, Pohlmann had these ideas to help open markets for SMEs: 
• improve and clarify the rules on labor mobility; 
• expand the role of sub-national governments in U.S.-Canada trade and regulatory discussions; 
• provide more guidance to SMEs on how “rules of origin” regulations work under the USMCA, and make these rules easier to understand; 
• reduce non-tariff administrative burdens; and 
• increase how government agencies interact with businesses and distribute information on issues related to international trade.

Ohio Speaker of the House Robert Cupp, co-chair of the MLC-Midwest Canada Relations Committee, chats with April Chiang of the Kansas Department of Commerce and Corinne Pohlmann of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business during an MLC session on small businesses and exports. (photo: Caleb McGinn)

Promise of high wages, more jobs has states putting more resources into building STEM career pathways

by Laura Tomaka (ltomaka@csg.org)

In 2021, 19.1 million Americans worked in fields related to science, technology, engineering and math. This number represents an increase of 10 percent from just two years ago, and STEM employment is projected to grow at twice the rate of jobs in other sectors through 2029. But will there be enough workers? “States across the region are struggling with a workforce talent demand,” said Jeff Weld, executive director of the Iowa Governor’s STEM Advisory Council. In a July session co-organized by the Midwestern Legislative Conference’s Economic Development and Education Committee, Weld addressed the need for more STEM workers worldwide. He views STEM education as “an economic and national security imperative.” He described the necessary state response as “edu-nomics” — educators, business leaders and lawmakers collaborating and building STEM-focused educational resources that prepare a state’s workforce for success in these high-growth, high-wage jobs. Led by Weld, Iowa’s STEM Advisory Council is on an ambitious campaign to achieve STEM equity across the nation; dozens more exist on a regional basis. (Every Midwestern state has a statewide initiative or program dedicated to promoting STEM education and careers.)

By connecting the real world of work with education, STEM programs often focus on experiential learning and workplace experiences. In Iowa, through the advisory council, high school teachers and industry leaders work together on creating a STEM curriculum. In the summer, Iowa teachers are able to participate in STEM-related externships. Weld also emphasized the importance of raising public awareness. His state has launched high-profile advertising campaigns promoting the potential of STEM careers — including in vital Iowa economic sectors such as agriculture and manufacturing — among young people. Weld believes the state’s investment in STEM is paying off.

One-fifth of Iowa students now take part in STEM programs; in turn, they demonstrate higher academic performance than their peers. These students also enroll at Iowa’s public universities at higher rates and are more likely to express an interest in staying in the state, post-graduation. One potential reason: Their early exposure to promising career opportunities near home. Nationwide, participation in STEM work can vary considerably by race and ethnicity, and two typically under-represented groups are Black and Hispanic workers. Introducing black and Hispanic students to STEM opportunities is a goal of the K-12 Initiative, a long-running partnership between the Kansas City (Kansas) school system and the University of Kansas School of Medicine. With a focus on health and other STEM fields, the K-12 Initiative is a supplemental education program; most activities occur after school, on weekends and during the summer. Jessica Rodas described the program to legislators as “an early workforce development initiative.” Students often get involved early on (in the middle-school years) and stay with the program through high school. They leave not only ready to pursue STEM degrees of some kind, she said, but to be future leaders. “They learn about what is happening in their communities — and how they can envision themselves as change makers — along with the learning competencies [they need to pursue STEM careers],” said Rodas, a graduate of the K-12 Initiative and now the program manager.

She pointed out several promising outcomes among participants: • 91 percent enter college; • 82 percent pursue a degree in a STEM or health field; and • compared to peers, they are twice as likely to come back for a second year of college.

Farm economy has outpaced expectations, but high input costs and labor shortages persist as problems continue.

### Commodities and Production Chain

In the recent decline in the agriculture economy, many forecasters predicted the continuation of a recent pandemic disrupted the entire food production chain. This year, though, farm prices have bounced back quickly for most commodities, and when combined with pandemic relief from the federal government, 2020 turned out to be a strong income year for most agriculture producers.

### Outlook for the Midwest

That year, though, farm prices bounced back quickly for most commodities, and when combined with pandemic relief from the federal government, 2020 turned out to be a strong income year for most agriculture producers. One outlier has been the cattle industry. "That sector is still struggling, and cattle prices have been slow to recover," Cortney said. When COVID-19 hit, a large portion of the animal processing workforce got sick; at one point, as many as 500,000 cattle were awaiting processing. It was a buyers’ market, and live cattle prices dropped. On the consumer side, meanwhile, a store-level shortage of beef occurred, causing retail prices to skyrocket.

### Market Recovery

These factors resulted in a large spread between low cattle prices and high prices at the grocery store. Cowley explained that this gap is continuing because many people who work on the cutting floor at animal processing facilities did not come back to the labor force after leaving due to COVID. Labor shortages on the cutting floor are keeping processing numbers down, she said.

Droughts also have hit many cattle-raising areas, and producers are dealing with high (and rising) input costs, particularly for feed. As a result, some producers are liquidating herds, and overall, the number of beef cows in the United States has fallen — a drop of 2 percent in July 2022 compared to a year ago. This is the fourth straight year of smaller beef cow numbers, with the biggest decreases in heifers and cow inventories.

Higher cattle prices should be coming soon as a result of this downward trend. Across the agriculture sector, net farm income, a broad measure of profits, is expected to drop 4.5 percent this year compared to 2021 numbers — down from $123.4 billion to $113.7 billion, with this year’s figure still being high relative to most recent years and above the 20-year average.

In part, farmers have been using their increased income to pay off loans, with rates of farm loan delinquencies decreasing and loan repayment rates improving. According to Cowley, just as supply chains in the farm sector were recovering from the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, labor challenges and the weather have impacted agriculture producers this summer.

### Market Challenges

Because Russia and Ukraine account for a large share of the global production and export of grain and oil, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine caused historical increases in the price of oil and wheat similar to that seen during the Dust Bowl and the 1974 oil embargo. The invasion caused broad disruptions in global commodity markets and large price increases, the latter exacerbated by already low inventories.

Markets have been dropping slowly, Cowley said, but higher commodity prices will continue to be supported by record-high exports through the remainder of the year. For farmers, one concern continues to be a rapid rise in production costs, along with uncertainty about where input prices are headed. Right now, increases in input costs — particularly fertilizers, which are made from fossil fuels — are far outpacing rises in food prices.

Between 2020 and 2022, the U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that total production expenses will increase by more than 20 percent. This is leaving many farmers, particularly small and medium-sized producers, to question their ability to just break even this year, despite high commodity prices.

Cowley, in response to questions from legislators about how to help producers, said that states should look to increase access to credit and focus on strategies to ease the labor shortage.

### Impact on State Economies

The forecast for net farm income in 2022 is $113.7 billion, a 4.5 percent drop from 2021 but still above the 20-year average.

### Economic Development

The MLC counts 11 states and the province of Saskatchewan as members, along with Alberta, Manitoba and Ontario as affiliate members. The seven nonpartisan, binational policy committees of the MLC are composed of legislators from these jurisdictions. Each committee has two co-chairs along with one or two vice chairs. The Midwestern Office of the Council of State Governments provides staff support to these committees on 1) Agriculture & Natural Resources; 2) Criminal Justice & Public Safety; 3) Economic Development; 4) Education; 5) Fiscal Affairs; 6) Health & Human Services; and 7) Midwest-Canada Relations.

The goal of these committees is to provide a forum for legislators to work together, share information and exchange ideas on issues of importance to this region. For more information, and to view presentations from the committees’ July meetings and sessions, visit csgmidwest.org.

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**ESTIMATES OF AGRICULTURE’S CONTRIBUTION TO STATE ECONOMIES AND TAX RECEIPTS IN MIDWEST**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Taxes paid by agriculture sector</th>
<th># of jobs from agriculture sector</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>$34.1 billion</td>
<td>1.7 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>$12.3 billion</td>
<td>900,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>$10.3 billion</td>
<td>800,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>$7.8 billion</td>
<td>570,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>$15.0 billion</td>
<td>1.1 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>$15.4 billion</td>
<td>900,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nebraska</td>
<td>$7.6 billion</td>
<td>500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Dakota</td>
<td>$3.7 billion</td>
<td>160,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>$23.4 billion</td>
<td>1.5 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Dakota</td>
<td>$1.1 billion</td>
<td>200,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>$17.0 billion</td>
<td>1 million</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: "2022 Feeding the Economy" study (using data from the U.S. Census Bureau)
PROFILE: MICHIGAN SENATOR ROGER VICTORY

For incoming chair of the Midwestern Legislative Conference, effective legislating begins by listening to others and providing a voice to those often not heard

by Jon Davis (jdavis@csg.org)

F or someone with agriculture in his bones, perhaps it's fitting that the seeds of Michigan Sen. Roger Victory's political career were planted in his childhood.

"I still remember, at age 4 and 5, sitting in the other room and listening to the neighbors who would come over once or twice a year discussing some of the issues in government pertaining to agriculture," Victory says. "That was my initial introduction to it, just seeing a real grassroots discussion taking place."

Early on, too, Victory decided to be a farmer in his hometown of Hudsonville, located just west of Grand Rapids and well within range of Chicago's high-wattage AM radio stations — through which he heard the news of the Illinois General Assembly.

As a student at Grand Rapids-based Davenport University, he created a business plan for, and soon launched, Victory Farms. Today, the 1,100-acre operation delivers produce across the country.

His evolution from local farmer and businessman to legislator came during the Great Recession — his brother came to work for the farm at that time, while friends and colleagues told him a strong voice for agriculture was needed in Lansing.

"Roger, you need to step up to the plate," they told him.

First winning a House seat in 2012, Victory moved to the Senate six years later and now holds four leadership positions: assistant majority whip, chair of the Judiciary and Public Safety Committee, and chair of two Appropriations subcommittees (on Agriculture and Rural Development and General Government).

Most recently, legislative colleagues from across the region chose Victory to serve as incoming chair of The Council of State Governments' binational, nonpartisan Midwestern Legislative Conference.

He assumes this regional leadership position later in the year. Part of his duties will be leading Michigan's efforts in hosting next year's MLC Annual Meeting in Detroit (July 9-12).

In a recent interview, Sen. Victory reflected on his time in the Michigan Legislature, as well as his outlook on leadership.

Q: What has shaped your views of effective legislative leadership?
A: I think it goes back to my first term serving in the House.

Coming more from a business and agricultural background, I found myself serving on a committee called Families, Children and Seniors and dealing with a lot of behind-the-scenes issues. This was not my area of expertise or in my book of knowledge on policy, but the experience really enlightened me

On that committee, there were a lot of issues we were dealing with — foster care and foster children, for example — where it became clear to me that part of leadership is making sure that when you have an opportunity to bring a voice forward, you bring that voice for those you're representing — and especially for those who may not have a voice.

Make sure their concerns and issues are brought forward.

Q: What is the biggest surprise you about being a legislator?
A: How quickly things can change. I think coming through COVID is an example of how things and times can change with the environment, and how what was the norm of a year ago is kind of flipped on its end.

One thing you discover is that change is difficult for people. Also, you learn that policy sometimes has a difficult time to move along with that rapid change.

Policy sometimes is like a fine wine; it takes a little time to come to its own life. And when you're going through the legislative process during something like a pandemic, it's a roller-coaster ride.

Q: What style of leadership will you bring to CSG's Midwestern Legislative Conference as its chair?
A: I don't really have a definition as to what the style of leadership is. I will just bring the Roger Victory brand that has been successful for me in my days in Lansing, in the House and the Senate, and that has allowed me to take on additional leadership roles.

Part of that is having a good listening ear. Bring your expertise and mine to the table, but also make sure you're a listening person. And, I always have to say, align yourself with people who are more intelligent than yourself. The key is always be a listener. Never push anyone away who has a great insight into an issue, bring them to the table.

Q: Do you have a sense yet of what you want to do as MLC chair?
A: There are no specific issues that are on the radar, I'm more looking at the 30,000-foot level. I always say, "When you have an opportunity to take on a leadership role, always leave the organization in a better place than you found it." And that's making sure you always add something to it and not take away from it.

So my goal through my term of leadership is that we can grow, learn and experience together for the benefit of the organization and its members.

“Align yourself with people who are more intelligent than yourself. The key is always be a listener. Never push anyone away who has a great insight into an issue; bring them to the table.”

BIO-SKETCH: MICHIGAN SEN. ROGER VICTORY

- First elected to the Michigan House in 2012 and the Michigan Senate in 2018
- Currently serves as Senate assistant majority whip
- Chair of the Senate Judiciary & Public Safety Committee and the Appropriations subcommittees on Agriculture & Rural Development and General Government
- Owns Victory Farms LLC, a year-round producer of specialty crops, and Victory Sales LLC, a national produce distributor
- A graduate of Davenport University and a fourth-generation resident of the western Michigan town of Hudsonville
- Will serve as chair of the Council of State Governments' Midwestern Legislative Conference in 2023

Michigan Senator Roger Victory is a resident of the western Michigan town of Hudsonville. He is a fourth-generation farmer in his hometown of Hudsonville, located just west of Grand Rapids and well within range of Chicago's high-wattage AM radio stations — through which he heard the news of the Illinois General Assembly. He is a graduate of Davenport University and a fourth-generation resident of the western Michigan town of Hudsonville.
First Person: The End of Standardized Testing in Early Grades, and the Start of Something New

Illinois law results from rethinking the appropriateness of these assessments, opens new options better tied to needs of children.

by Illinois Sen. Cristina Pacione-Zayas

If the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has taught us anything, it’s that many of the “usual” ways we accomplished things were products of tradition and habit, rather than reason. The surge in work-from-home arrangements and telemedicine are just two areas of life and work that stand out.

One of those areas that faced the most scrutiny was early education: now that young children were expected to stay home, how could educational institutions continue to instruct, assess, monitor progress, and ensure the holistic development of each individual child? This caused many of us to question the way things were.

We found a major area of concern was the use of standardized testing in children prior to third grade. Why would we dedicate public resources to subject our youngest learners to this kind of testing in the early grades? Our focus should be on making sure that school districts can redirect funds they might have received for standardized assessments. Allow them to pursue authentic and meaningful assessments and strategies that better track and support a child’s progress. We should also expand the scope of that funding to incorporate more than strictly educational assessments.

Research also suggests that these assessments don’t help prepare students for the standardized testing they might face in later grades. Despite these flaws, standardized testing can be further misused for accountability purposes, as a method of measuring teacher performance or school-level progress. This extends the potential harm of our basic mistake — a fundamental misunderstanding of the tools to use in early education, as well as what they say or don’t say. Whatever the goals of standardized testing in later grades (monitoring, accountability, etc.), such testing does not work in the early grades. Given that, we as legislators needed to ask ourselves if it was worth creating the pathway for a harmful and inappropriate practice, or if we could take advantage of this moment to push for what the experts are already telling us is the path forward.

One promise with our new approach is to free up time, funds and resources in our K-12 education system. We don’t want funds being expended on inappropriate assessments. At the same time, as we make this change in state policy, we need to make sure our schools with populations of limited economic resources don’t inadvertently lose any resources from the state.

We should focus on making sure that school districts can redirect funds they might have received for standardized assessments. Allow them to pursue authentic and meaningful assessments and strategies that better track and support a child’s progress. We should also expand the scope of that funding to incorporate more than strictly educational assessments.

A generation of young minds has endured significant sickness, deaths, etc. Principals have proven support strategies more suitable for the early years? When we talk to school officials, their priorities don’t include funding for standardized tests. Instead, to improve child outcomes, they want more student supports, wrap-around services, teacher mentoring and professional development.

We know the early years are the most vital for the human trajectory. Getting those years right is an imperative. Failure is not an option. We should not allow tradition to stand in the way of what the latest research tells us is the path forward. Let’s push beyond methods that don’t work and provide more flexible funding so districts aren’t required to adopt a one-size-fits-all approach. Let them look into alternative assessment processes and proven support strategies more suitable for their communities and contexts.

This bill is only a first step toward a more equitable system that centers on holistic child development and learning. We must put the habits of old behind and continue to harness this moment to replant the tradition to stand in the way of what the latest research tells us is the path forward. We should not allow tradition to stand in the way of what the latest research tells us is the path forward.

Sen. Cristina Pacione-Zayas was first elected to the General Assembly in 2020. She is vice chair of the Illinois Senate’s Higher Education Committee and its Subcommittee on Education Appropriations.
KANSAS LAWMAKERS WELCOME HUNDREDS OF LEGISLATORS FROM MIDWEST’S STATES, PROVINCES FOR MLC ANNUAL MEETING

With a goal of fostering collaboration, relationship building and information sharing among the region’s state and provincial legislators, the Midwestern Legislative Conference met for four days in July in the state of Kansas’ largest city, Wichita.

The event attracted hundreds of legislators from the Midwest.

Led by Sen. Carolyn McGinn, 2022 chair of the MLC, members of the Kansas Legislature served as meeting hosts.

This edition of Stateline Midwest features some of what was offered to legislators at this year’s Annual Meeting — professional development workshops, legislative roundtable discussions, policy-focused site visits and sessions, and featured presentations from acclaimed U.S. historian H.W. Brands and presidential historian Nancy Gibbs.

The MLC is a nonpartisan association of all legislators in 11 states and one Canadian province: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, Saskatchewan, South Dakota and Wisconsin. The Canadian provinces of Alberta, Manitoba and Ontario are affiliate members.

The Midwestern Office of The Council of State Governments provides staff support to the MLC.

MIDWEST’S LEGISLATORS OK 4 POLICY RESOLUTIONS AT MLC ANNUAL MEETING

The Midwestern Legislative Conference considers resolutions introduced by individual lawmakers as well as its seven interstate, binational policy committees.

At the MLC Annual Meeting, a bipartisan Resolutions Committee (led this year by Michigan Sen. John Bizon, first vice chair of the MLC) reviews and votes on these resolutions. Once passed by this committee, the resolutions are voted on by the full MLC on the final day of the meeting.

Using this process, the MLC adopted the following policy resolutions in July at its Annual Meeting:

- call on state, federal, local and tribal governments to develop new action plans that better raise awareness and improve responses to cases of missing and murdered Indigenous people;
- support the protection and return of Indigenous remains and property;
- affirm continued support of the relationship and shared interests between the MLC and Taiwan; and
- support the U.S.-Canada trade relationship.

On the final day of its four-day Annual Meeting, the Midwestern Legislative Conference elected a four-officer team of legislators to lead the binational, nonpartisan organization in 2023.

The team will include a mix of new and returning officers. Among the new officers: Michigan Sen. Roger Victory, who will be MLC chair and guide the efforts of his home state in hosting next year’s MLC Annual Meeting in Detroit (July 9-12).

First elected to the Michigan Senate in 2018, Sen. Victory serves as chair of the Judiciary and Public Safety Committee and as assistant majority whip. He was a member of the Michigan House for six years.

Saskatchewan Speaker Randy Weeke is slated to be the MLC’s second vice chair in 2023.

The returning officers are Kansas Sen. Carolyn McGinn, who will move to the position of past chair; and Ohio Sen. Bill Reineke, who will become first vice chair.
BILLD & THE MLC ANNUAL MEETING: A TIME FOR ALUMS TO MEET, LEADERSHIP PROGRAM’S LEADERS TO GATHER, AND ALL LEGISLATORS TO ADVANCE SKILLS

Every year, a select group of newer state and provincial legislators from the Midwest comes together for five days of intensive leadership training and professional growth. One of the oft-cited benefits of taking part in this Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development: the chance to meet and become friends with legislative peers from across the Midwest. This summer in Kansas, as part of the Midwestern Legislative Conference Annual Meeting, a special reception was held for all alumni of the MLC’s BILLD program. This event allows BILLD Fellows to reconnect with friends and acquaintances from the program, as well as develop new relationships. More than 900 legislators have graduated from BILLD since the program’s inception in 1995, all are invited to attend this yearly special reception at the MLC Annual Meeting.

STEEING COMMITTEE FINALIZES PLANS FOR 2022 INSTITUTE, LOOKS AHEAD TO 2023 AND BEYOND

A bipartisan group of legislators from 11 Midwestern states and the Canadian province of Saskatchewan is responsible for guiding the work of the Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Committee. This BILLD Steering Committee met in July during the Midwestern Legislative Conference Annual Meeting.

In part, participating committee members helped finalize plans for this year’s institute — five days of training in Madison, Wis., with sessions featuring legislative leaders from the Midwest and public policy experts, as well as seminars covering subjects such as media relations and communication, priority management and consensus building.

LAWMAKERS EXPLORE PATHS TO CONSENSUS BUILDING, SOUND DECISION-MAKING AND MORE

As part of this July’s four-day MLC Annual Meeting, two legislator-focused, interactive professional development workshops were offered to attendees. Phil Boyle, president and co-founder of Leading and Governing Associates, guided lawmakers through a session on policy decision making — particularly how lawmakers can navigate competing priorities and visions, as well as ethical dilemmas, to reach conclusions in the legislative arena that advance the public good.

Naseem Khuri, a facilitator and consultant who serves on the faculty at The Fletcher School at Tufts University, led attendees in a session that explored strategies of legislative negotiation, influence and conflict management. These workshops reflect one of the goals of the Midwestern Legislative Conference and its BILLD program: provide opportunities for state and provincial lawmakers to continually advance their legislative leadership skills.

BILLD GRADUATES HELP LEAD CSG’S REGIONAL GROUP OF LEGISLATORS

Along with advancing into key leadership roles in their respective states or provinces, graduates of the Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development often take on important roles in the binational, nonpartisan Midwestern Legislative Conference (MLC). Among current legislators, for example:

Four graduates are past chairs of the MLC:
- Indiana Sen. Ed Charbonneau, class of 2008
- Michigan Sen. Ken Horn, class of 2007
- Iowa Sen. Janet Petersen, class of 2002

Two graduates are currently part of the four-officer MLC leadership team:
- Michigan Sen. John Bizon, class of 2017
- Ohio Sen. Bill Reineke, class of 2016

Eleven graduates are serving as officers of an MLC policy committee:
- South Dakota Sen. Jim Bolin, class of 2012
- Saskatchewan MLA Steven Bonk, class of 2017
- Ohio Sen. Harecel Craig, class of 2015
- Manitoba MLA Kelvin Goertzen, class of 2008
- Minnesota Rep. Fue Lee, class of 2019
- Indiana Rep. Ethan Manning, class of 2019
- Nebraska Sen. John McCollister, class of 2016
- Kansas Sen. Pat Pettay, class of 2017
- North Dakota Rep. Shannon Roers Jones, class of 2017
- Kansas Rep. Troy Waymaster, class of 2015
- Wisconsin Rep. Robert Witte, class of 2019

RECOGNIZING A LONGTIME BILLD SPONSOR: GENENTECH

Genentech, a sponsor of the BILLD program since 2003, was recognized during a luncheon at the recent Midwestern Legislative Conference Annual Meeting. Pictured: Lee Kansas Rep. Jarrod Ousley, co-chair of the BILLD Steering Committee, and Joe Minkra, senior manager of state government affairs at Genentech. (Photo: Caleb McGinn)