



Climate Conversations debuts with Kandiyohi County farmer Erik Hatlestad

By Lisa Holm

Welcome to Climate Conversations, a new series about climate and agriculture.

Erik Hatlestad has been Kandiyohi County Farmers Union President since 2019 and is energy democracy program director at CURE.



Erik Hatlestad

Erik farms 850 acres in west central Minnesota with his parents, Phil and Carolyn, and his brother, Adam.

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Q. Has climate change informed your plans for the future of your farm?

A. We were early adopters of no-till and have strong water management practices including buffer strips. It has never been a question to us about the reality of climate change and the responsibility of farmers to do what they can to mitigate their impacts.

Looking forward, we're cautious about carbon markets. Currently it seems like farmers doing the work will not receive much of the benefit until the market develops more.

Looking to the future of the farm, we're thinking about what climate change will mean for the operation. Several years ago, our family attended MDA's education session on organic transitions and my brother and I have had conversations about incorporating sustainable meat production and cover crops on the farm. I am excited about new programs that will make implementing these practices easier and more economically viable.

What is RIPE100?

The RIPE100 program would pay farmers \$100 per acre or animal unit for conservation practices that deliver public value through carbon sequestration, improved soil health and water quality, and other environmental services.

Learn more at www.riperoadmap.org

Q. Conservation practices have been integral to your family's farm operation for many years. What are some ways to increase adoption of conservation practices in your area?

A. I frequently travel around the state and no-till operations are not as common as I would expect, it's the bare minimum

when it comes to conservation practices that positively impact climate and water. Topsoil erosion is a huge problem in west central Minnesota, and increased cover crops could improve yields and help with natural carbon sequestration.

Beyond continuing to have conversations with our neighbors to help them value the importance of conservation practices, further federal support of conservation programs – like RIPE 100 – will help accelerate adoption of practices like no-till and cover cropping.

Q. What is an example of a climate solution or opportunity you have found that has helped you remain resilient?

A. What keeps us resilient has been community and organization. The problems of the climate crisis and problems within the industry are so enormous, it is impossible to take them on by yourself. I think of climate as the big challenge of our time.

Community is not just defined by geographic area, it is the people that share the same objective in solving these major problems, those that you are in solidarity with. We're never going to solve any of these problems or address economic, social and environmental justice without some sense of solidarity.

Q. Are you facing challenges in relation to climate change management?

A. A big challenge is maintaining general infrastructure like buildings and equipment. There are increasing pressures on already strained infrastructure from increasing storms, out of the ordinary large snowstorms, and increasingly erratic weather that makes maintenance more difficult and expensive.

Q. What opportunities for policy and markets have been on your radar?

A. The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) will be huge, [and I am] cautiously optimistic about the climate-smart ag programs.

I view the development of wind and solar as another “crop,” considering the profitability of farmers that are receiving lease payments for siting. Much of the corn we grow on our farm and in Minnesota is already used for energy, and growing energy with wind and solar is a similar market with a different production method.

Q. What do you think people are missing in the conversation around climate?

A. For rural communities, it’s the enormous economic development and job opportunities that there are and the opportunity to solve a lot of longstanding issues we have had, for example energy efficiency in housing. It is a smart investment.

Q. If you could tell Congress to do one thing that would help you continue to farm in the next generation, what would it be?

A. Authorize RIPE100 in the 2023 Farm Bill. RIPE100 will be transformative in terms of the economic viability of conservation practices on the farm. I’m eager to see the pilot projects in Minnesota and am hopeful that Kandiyohi County will be selected as a pilot location.

Congress must also continue to renew its commitment to rural electrification by maintaining and expanding the new loan and grant programs for electric cooperatives that were passed in the Inflation Reduction Act. These long-needed investments will help create rural jobs, save rural people money, create new markets for farmers and act on the climate crisis.

MFU member chairs national policy committee

By Janet Kubat Willette

Serving as the chairwoman of the National Farmers Union Policy Committee was a learning experience for MFU member Melany Thomas.

Thomas, who farms in Clay County and is a graduate of Minnesota Farmers Union’s New Leader Academy, served on the committee in 2022 and was invited back to chair the committee in 2023.

She said she was both nervous and excited to lead the seven-member committee.

“I was worried about being able to do a good enough job,” Thomas said. “I’ve never been in such a formal type of setting. A job lead is different. I’ve never done anything like this.”

Policy committee members commit to a series of in-person meetings in January, an online meeting later that month and two days of presentations as members gather for convention. They also read through the entire NFU policy book at least once.

The 2023 policy committee met for the first time the week of Jan. 9. They spent three and a half days going through the policy book. The entire document is open to change at the committee’s discretion, Thomas said. They heard from USDA staff and leaders of both the U.S. House and Senate majority and minority.

“National Farmers Union gives us the binder of policy and we literally started on the preamble,” she said.

As chair, Thomas broke the policy into sections and the entire committee read through it and made suggestions. They had policy books from states that had completed their conventions and they’d refer to them to inform sections of national policy. The debate resembles a county convention in Minnesota, where resolutions are brought forth and debat-

ed, she said. The committee added to the national policy, took pieces out and in general sought to improve the document. It is helpful to have a diverse policy committee, as each member shares their background to make the policy better.

The committee met online on Jan. 30 to finish their review of the policy book and finalize special orders. They read and reviewed the policy book through the printing deadline in February. Members then arrived in

San Francisco in advance of the convention and spent March 4 and 5 listening to presentations from delegates.

This year, policy committee members came from Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Rocky Mountain and South Dakota. The slots on the policy committee rotate between states based on membership, said Mike Stranz, NFU vice president of advocacy. Some states have representatives on the committee every year, others rotate on and off at different lengths of time, depending on membership numbers.

State organizations recommend members to serve on the committee, and the NFU president makes the final selections, Stranz said. Typically, members don’t serve more than one year in a row, unless they are selected to be the chair. In recent years, the chair has been picked from the previous year’s policy committee and is selected by the NFU president.

As committee chairwoman, Thomas discovered her skills of being able to listen to other sides of arguments, letting other people have their say and being civil served her well. It’s also important to realize that you’re not going to know everything about everything, she said.

“I enjoyed it, but I’m a nerd like that,” Thomas said. “It’s really fun to be a part of process.”



Melany Thomas