

WESTERN KENTUCKY Business Journal

★ 2026 FINANCIAL OUTLOOK ★ KENTUCKY AGRI-BUSINESS ★

New bill would exempt KY churches from sales tax

STAFF REPORT

WESTERN KENTUCKY BUSINESS JOURNAL

State Rep. James Tipton has filed a bill that would exempt churches from having to pay sales taxes.

(File photo)



A Kentucky lawmaker has filed a bill to exempt churches and other religious institutions from collecting sales tax on certain transactions.

Rep. James Tipton, R-Taylorsville, is sponsoring House Bill 101, a narrower version of a proposal he unsuccessfully advanced in 2025 that would have applied to all non-profits. Tipton said the measure would ease administrative burdens on churches and allow them to focus on ministry and community service.

Tipton argued that many churches are unaware they are required to collect sales tax when charging set prices for meals or events, and said the requirement is impractical and burdensome. He also dismissed concerns that the exemption would create unfair competition with private businesses, noting church events typically serve members who would attend regardless.

Tipton said the financial impact on the state's \$16 billion budget would be minimal, adding that little tax revenue is likely being collected now.

The bill has the backing of Kentucky Baptists, whose 2025 convention passed a resolution urging lawmakers to eliminate sales and use taxes on churches. KBC Executive Director Todd Gray called the tax an unnecessary burden on ministry.

Tipton said the bill has strong interest among House members and may be folded into a larger revenue or budget measure rather than passed on its own. He encouraged supporters to contact their legislators, noting messages can be left through the Legislative Message Line at (800) 372-7181.

Dr. Andrea Tooley: A national leader in Ophthalmology, Education and Innovation

By Greg LeNeave
Publisher, KPI Newspaper Group

PADUCAH, KY — The greater Paducah area has landed a top-notch Doctor that has a Mayo Clinic background in Eye Care. When it comes to your appearance such as droopy eyelids or bags under your eyes, you are in luck. I have found the perfect doctor to help you with your needs. It could be medically necessary or you may just want to look younger and more refreshed. Dr. Andrea Tooley is located right here in Paducah at Innovative Ophthalmology. Dr. Barbara Bowers and Dave Hoffman were instrumental in bringing a world-class doctor to the region.

People that need help with the way their eyes look and work can get help from a world-class doctor and a first-rate human being. By adding Dr. Andrea Tooley, Innovative Ophthalmology brings a nationally recognized ophthalmologist and educator to western Kentucky.



Andrea Tooley M.D.
Oculoplastic &
Aesthetic Facial Surgery

Please see Dr. Tooley page 3

Tooley serves as a consultant in the Department of Ophthalmology at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, where she also served as residency program director and an associate professor at Mayo Clinic College of Medicine and Science. She is board certified by the American Board of Ophthalmology and specializes in ophthalmic plastic and reconstructive surgery.

She earned dual bachelor's degrees in chemistry and English literature from Butler University and received her medical degree from Indiana University School of Medicine.

She completed her internship and ophthalmology residency at Mayo Clinic, followed by a fellowship in ophthalmic plastic and reconstructive surgery at NYU's Manhattan Eye, Ear and Throat Hospital. Tooley spent over two years in New York working on a fellowship at Cornell and Columbia.



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WAVE River Counties AG Initiative hosts annual partnership luncheon:

“WAVE AG... Building Bridges”



Pictured not in order: Dr Brannon, Phillip Bean, Joel Reddick, Lucas Goodman, Collin Cooper /Madi, Jonathan Reynolds (not pictured) for their membership in Ag Launch LLC and participation in Farmer Trials.

Photo submitted

By Laurna Todd
WKBJ Writer

The WAVE River Counties AG Initiative recently held its annual Partnership Luncheon on Friday, January 16th at the West Hickman Baptist Church, honoring the partners and supporters who help strengthen regional agriculture.

The 2026 luncheon carried the theme “WAVE AG...Building Bridges,” highlighting the Initiative’s mission of connecting farmers, partners, and the waterway region through collaboration and shared growth. Each sponsor was recognized during the event, and attendees

received updates on regional agriculture.

The keynote speaker, USDA Deputy Secretary Stephen Vaden, shared insights from his career, including his journey from Union City High School to law school at Vanderbilt and Yale, and his service as General Counsel to the USDA during President Trump’s first term.

In 2020, President Trump appointed Judge Vaden to the United States Court of International Trade.

Deputy Secretary Vaden also discussed ongoing USDA programs, including the Farmer Bridge Assistance (FBA), a program projected to bring upwards of \$13

million to the river counties.

A highlight of the luncheon was the recognition of Ag Launch. CEO Pete Nelson joined Dr. Brannon in honoring local farmers Phillip Bean, Joel Reddick, Lucas Goodman, Collin Cooper, and Madi Jonathan Reynolds (not pictured) for their membership in Ag Launch LLC and participation in Farmer Trials.

The WAVE AG Initiative continues to celebrate the dedication of its partners and farmers while building bridges for the future of agriculture in the region.

MSU's Construction Management and Architecture program brings in industry experts

MURRAY, Ky. — Murray State University's Construction Management and Architecture program is giving students a unique, real-world perspective this semester with John Hale, vice president of Bill Adams Construction, Inc., teaching CMA 480: Construction Contracting.

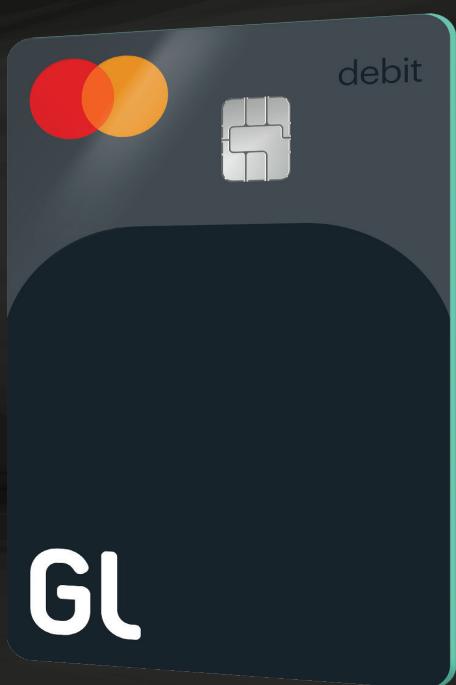
Hale brings decades of industry experience in residential, commercial and light industrial construction experience to the classroom. Over the course of his career, he has served in key roles including designer, estimator, project engineer and project manager. His presence in the classroom provides students with practical insights into contract negotiation, project management and industry best practices while highlighting the

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see **MSU**,
page 7

Dr. Tooley continued from front page

Another noteworthy topic concerning Dr. Tooley is her magnificent speaking engagements. She has been the featured speaker for many events around the globe. As a nationally recognized ophthalmologist and educator she has spoken in Argentina, Prague and Singapore; in the United States she will be the main speaker for 50,000 ophthalmologists this year in New Orleans. In addition, she will be the commencement speaker for the graduating classes of NYU (May 30th) and University of Kentucky (June 5).

What's more gratifying about Dr. Andrea Tooley is a sweet countenance. She exemplifies what it is to be a successful working mother. She has three children ranging from a 4-year old, a 3-year old and baby just 1-year old. She mentioned how important family is to her and that she leaves work at work and makes dinner for her family every night.

Here's the main thing that caught my eye, was when asked how she managed to get to Paducah, she said "It was a GOD THING." She is a devout Christian and attends First Baptist Church in Paducah. It's obvious that she is a kind and caring doctor that possesses a terrific problem-solving nature when it comes to helping her patients. Tooley stated "I get instant sat-



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Dr. Andrea Tooley is a board-certified Oculofacial Plastic Surgeon. She has spent the past 10 years training and practicing Oculofacial Aesthetic and Reconstructive Surgery in New York at the prestigious Mayo Clinic. In addition to periocular, upper face aesthetic and reconstructive surgery, she also specializes in the treatment of orbital inflammatory and neoplastic diseases. Dr. Tooley and her family are returning to their Western Kentucky roots to be closer to family.

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RYAN HARPOLE M.D. GENERAL OPHTHALMOLOGY

Dr. Ryan Harpole was born and raised in Western Kentucky. He is a graduate of the University of Kentucky School of Medicine and is currently finishing his final year of Ophthalmology residency at the University of Kentucky Department of Ophthalmology. Dr. Harpole will be practicing general ophthalmology with a special interest in cataract and refractive surgery. He will begin seeing patients in July of 2026.



DR. ANDREA TOOLEY'S: notable accomplishments:

Education and training

Bachelor's degrees in chemistry and English literature, **Butler University**

Medical degree, **Indiana University School of Medicine**

Internship and ophthalmology residency, **Mayo Clinic**, Rochester, Minnesota

Fellowship in ophthalmic plastic and reconstructive surgery, **NYU Manhattan Eye, Ear and Throat Hospital**

Professional roles

Consultant, Department of Ophthalmology, Mayo Clinic • Residency program director, Mayo Clinic Department of Ophthalmology
Associate professor, Mayo Clinic College of Medicine and Science • Former assistant residency program director, Mayo Clinic

Educational leadership and accomplishments

Developed innovative residency training programs, including hands-on surgical and emergency procedure curricula
Founder of a national virtual ophthalmology mentorship program connecting medical students with academic physicians
Mentor to medical students, residents and fellows pursuing academic and clinical careers
Frequent national and international lecturer on ophthalmic surgery, medical education and physician leadership

Research and recognition

Author of dozens of peer-reviewed scientific publications • Participant in nationally funded clinical trials

Named one of The Ophthalmologist magazine's "Top 50 Rising Stars"

Recipient of leadership awards from **Women in Ophthalmology** and the **American Academy of Ophthalmology**

Trigg County Chamber of Commerce announces new membership director



Karen Sue C. Stanfield

Cadiz, KY – The Trigg County Chamber of Commerce is pleased to announce the hiring of Karen Sue C. Stanfield as its new Membership & Events Director. Stanfield will officially begin her role on January 5, 2026.

Stanfield brings more than 25 years of experience in program development, organizational leadership, and community engagement. Known for her collaborative and people-centered approach, she has a strong background in building partnerships, supporting small businesses, and creating opportunities

that connect communities.

A former small business owner, Stanfield created and facilitated multiple farmers markets, including iPICKHERE.com, a large online farmers and vendors marketplace that expanded access for producers and consumers alike. Her work reflects a commitment to innovation, local enterprise, and sustainable community growth.

A newlywed and new resident of Cadiz, Stanfield relocated to Trigg County with her husband, Pastor Sean Stanfield. Since

arriving, she has been actively involved in the community through volunteer service, including coordinating the November Mobile Food Distribution and the Diaper Bank Ministry at LifeBridge UMC.

Together, the Stanfields are the parents of seven children and share their home with several pets.

Formerly a specialty chicken farmer, Stanfield now enjoys maintaining a country retreat, attending Bluegrass and Americana music festivals, and hiking or camping in the outdoors.

"We are excited to welcome Karen Sue to the Chamber team," said Kara Allen, Chamber President.

"Her experience, energy, and heart for community make her an excellent fit for supporting our members and strengthening connections throughout Trigg County."

The Trigg County Chamber of Commerce looks forward to the leadership and enthusiasm Stanfield will bring to the Membership Director role as the organization continues to serve local businesses and the broader community.

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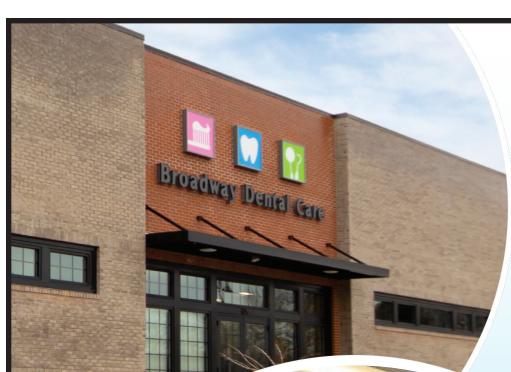
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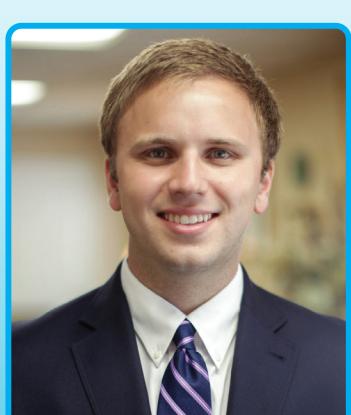


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Dr. James Hunt



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More than the Winter Blues

[PADUCAH, KY] — Shorter days, colder temperatures, and less sunlight can quietly affect your mood. If you notice feeling more tired, unmotivated, or down during the winter months, you're not alone. For many people, this is known as the winter blues, but for others, it may be Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).

"Seasonal Affective Disorder is more than just disliking winter," said Dr. Allan Wells, Baptist Health Medical Group Primary Care. "It's a form of depression that follows a seasonal pattern and can significantly impact a person's daily life if left unaddressed."

The winter blues often involve mild symptoms, such as lower energy or wanting to stay indoors more. SAD, however, is more persistent and may include ongoing sadness, changes in sleep or appetite, difficulty concentrating, and withdrawing from others.

"When symptoms

last for weeks and start interfering with work, relationships, or daily responsibilities, that's when we encourage people to seek help," said Dr. Wells. "You don't have to wait until you feel overwhelmed."

Simple self-care to get ahead of symptoms:

Spend time outdoors or near windows during daylight hours to get more light.

Regular exercise can improve mood and energy.

Get consistent sleep and maintain daily schedules to support mental health.

Eat balanced meals to help stabilize mood.

Social interaction is a powerful mood booster so stay connected with family and friends.

"Self-care isn't about doing everything perfectly," said Dr. Wells. "It's about building small, consistent habits that support both your mental and physical well-being."

If symptoms last more than two weeks

or begin affecting your quality of life, professional support can help.

"Seasonal depression is very treatable," added Dr. Wells. "Reaching out for help is a sign of strength, and often the first step toward feeling better." Winter may be unavoidable, but struggling through it doesn't have to be.

Important note: For more information about our Behavioral Health services, please call our Behavioral Health Resource Connection line at 800.395.4435, seven days a week, 7 a.m.—7 p.m. If you are struggling with a mental health condition and have thoughts of harming yourself or someone else, you should seek help immediately by calling the National Suicide Line at 988 or by going to a hospital emergency room.

To call or schedule an appointment with Dr. Wells, call 270.415.4645.

Baptist Health Paducah is a regional medical and referral

center serving about 200,000 patients a year from four states. With more than 1,300 employees and 364 physicians, it offers 42 points of care with a full range of services, including cardiac and cancer care, diagnostic imaging, women's and children's services, surgery,

emergency treatment, rehabilitation, and more. It has the region's first heart center and only accredited chest pain center and certified stroke center with 24/7 neurohospitalist coverage, as well as Paducah's only comprehensive cancer center and Level 3

Neonatal Intensive Care unit. Baptist Health Paducah has a network of healthcare providers for patients in western Kentucky and southern Illinois — from Baptist Health Medical Group physician offices to Baptist Health Urgent Care and Occupational Medicine locations.

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Elliot Treece, First Vice President/Investments
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Adam Chustz, CDFA®, Senior Vice President/Investments
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Gov. Beshear announces nearly \$2.3 million to strengthen Kentucky's public riverports

Awards will fund eight projects to enhance safety and support economic growth

Gov. Beshear Announces Nearly \$2.3 Million To Strengthen Kentucky's Public Riverports

Awards will fund eight projects to enhance safety and support economic growth

FRANKFORT, Ky.

— Today, Gov. Andy Beshear announced funding to enhance Kentucky's riverports and increase economic opportunities, efficiency and connectivity for Kentucky industries. Over \$2.3 million in awards will benefit eight projects at six of Kentucky's public riverports.

"Kentucky's riverports are critical economic engines that connect us to national and global markets," said Gov. Beshear.

"These awards invest in port efficiency with new equipment and further develop operations at riverports to help our businesses compete and grow."

Kentucky Public Riverport Construction and Maintenance (KPRCM) program funding invests \$7.5 million per fiscal year to improve riverport facilities and infrastructure for new construction, major replacement or repair projects. This round of awards, administered by the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet, supports eight projects at six of Kentucky's public riverports.

The Paducah-McCracken County Riverport Authority



received two awards totaling \$730,000. A \$520,000 project will replace a deteriorating scale house with a new 1,366-square-foot building, and \$210,000 will replace a fertilizer conveyor system. The scale building is critical to

bulk yard operations, which account for approximately 55% of revenue.

The Eddyville Riverport and Industrial Development Authority was awarded nearly \$460,000 for a project to replace and modernize an undersized and aging building. The new facility will support its expanded boat-repair operations and enable more efficient use of the port's lift.

The Hickman Fulton County Riverport Authority award of nearly \$354,000 will go toward the purchase, engineering, and installation of a new, safer, and more efficient barge-moving system.

The Henderson County Riverport Authority will receive over \$320,000 to replace a mobile conveyor system with a new electric material handler.

A \$250,000 award will go to the Western Kentucky Regional Riverport Authority to excavate Fort Jefferson to develop a new 19-acre inland riverport.

The Owensboro Riverport Authority won two awards totaling more than \$200,000 to purchase a new yard tractor and a new forklift. The acquisition will modernize its warehouse and improve loading and unloading operations.

Collectively, the projects modernize

equipment, expand capacity, and improve safety across Kentucky's riverport system, strengthening the state's role in regional and national freight movement.

"Team Kentucky is focused on strategic, targeted multi-modal investments that improve how goods move across our commonwealth," said KYTC Secretary Jim Gray. "These enhancements are vital for commercial and industrial users who rely on strong and efficient riverports."

This is the final round of KPRCM grants to be announced before the next budget is set this legislative session. The funding comes from a grant program established by the 2024 General Assembly and approved by Gov. Beshear.

To date, Gov. Beshear has awarded \$12.7 million for 17 projects through the new program.

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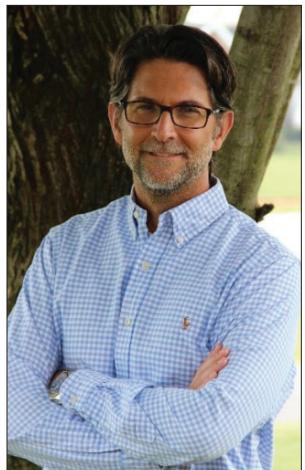
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MSU
from page 2

program's commitment to bridging academic learning with professional experience.

"The construction industry is fast-paced and constantly evolving," said Kevin Perry, program coordinator. "While our curriculum provides students with a strong foundation in theory and contracting principles, the classroom can't always capture the complexities and realities of the field. That's why we're excited to welcome seasoned professional John Hale to our teaching team. His decades of hands-on experience bring invaluable real-world insight, something



core Construction Management classes and Mr. Hale is just the first. Without the support of our local industry and the AGC (Associated General Contractors) of Western Kentucky, our program would not be as sought after and well thought of as it is."

The future of this initiative is made possible through the AGC Danny Claiborne Professorship, which supports the inclusion of industry experts in Murray State courses and allows the program to expand adjunct, industry-led instruction in future semesters. To donate to the Danny Claiborne Professorship, contact Kevin Munsey in the Office of Development at kmunsey1@murraystate.edu or 270-809-3406.

no textbook can fully convey. The students will benefit greatly from his knowledge and examples he brings to the classroom. This is just the start of bringing in industry professionals to supplement and enhance our curriculum. The plan is to bring an experienced professional in each semester to teach one of our



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KFAC approves more than \$4 million in loans

Financing bolsters beef, horticulture, poultry, and grain farmers across the state

FRANKFORT – The Kentucky Agricultural Finance Corp. (KAFC) approved 20 agricultural loans totaling \$4,003,087 for projects across the Commonwealth today at its monthly board meeting.

Agricultural Infrastructure Loan Program (AILP)

Five Agricultural Infrastructure loans totaling up to \$1,193,750 were approved. Loan recipients were in Calloway (\$250,000), Christian (\$250,000), Graves (\$250,000), McLean (\$193,750), and Union (\$250,000) counties.

KAFC participates with lenders to provide financing to

producers making capital expenditures for agricultural projects through the AILP. Eligible projects include permanent farm structures with attached equipment that improves the profitability of farming operations. Producers may be eligible for up to \$250,000 not to exceed 50 percent of the project.

Agricultural Processing Loan Program (APLP)

Two Agricultural Processing loans totaling up to \$500,000 were approved. Loan recipients were in Bell (\$250,000) and Calloway (\$250,000) counties.

APLP is designed to provide loan opportunities to

companies and individuals in Kentucky interested in adding value to Kentucky-grown agricultural commodities through further processing. Agricultural processors may qualify for financing for acquisition of equipment, construction of new facilities, renovation/expansion of existing facilities and permanent working capital up to 50 percent of the project cost.

Beginning Farmer Loan Program (BFLP)

Twelve Beginning Farmer loans totaling up to \$2,196,837 were approved. Loan recipients were in Bourbon (\$104,987), Christian (\$250,000),

Daviess (\$116,500), Graves (\$250,000), Grayson (\$250,000), Madison (\$250,000), Marion (\$150,350), McLean (\$250,000), Meade (\$250,000), Nelson (\$45,000), Pulaski (\$250,000), and Washington (\$30,000) counties.

The BFLP is designed to assist individuals with some farming experience who desire to develop, expand, or buy into a farming operation. Beginning farmers may qualify for financing to purchase livestock, equipment, or agriculture facilities; to secure permanent working capital; for the purchase of farm real estate; or to invest in a partnership or LLC.

Diversification through Entrepreneurship in Agribusiness Program (DEALP)

One Diversification through Entrepreneurship in Agribusiness loan totaling \$112,500 was approved. Loan recipient was in Mercer County.

DEALP is designed to assist agri-entrepreneurs with the purchase, establishment, or expansion of a business that sells agricultural products or services to farmers or consumers. For more information on KAFC participation loans, contact your lender or Bill McCloskey at Kentucky Office of Agricultural

Policy at (502)382-6093 or email kafc@ky.gov.

The Kentucky Office of Agricultural Policy (KOAP), a division within the Kentucky Department of Agriculture, provides staff support to the Kentucky Agricultural Finance Corporation (KAFC) and the Kentucky Agricultural Development Fund (KADF). The KADF is administered by the Kentucky Agricultural Development Board. KOAP ensures Kentucky is being good stewards of dollars from the 1998 Tobacco Settlement Agreement by overseeing the boards' investments into diversifying and supporting Kentucky agriculture.

UK project aims to help Kentucky hay producers, horse owners meet in the middle



Hay is especially important to horse owners, though finding the best product for the best price can sometimes be difficult.

Photo by Matt Barton

By Jordan Strickler

Lexington, Ky.— A University of Kentucky team consisting of Bob Coleman, Ray Smith and Krista Lea, along with the support of many county agents around the state, is starting a two-year research and educational effort to help hay producers sell more “horse-quality” hay and horse owners

buy hay with fewer surprises.

Kentucky has approximately 35,000 horse operations, affecting more than one million acres of farmland. Many of those farms buy hay, and project leaders say better communication between sellers and buyers can keep more hay dollars in Kentucky.

The Department of Animal and Food Sciences and

Department of Plant and Soil Sciences partnership grew out of an earlier grant and a simple idea: Connect the people who grow the commodity with the people who use it.

“What you’re trying to do is bring together the commodity producers with the commodity users,” said Bob Coleman, associate professor in the Department of Animal Sciences at Martin-

Gatton College of Agriculture, Food and Environment. “I believe that is extremely important.”

A key part of the project is helping hay producers describe their product in ways horse owners can trust and compare. Coleman said buyers often rely on advice and may reject hay that is safe

see PROJECT, page 11



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The 30th annual Spring Farm Consignment Auction will be an online auction through DASONLINEAUCTIONS.HIBID.COM. All equipment will be lined up and staged at the Warrick County 4-H Center as usual. We will not be accepting small items: hand tools, boxed lots, tires, or small barn and garage related items that are usually lined up along the barn. DAS has the right of refusal of any merchandise. Items will be lined up and staged outside in the order they come in. The commission is on a sliding scale per each item and a \$15 fee will be charged for each item with a title.

DAS will take consignments from Saturday Feb. 28th through Thursday March 5th from 7 AM till 5 PM. **NO CONSIGNMENTS TAKEN ON FRIDAY MARCH 6th OR ON AUCTION DAY!** Please bring a list and good description of items being consigned. Each day, items will be updated and available for the online auction. Items can be viewed at the 4-H Center Friday March 6th and on auction day, March 7th. The staff will be present if you have any questions. For more information, please call or look on our website at <https://dasonlineauctions.hibid.com>.

TERMS: A 10% buyer's fee will be charged. A credit card is required to sign up to bid through Dasonlineauctions.hibid.com. When the online auction closes, you will receive an invoice by email (about 30 minutes after the conclusion of auction) for items you win. When you pick up your items, you can **pay with cash, check, or credit card (3% charge)**. Indiana 7% state sales tax will be charged (Exemption forms will be available). All items need to be paid for by Monday March 9th. If items are not paid for on Monday, March 9th your credit card will be charged. Items can be picked up 1 hour after the auction is completed and invoices are emailed (loaders will shut down at 5:15 PM - NO LOADING IN THE DARK) and Sunday March 8th through Tuesday March 10th from 9 AM to 4 PM. Loaders will be available.

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|--------------------------|-----|
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| \$501.00 to \$2,000.00 | 15% |
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Comer and hemp industry leaders push bipartisan legislation to support America's hemp farmers

WASHINGTON – Last week in Washington, Congressman James Comer (R-Ky.) joined hemp industry leaders and farmers to host a press conference focused on the future of the U.S. hemp industry and the need for a responsible, workable regulatory framework. Congressman Comer emphasized that Congress must remain committed to advancing bipartisan solutions in partnership with fellow lawmakers and industry stakeholders, while opposing any actions that would undermine the hemp industry or create additional uncertainty and economic hardship for America's hemp farmers.

On Wednesday, Congressman Comer joined Representative Jim Baird (R-Ind.), House Agriculture Committee Ranking Member Angie Craig (D-Minn.), Representative Tim Moore (R-N.C.), and Representative Gabe Evans (R-Colo.) to introduce the bipartisan Hemp Planting Predictability Act. The bill would grant a two-year extension of the hemp provision included in the FY2026 Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act that restricts the definition of legal hemp. This extension would give Congress additional time to develop and enact comprehensive hemp policy that supports farmers, strengthens the industry, and protects consumers.

Below are Congressman Comer's press conference remarks as prepared.

Good morning. Today, I am proud to join so many leaders, advocates, and supporters of the hemp industry here in Washington, D.C.

I want to thank my friend, Jonathan Miller, and the U.S. Hemp Roundtable for convening so many advocates to support hemp farmers and the businesses that cultivate it.

This is an issue near and dear to my heart.

The hemp industry is facing significant challenges and growing uncertainty, and it is long past time for Congress to provide farmers and business owners with the clarity they need to succeed.

This uncertainty is not abstract—it is impacting real people, real jobs, and real communities across the country, particularly in rural America.

The hemp industry's impact on my home state of Kentucky, and nationwide, is substantial.

Hemp supports 320,000 American jobs, generates \$28.4 billion in market activity, and contributes \$1.5 billion in state tax revenue.

I am proud to be a long-time supporter of the hemp industry, dating back to my service as Kentucky's Commissioner of Agriculture. I led the charge to make Kentucky the very first state to legally grow hemp.

Today, as it did then, hemp offers farmers the opportunity to diversify, innovate, and remain competitive in an evolving agricultural economy.

Hemp is a major crop for our Kentucky farmers, and nearly every farmer I know who grew hemp last year was a former tobacco

farmer. So, hemp is doing exactly today what I predicted. It has become an alternative crop to tobacco for Kentucky farmers.

Since coming to Congress in 2016, I have

worked to ensure the hemp industry receives strong support at the federal level.

That work was especially critical during negotiations on the 2018 Farm Bill, which laid

the foundation for the industry's growth over the last few years.

I made it a priority to be one of hemp's strongest advocates during those negotiations.

As a result, the 2018

Farm Bill unleashed the industry and supported jobs, small businesses, and entrepreneurs across the country.

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A look back at USDA rural development's impact in 2025



By Travis T. Burton,
Kentucky State Director,
USDA Rural Development

As we close out the year and welcome a new one, this is a great time to review what we've accomplished at the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development agency, and I can tell you 2025 was a record year for us here in Kentucky! Since President Trump took office, we secured over \$1.265 billion in federal resources for the

commonwealth.

Our agency exists to improve the economic prosperity and quality of life in rural America, and we do that through three overarching funding categories – affordable housing, business development, and community infrastructure.

Affordable Housing

Through our various affordable housing programs, we helped over 1,500 families buy,

build, or repair their home.

Homeownership is not just part of the American dream; it's the best way to build generational wealth. Our direct and guaranteed loan programs are a great way to realize that dream.

That's exactly what Brian W. did. After being displaced by the historic flooding in July 2022, he found himself and his two pugs living with friends and family. But he worked with one of

our housing non-profit partners and now owns a home in a higher ground development.

We also helped over 100 families make necessary repairs to their homes, including 50 through our disaster repair grant programs.

Business Development

Small businesses play a vital role in the economic prosperity of rural Kentucky. From multi-million dollar guaranteed loans to small energy efficiency grants, we're here to help rural businesses grow, create jobs, and be profitable. We also have programs to help trusted non-profits provide technical assistance to small businesses.

In 2025, we invested over \$63.5 million, saving and creating over 200 jobs across the commonwealth. Some of these investments will have a long-lasting impact, like the grant awarded to Kentucky Community & Technical College System's Hazard campus. That grant will be used to help establish a mobile plumbing training program to good paying jobs in our state.

Community Infrastructure

Communities can't exist without infrastructure and essential services like law enforcement, health care and emergency response.

We recently announced a \$73.8 million investment in Livingston Hospital, which will be used to create 56,000 additional square feet of treatment space and improve access to quality care in that region.

That's just one of over 40 infrastructure investments we made in rural Kentucky totaling over \$893.6 million.

Looking Ahead to 2026

We're just getting started! I can't wait to see what 2026 brings us to rural Kentucky. President Trump and Secretary Rollins are committed to ushering in a new era of prosperity for rural American and my team and I will spend every day making sure we are doing just that here in Kentucky.



12th Annual PRODUCTION SALE MARCH 8, 2026

Sale at 1:00pm // Lunch at 11:30am

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PROJECT
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and useful because it does not match a checklist they found online. He said basic details can change a buying decision, including the bale's weight.

"You might have a 50-pound bale for \$10 and a 40-pound bale for \$8," Coleman said. "That makes a huge difference. Horse owners need to know what they are getting. Also, you need to feed your horses high-quality hay, but what is that? Hay with the highest nutrient numbers is not always the best fit for every horse."

The project will work through county Extension personnel, who often know local hay producers better than they know horse owners. The plan includes demonstration farms, publications and popular-press articles, educational programs and six regional field days.

The project also plans to work with the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, the UK Regulatory Services Hay Testing Program and the Kentucky Department of Agriculture's hay marketing efforts.

Early work has focused on outreach and hay sampling, including proper sample collection. The team also expects to teach about weed issues that show up in horse hay, such as foxtail, and to help horse owners recognize problem plants when they open a bale.

The effort comes at a time when hay prices and marketing opportunities matter for farm budgets. USDA data show Kentucky farmers received an average of \$176 per ton for hay excluding alfalfa in 2024, a figure Coleman said can look very different when hay is packaged and marketed for the horse market.

"The goal is not to turn Extension agents into hay brokers," Coleman said. "I don't want to be the broker, and I know the agents don't want to be the broker. But if we can come up with a way that makes it really easy and very user-friendly, I think that will help."

The two-year project is funded by a \$147,000 grant through the Kentucky Governor's Office of Agricultural Policy.

COMER
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Now, we must act swiftly to pass legislation that protects jobs, eliminates bad actors, standardizes labeling, and requires third-party testing.

These steps are essential to providing certainty for business owners and confidence for consumers.

Today, American farmers are facing serious headwinds. The last thing they

need is inaction from Washington that puts a growing, multi-billion-dollar industry at risk.

That is why I am proud to stand here today in strong support of the hemp industry.

I appreciate the leadership of my colleague from Indiana, Congressman Jim Baird, who has introduced the Hemp Planting Predictability Act.

I am proud to be an original cosponsor of this legislation, which would give Congress an additional two years to

enact comprehensive hemp policy that supports farmers, strengthens the industry, and protects consumers.

This is not a partisan issue.

I urge both Republicans and Democrats to come together and support this commonsense extension.

I look forward to continuing to work with my colleagues in Congress and industry stakeholders to get this bill to the President's desk as quickly as possible.

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