



# Ag Innovation News

TODAY'S INSIGHTS • OPPORTUNITIES • IDEAS

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## Turning a Dream of Local Meat Processing into Reality

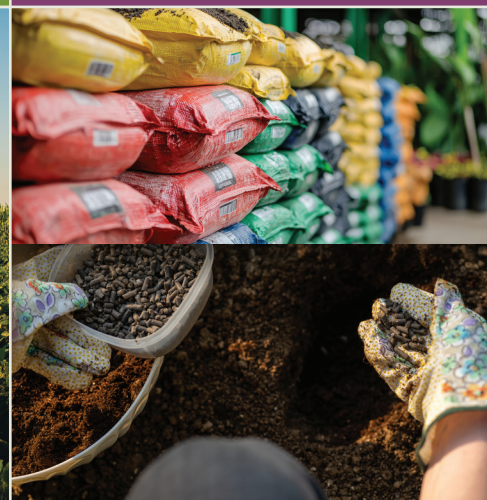
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Strategies to Reduce and Recover Nutrients in Ag Production

Where Are They Now? StableFeed



## EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S COLUMN

*“While the economic future for the agricultural sector is uncertain, AURI’s role remains as critical as ever in securing that future.”*

It was a busy and impactful year for AURI and its many collaborators. Our FY25 annual report illustrates what we did and how it advanced our mission in achieving economic impacts to benefit Minnesota agriculture.

We worked on 196 projects across food, bioindustrial, and multi-purpose areas. We conducted 10 events, either virtually or at various locations across the state, and delivered on our mission to create and expand market opportunities through our technical assistance on new products and processes. Clients serviced over the past five years reported an estimated \$189 million in new gross annual sales of agricultural-derived products, \$129 million in capital investment over that same five-year period to advance new opportunities, and 686 jobs being supported or created. What is even more intriguing is the optimism reported by past clients about the future, with an estimated \$604 million in new potential capital to be invested in value-added agriculture across the state over the next five years.

Additionally, this is the first time AURI has quantified the impacts of its more public-facing initiatives. The methodology for doing this type of work is challenging and imprecise, but based on conversations with industry and public statements from companies, we believe an estimated \$800 million in economic impacts has occurred or will ensue across the region in value-added sectors that AURI has been working broadly to advance and support. That is a significant number that is shared across many stakeholders and collaborators to advance value-added agriculture markets.

We are already well underway with our FY26 activities and are looking forward to seeing what additional economic activity we can help catalyze to support the agricultural industry. So far, there has been a lot of activity in the biogas space, and we continue to see strong engagement across our four other interest areas of scaling food and beverage companies, food ingredients, coproduct valorization, and biobased products.

While the economic future for the agricultural sector is uncertain, AURI’s role remains as critical as ever in securing that future. We were created and built for the challenge. After 35 years, AURI continues to stay true to its mission to find innovative ways to expand markets and enrich and support a healthy economy and a sustainable future for our farmers.

I encourage you to enjoy this edition of the Ag Innovation News and to download our FY25 annual report to learn more about what AURI is striving to accomplish and to understand potential ways you can engage with us and collaborate in expanding market opportunities.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Shannon M. Schlecht'. The signature is fluid and cursive, written over a light gray background.

**Shannon M. Schlecht**  
Executive Director

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AURI’s FY25 annual report is now available on our website under the leadership tab.



## *Board Spotlight*

### **REP. PAUL ANDERSON**

This issue of Ag Innovation News highlights AURI’s first-term Board Director, Rep. Paul Anderson. Rep. Anderson is a fourth-generation family farmer from Starbuck, Minnesota, and a graduate of the University of Minnesota. First elected to the Minnesota House of Representatives in 2008, Anderson has consistently represented a rural district in West Central Minnesota, advocating for policies that support the region’s agricultural heritage, rural way of life, and economic vitality. He currently serves as co-chair of the Minnesota House Agriculture Finance and Policy Committee, where he plays a key leadership role in shaping legislation that impacts Minnesota’s farmers, rural communities, and food systems.

#### **Why did you want to join AURI’s board of directors?**

While in the Legislature, I have been familiar with AURI’s work over the years. When given the opportunity to become a board member, I gladly accepted.

#### **What do you think is the biggest challenge facing farmers today?**

Low commodity prices and high input costs are putting a financial squeeze on farmers operating today.

#### **How can Minnesota best support its agricultural industry?**

We can stop adding regulations and costly fee increases to Minnesota farmers. These things add additional cost to their operations.

#### **What action has been taken at the Legislature to support farmers and the agricultural industry?**

We passed funding to help dairy farmers pay the premium for their enrollment into the federal Dairy Margin Protection Plan. We also fund the Rural Finance Authority, which makes loans to farmers at below-market interest rates. We also support the Farmer-Lender Mediation Program, which farmers can utilize when working with their lenders.

#### **Which ag-related issues are most important to you?**

I want to work to make biofuels more available to the public and to the airline industry. We can’t rely on one country to take our excess production. Producing E-15 and sustainable jet fuel are two products I fully support.

#### **What is something people would be surprised to learn about you?**

I am also a farmer, so I have firsthand knowledge of the impact state policies have on Minnesota agriculture. Minnesota is a powerhouse in ag production, and I want to do what I can to support our ag industry.



# AURI DERISKS INNOVATION AND OPPORTUNITY

**AURI clients are a highly diverse mix of entities, ranging from farmers to entrepreneurial startups to legacy businesses expanding their offerings. Yet many share a common trait that drives them and their ideas forward.**

“Everyone we work with is different,” says AURI Executive Director Shannon Schlecht, “but they share a passion, creativity, determination, and willingness to take risks that many might be hesitant to take.”

From innovative food products targeting today’s consumers to groundbreaking technologies with broad impact potential, AURI’s client base is wide, touching nearly every Minnesota-grown agricultural commodity or processing coproduct.

For more than 35 years, AURI has supported the development of new uses for agricultural products by delivering unique business and technical assistance to help businesses and entrepreneurs respond to market opportunities. AURI’s assistance typically comes early in the process, which helps tilt the odds of success in the client’s favor.

“I’m constantly amazed at the ingenuity and innovation we see across the state,” Schlecht says. “It comes from everywhere—farmers, cooperatives, scientists, and your neighbor next door. Minnesotans and Midwesterners have a mentality of making things better for the next generation and of truly wanting to solve problems they see in their lives or that are emerging. That is a great mindset, and I think it speaks to what we see every day.”

## CHANGE AGENTS .....

Taking risks often comes with substantial rewards. Collectively, AURI-supported clients have made significant impacts on the state’s economy.

Economic analysis from July 2020 to June 2025 shows that AURI clients made an estimated capital investment of over \$129 million, with an additional \$604 million in planned future capital investment. AURI clients generated estimated new annual gross sales of nearly \$189 million.

In addition to investments, AURI-supported clients had a real impact on people and communities. During the 2020 to 2025 time period, AURI clients retained 686 jobs with the expectation of adding or retaining over 760 jobs in the future.

“AURI has been the start of unlocking innovation to small companies that are up and coming to large companies that need a different avenue,” says Tom Smude, owner of Smude Enterprises of Pierz. “They’re always looking for that new way to help that business succeed.”

“We service a lot of projects each year. Some are very successful, and others are less impactful, but what we do is provide both a technical and business perspective to fill information gaps and provide honest assessments,” Schlecht explains. “Those upfront evaluations to build right-sized projects with businesses, in turn, help build better outcomes and impacts, and are reflected in our annual results.” Schlecht says receiving client feedback on how

AURI assistance has affected their business is valuable information on which AURI continues to build, leveraging that Midwestern mentality to refine and improve the support offered.

## EMERGING AND INNOVATIVE

One of AURI's focus areas is food. In 2025, AURI's food team worked on 100 projects centered on innovative products. That assistance included working with Subash Yadav and Alexis Poce. They are growing their business producing momo, a dumpling familiar to Nepali cuisine, typically filled with meat or vegetables. Mr. Momo started as a food truck but has since moved into a production facility in Minneapolis.

Mr. Momo produces chicken, lamb, and vegetable momo, as well as a line of sauces for retail and restaurant customers in the Twin Cities and beyond.

"AURI really works with businesses at the point they are at financially," Yadav says. "We are a startup, and we don't have a lot of extra money, so to get the level of service for such a low cost was extremely helpful."

Bioindustrial development is another focus for AURI. A rapidly emerging area of potential to add value to Minnesota agriculture is biogas generation. AURI has made significant advancements in helping businesses and farmers better understand the renewable energy potential of biogas generation through anaerobic digestion.

The Minnesota state legislature provided AURI with one-time funding to assess the opportunity. Schlecht notes that the organization has greatly expanded its knowledge, networks, projects, and tangible outcomes as a result. He adds: "The one-time funds really jump-started our efforts to advance this overlooked renewable energy opportunity for our agriculture sector."

Minnesota has fewer than 20 digestors on farms today, but with a robust livestock sector, ample ag-based biomass, a strong food processing sector, and clean energy goals, "this all feels like it could develop into a new renewable energy opportunity for Minnesota's agriculture sector. Biogas provides another renewable energy product and revenue stream in addition to ethanol and biodiesel," Schlecht says.

One company working to make the intersection of agriculture and energy a reality is Swinergy. Based in Minneapolis, Swinergy

transforms livestock manure into renewable energy. The company uses anaerobic digestion to process the manure into renewable natural gas (RNG) and fertilizer. The system captures about 90% of greenhouse gas emissions and reduces processing time from a typical 60-90 days to just 13 days.

"Our solution is a win-win-win," says Eugene Alvey, Swinergy founder and CEO. "We help livestock operations better manage their emissions, leading to environmental benefits, water quality improvements, and the generation of renewable natural gas for growing energy needs."

Swinergy's system integrates with existing farms. The company manages system installation, operation, maintenance, and renewable natural gas sales. Swinergy is currently fabricating its first commercial system for a 4,800-head swine farm in southern Minnesota. The system is expected to produce pipeline-quality gas this upcoming summer.

## FOR THE LONG HAUL

Success for new business or expanded product lines for existing companies rarely takes a linear path. Success doesn't always come easy, nor does it come quickly.

"We've gotten used to the hockey stick curves with the technology sector, but agriculture and food typically follow a slower growth rate," Schlecht observes. "We see a lot of success with companies exploring product extensions or looking at feedstock uses in a different way to get some incremental value. The business relationships and trust that AURI has built over its 35-plus years of existence provide the foundation and expertise to help both start-up and existing companies make more informed and ultimately impactful decisions."

AURI's non-biased insight and experience can help unlock growth, or it can help a business or an entrepreneur avoid costly mistakes.

"We all see the world differently, have different experiences, and AURI gets to be an entry point to help assess a lot of those perspectives," Schlecht says. "We try to match those perspectives with our expertise or with others in our networks that can catalyze an opportunity."



"AURI really works with businesses at the point they are at financially," Yadav says. "We are a startup, and we don't have a lot of extra money, so to get the level of service for such a low cost was extremely helpful."

# Turning a Dream of Local Meat Processing into Reality



Years ago, Paul Benson sat down with his two sons for a conversation that would ultimately reshape not only his family's future but the future of his hometown.

A lifelong cattle producer in Waubun, Minnesota, Benson had built a small butcher operation in Mahnomen County, located on the White Earth Indian Reservation in the northwest corner of the state. The county is one of Minnesota's poorest and is considered a food desert, with limited access to fresh foods and a shortage of high-paying jobs.

"I told my sons there really weren't opportunities for small beef producers here," Benson recalls. "I encouraged them to look elsewhere. I didn't want them to get stuck."

But the weight of that conversation lingered. Instead of accepting decline as inevitable, Benson began asking a different question: What would it take to create opportunity here?

## FROM IDEA TO INITIATIVE

In 2017, Benson and his friend Doyle Turner approached the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) to explore funding for expanding their family farm's butcher operation. They learned \$10,000 was available for a feasibility study—if they could match it. The White Earth Nation stepped in with matching funds, giving the project momentum.

The feasibility study confirmed what Benson already believed: there was room—and need—for local meat processing capacity. The pair hired a design firm and worked with their accountant to develop a business plan. They pursued additional grants and worked with the Minnesota Department of Transportation to identify an accessible location near both livestock producers and convenient traffic corridors.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Progress stalled. In September 2021, Turner died from complications related to COVID-19.

"I thought that was the end of it," Benson says. "The money had dried up, and without Doyle, it felt like we had taken it as far as we could."

## A SECOND WIND

Nearly a year later, Benson's sister, Mary Metelak, and her husband, Stew, stepped in and agreed to serve as co-owners. Metelak quickly focused on a pivotal opportunity: a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) that could revive the project.

To strengthen the application, she turned to AURI. Harold Stanislawski, AURI's business and industry development director, worked closely with the team to refine the proposal.

"That grant application process was incredibly in-depth," Metelak says. "AURI helped answer tough questions, which led to a successful application. Harold's expertise was invaluable."

Their efforts paid off. The project was awarded nearly \$1 million in USDA funding. Bremer Bank provided additional financing, construction began in 2023, and in 2024, Benson + Turner Foods, Inc., officially opened its doors.

## A NEW MODEL FOR RURAL MEAT PROCESSING

The 8,000-square-foot USDA-inspected facility now employs 21 full- and part-time workers and contributes an estimated \$4 million annually to the local economy.

USDA inspection status allows the plant to sell products across state lines—critical for market access. But Benson + Turner Foods operates differently from large-scale commodity processors.



## What is Benchmarking?

Benchmarking is a confidential, data-driven tool that helps meat processors compare their business performance with peers across Minnesota and beyond. For a limited time, AURI is offering this tool free of charge.

With clear, easy-to-read reports, you'll see how your plant performs in:

- Labor efficiency
- Utility and overhead costs
- Yield and throughput
- Profit margins

### How to Enroll

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OR VISIT: [auri.org/benchmarking-subscription-for-meat-processors/](https://auri.org/benchmarking-subscription-for-meat-processors/)

“Everything we sell comes through our door alive and from local producers,” Benson says. “We’re not moving pallets of boxed beef. We have to build a market for every cut. That’s challenging—but it’s also our strength.”

Approximately 40 percent of production goes toward retail and wholesale products, with the remainder custom processing. The company sources livestock from about 15 local producers and assists farmers in developing labels to support direct marketing. Beyond processing, the facility includes a retail market and a classroom for workforce training and community education. A commercial kitchen and canning space are under construction. Federal and state partners see the facility as a proof point. Representatives from both the USDA and the MDA have been enthusiastic supporters throughout the lifecycle, Benson says.

“They’ve told us our job is to help rebuild innovation in meat processing—something this country has lost—and demonstrate this model works,” Benson says. “We’re doing our best to prove them right.”

## ONGOING PARTNERSHIP WITH AURI

Since opening, AURI has continued supporting Benson + Turner Foods with staff training, food safety assistance, and technical expertise.

The business is also participating in AURI’s Benchmarking Service (see sidebar for more information), a data-driven tool that allows processors to compare performance metrics—such as labor efficiency, yield, margins, utilities, and overhead—against peers across Minnesota and the U.S.

“AURI has helped us think more analytically about our business,” Metelak says. “They’ve shown us where we can stretch our dollars and improve efficiency. I can’t say enough good things about their support.”

Stanislawski notes that the project faced numerous moments when it could have collapsed.

“Economic development like this is not for the faint of heart,” he says. “But local meat processing is foundational to rural economies. A plant like Benson + Turner Foods supports livestock producers while also generating secondary benefits for retailers, consumers, and the broader community.”

## KEEPING THE VALUE LOCAL

Today, Benson and Metelak are focused on strengthening regional markets for local beef and pork. They are advocating for policies and purchasing practices that prioritize local sourcing—encouraging institutions such as food shelves and senior care centers to buy from area producers—so that food dollars remain in the community. They are also working with local school districts and food distribution organizations through the White Earth Tribe to further expand markets for their products.

“We’re learning as we go,” Metelak says. “But we can already see the impact. One of my priorities is to continue to work hard on building awareness to keep the momentum going on the benefits of local sourcing.”

For Benson, the greatest impact is generational. It has been years since he told his sons to look elsewhere for opportunity. Now, he sees young producers launching their own labels, building customer bases, and staying in Mahnomon County. Staying home is not easy, but it is now possible.

*“We have young farmers who can start a business, market their own products, and support their families,” Benson says. “That’s the biggest win. Local sourcing isn’t just a slogan—it’s economic development in real time. Now we have to keep it going.”*

# AURI: BUILT FOR COOPERATION



Farmer-owned cooperatives have long been a foundational mechanism for Minnesota growers to work together for collective benefit. The first Minnesota farmer cooperatives date back to the 1890s.

For 15 years, AURI's Rural Cooperative Development Center (RCDC) has helped support that cooperative spirit while enhancing those businesses' ability to grow. The Center uses cooperative development as a strategy to support and grow rural economies by delivering services to new or existing cooperatives. AURI provides technical assistance in a range of areas, including business assistance, product assessment, feasibility analysis, market evaluation, and more.

AURI's Center has received federal support through the USDA Rural Cooperative Development Grant (RCDG) program. The RCDG program enables nonprofit organizations to operate cooperative development centers that support rural economic growth and job creation through the cooperative model.

"We started the Rural Cooperative Development Center in 2011, and the focus of that Center is to assist rural businesses, existing co-ops, or steering committees that are looking at becoming co-ops. We walk them through the process of assessing whether a co-op is an appropriate business structure for the venture," says Michael Sparby, AURI commercialization director. "We've been very successful. We do a number of feasibility assessments, both on the economic and technical side of things, as well as efficiency enhancements for existing co-ops."

The RCDC has supported hundreds of projects with more than 16,000 coop members/owners since its inception, with substantial success. Impacts from the co-op assistance to Minnesota entities include over \$168 million in new capital investment and nearly \$277 million in increased revenue. Support from the RCDC has also led businesses to create or retain over 760 jobs.

Sparby says AURI has worked closely with a wide range of co-ops, including several Minnesota ethanol plants looking to streamline processes or identify new revenue streams.

Chippewa Valley Ethanol Company (CVEC) in Benson has undertaken several projects through the RCDG program. The program has helped support CVEC's forward-thinking mission.

"One of the first things the board here did was decide that they wanted to add value, and that was through corn to fuel. Then they added diversity to that platform and utilized that approach to continue adding value across different revenue streams for the facility. That's been a large portion of our success," says CVEC General Manager Chad Friese.

Whether it was exploring the use of corn cobs to produce natural gas or assessing alternative agricultural feedstocks for cellulosic ethanol conversion, Friese says CVEC has not been afraid to innovate. Many of their efforts were supported by AURI's Rural Cooperative Development Center.

"Just about every time we've ever done anything, it's been through this program," Friese says. "It's been new markets, it's been alternative products, so we go back quite a way."

Friese says CVEC has utilized AURI technical assistance and facilities in the cooperative's quest for ongoing growth and innovation.

"As a cooperative, we're always looking for ways to return value to our local shareholders and to our local community," Friese says. "I'm very happy with the relationship and collaboration we've had with AURI over the years. We will continue to work with them, given the opportunity."

## DIVERSE APPLICATIONS

In addition to farmer-owned ethanol cooperatives, AURI has supported a wide variety of entities looking at multifaceted applications through the RCDC. A few examples of those various projects are stated below.

AURI recently helped a Minnesota livestock producers' group assess the feasibility of forming a cooperative to share freezer and cold storage space. The producer group had established a customer base and believed it would benefit from cost savings and operational efficiencies through the cooperative sharing of infrastructure and logistics.

AURI worked with a dairy doing on-farm processing to evaluate coproducts to improve efficiency and potentially generate additional value-added products or revenue streams.

A group of growers enlisted AURI to evaluate the efficacy of an alfalfa-based foliar fertilizer. AURI assisted by assessing the process and technology, as well as addressing whether a co-op would be the best structure for advancing the venture.

AURI's Rural Cooperative Development Center served a dry bean grower group to further value-added processing opportunities targeting the dry bean ingredient market. Those services were intended to increase opportunities for both processors and farmers and to diversify Minnesota's agricultural economy.

A food co-op requested aid from the RCDC to warrant a financially sound expansion to a new location. The project required design, legal, and other predevelopment services associated with the expansion.

Farmers Union Industries has partnered with AURI on several projects ranging from biofuels to new value-added uses for ag fibers.

"The word that best describes AURI is collaborative," says Troy Bryant, director of construction and project management for Farmers Union Industries. "They bring different minds and different expertise. They pull from industries across the state, across the region, for us to leverage."

## CONNECTIONS

The RCDC not only offers a range of assistance to Minnesota rural companies and cooperatives but also has another strength: dovetailing with other resources.

"It's a program that works hand-in-hand with other resources that are out there," Sparby says. "For example, the Minnesota Department of Agriculture has a co-op grant program. The RCDG works with that program, as well as other resources that Minnesotans can tap into."

Not all the groups AURI has worked with have chosen to move forward as cooperatives. AURI's feasibility work has also caused some entities to put the brakes on possible ventures. True to AURI's mission, sometimes helping cooperatives avoid costly mistakes is as valuable as identifying new opportunities.

"The RCDC has been a very productive program for rural businesses and co-ops as well as for AURI because it's a program that fits well within our function and mission as an organization," Sparby says.

**More information on the Rural Cooperative Development Center is available at [auri.org](http://auri.org).**



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**Support from the RCDC has also led businesses to create or retain over 760 jobs.**



## *AURI Identifies Strategies* **TO REDUCE AND RECOVER NUTRIENTS IN AG PRODUCTS**

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The Agricultural Utilization Research Institute is conducting a multifaceted study of the environmental and economic benefits of capturing and repurposing nutrients from agriculturally derived products. The study, in collaboration with the Minnesota Department of Agriculture and funded by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), is part of an effort to identify strategies to reduce nutrient levels in Minnesota's surface and groundwater while also increasing rural economic activity and supporting the state's ag economy.

Nutrients in fertilizers and animal feed, such as phosphorus, nitrogen, and potassium, can enter groundwater through agricultural runoff, creating environmental concerns. Further, due to the state's geographic location, Minnesota's farmers pay more for fertilizer than the national average. Therefore, more effective nutrient use and reuse in ag operations is an opportunity area for Minnesota's agriculture industry. The study examines ways to increase the amount of nutrients recovered and repurposed at the processing and farm level, addressing environmental concerns and retaining more money in the state of Minnesota.

The first phase of the research focuses on strategies to reduce phosphorus levels in animal feed products. The second explores strategies to be more efficient in using nitrogen by removing a higher percentage of nutrients at the wastewater treatment plant level and scaling the reapplication of those nutrients back to the farm. The third segment expands on past research on intercepting nutrients before they enter groundwater using perennial or annual cover crops such as Kernza.

AURI is partnering with the University of Minnesota on ways to reduce phosphorus in animal feed. Researchers at the University are testing the effectiveness of a solvent that extracts nutrients from agricultural feedstocks, allowing the remaining byproducts to be used in animal feed diets with a better ratio of usable nutrients.

Based on experiments and research, chemists at the University hope to have results and a business case to present to the animal feed industry. The results so far have been positive, says Dr. Prasanth K.S. Pillai, an assistant professor of bioconversion & upcycling of food byproducts at the University.

"We are building a computationally informed solvent optimization system that enables precision extraction of nutrients while reducing empirical screening and development time. We aim to translate this research through a business lens so we can demonstrate to industry that nutrient extraction and upcycling can generate measurable new revenue streams," Pillai explains.

According to Pillai, AURI is a tremendous partner for the agricultural industry. Projects like this one are great examples of collaborations that train the next generations of chemists and produce research that benefits the state's ag economy.

"We are here to help businesses create new revenue streams while also training students to become the next generation of scientists equipped with the right skills and mindset," Pillai continues.

For the second issue, AURI is working to identify methods to improve the circularity of nitrogen applications. Farmers use manure to fertilize their fields, but it is not always very effective. Nutrients are often lost from the fields and end up in groundwater systems. Local wastewater treatment plants have been successful in removing nutrients before discharging water back into lakes and rivers; however, to date, those nutrients are not repurposed back to farmers at a reliable rate. The result is expensive and inefficient. AURI is conducting a screening exercise to identify technologies that can capture nutrients at wastewater treatment plants and return them to local ag producers for reuse in fertilizer applications. AURI is also working with manufacturers and other businesses to develop more effective technology solutions.

"We have data that shows that we could replace almost 30 percent of the demand for nitrogen in Minnesota if we can do a better job recovering the nutrients from the application of manure in agriculture," says Luca Zullo, AURI's senior director of science and technology. "That has a potential environmental and economic benefit of hundreds of millions of dollars for our state."

For the third objective, AURI is building on past research to show how cover crops and perennial crops can be used to scavenge nutrients. The research will identify ways these crops could be used to manage excess nutrients and explore value-added opportunities from their biomass, which may provide additional revenue streams for use in food, feed, or energy products.

This comprehensive research project is funded through a grant from the Minnesota Department of Agriculture and will conclude in 2027.

Zullo notes that to date, the research project has uncovered some promising findings. The topic of nutrient recovery also aligns well with AURI's ongoing work in coproduct valorization and the field of anaerobic digestion, he says.

"The question now," Zullo concludes, "is can we optimize what we are seeing in this work and get it to a point where it makes sense conceptually on the commercial side?"

## WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

### For The Love of a Horse

Mary Hartman didn't intend to be a pioneer in the horse feed industry; it just worked out that way, and it all began out of love for a horse.

"I think there are quite a few people in the horse industry who create a company because of their equines," Hartman contends. "I had a need, and what I needed was not available in the market, so I made it."

Hartman founded StableFeed in 2017 in Kasson, Minnesota, producing feed and supplements that use innovative ingredients to support horses' systemic health. StableFeed products use ingredients such as sainfoin, timothy hay, carrots, and berries. Sainfoin is a highly palatable, non-bloating perennial legume used for forage, hay, and even honey production. Sainfoin also offers environmental advantages. As a cover crop, it only needs tilling every 20-30 years, while early research indicates that sainfoin as a feed may reduce methane emissions from cows and other animals.

Hartman recognized that existing processed feeds weren't meeting the needs of horses, so she set out to do something about it. She worked on some formulations in her kitchen before connecting with AURI.

"I started working with AURI to create a feed product based on food and bioavailable ingredients for the horse," Hartman says.

Hartman says StableFeed's progression went from a sick horse to a kitchen-made supplement to the point where she needed to move into a larger production and shipping facility.

"We grew from a kitchen business to this year, where we anticipate selling \$2 million in products," Hartman says.

StableFeed now offers nine sainfoin and three chia supplement products, which are distributed nationwide. Hartman was recently contacted about expanding her products into South America.

#### BUILDING AN INDUSTRY

Beyond producing horse feed and supplements, Hartman is building a market for sainfoin. The crop production needed to supply StableFeed demand has expanded from about 80 acres in 2021 to more than 2,300 acres under cultivation in 2026.

"I also worked with AURI to look at sainfoin," Hartman explains. "Sainfoin is a really great forage,

STABLEFEED



so I started working with AURI to come up with a feed. At the same time, I started looking for people to grow sainfoin because it pretty much disappeared from the U.S. For the past three and a half years, we've been growing our sainfoin supply and growing that market into the United States. That's really been the progression. Now we're in the growth phase and looking for ways to scale."

"One of the goals that AURI has for projects that we begin to work with is to see them grow and get to that stage of large-scale commercialization and product distribution," notes AURI Senior Scientist for Coproducts Alan Doering. "Mary's there, and she continues to expand."

AURI recently recognized StableFeed by selecting it as the organization's 2025 Ag Innovator of the Year.

The Ag Innovator award recognizes an AURI client that has shown innovation in their product or process, has utilized AURI's technical services, uses substantial quantities of Minnesota-grown commodities, and has achieved a level of market success.

Doering says StableFeed is a shining example of what the award seeks to recognize.

"StableFeed is not only growing but continuing to innovate. We're excited to work with them on the next big thing they pursue," Doering adds.

Hartman says she got into the feed business for a horse, and she's still in it for a horse, although it's no longer exclusive for the ones she owns.

*"Almost every day of the week, we get a phone call or a message from somebody telling us how the work we've done here has saved their horse," Hartman observes. "That is the single most rewarding thing, and that is what keeps us going."*

#### ABOUT AG INNOVATION NEWS

Jennifer Voegele, managing editor

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Address correspondence or subscription requests to:

AURI/Ag Innovation News  
280 University Drive SW  
Waseca, MN 56093

218-281-7600

news@auri.org

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#### CONTACT US

**Crookston**  
510 County Road 71 Suite 120  
Crookston, MN 56716

**St. Paul**  
University of Minnesota  
Andrew Boss Laboratory, Office 136G  
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