Beginning Conservation Pubs

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

farmers, usda, work, conservation, rural affairs, programs, ranchers, nrcs, talking, guides, lysons, topics, cover, listeners, center, lands, offices, information, service, interested

SPEAKERS

Speaker 3, Kalee Olson, Christa Hartsook, Olivia Hanlon

Christa Hartsook 00:15
Hello, and welcome to the Small Farms Podcast, a production of the Small Farms Program at Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. Our podcast covers the opportunities and challenges associated with rural life.

Olivia Hanlon 00:29
In this episode, I visit with Kalee Olson, Policy Associate with the Center for Rural Affairs, and we are talking about some new resources that are available for farmers who are beginning to implement conservation practices. I'm Olivia Hanlon, Extension Education Specialist, and we hope you enjoy the show. Kalee, this is your first time on the podcast. So to kick us off, why don't you start by telling us a little bit about yourself and what your role is for the Center for Rural Affairs.

Kalee Olson 00:54
Of course. So like you said, my name is Kalee Olson, and I'm a Policy Associate at the Center. I primarily work in the conservation and agriculture space. So a part of that is talking to farmers and ranchers in our service area about their operations, their interest in conservation, and what they think about current programs out there for farmers who are interested in those topics.

Olivia Hanlon 01:20
Okay, so Kalee, we've had your co-worker Kate on before. But for those who may have missed that episode, or have forgotten, can you give us a little bit of a refresher on some background info for the Center for Rural Affairs?

Kalee Olson 01:32
Sure, the Center for Rural Affairs was founded in 1973, with the main purpose of creating vibrant rural communities and there's a handful of ways that we do that here at the Center. First, through small business training and lending.
Second, working with communities, farmers and ranchers. And third through policy change, which is the area that I work in specifically. And I'm located at our headquarters in Lyons, Nebraska, which is a town of about 850 people. So we're very, very rural sticking true to the people that we serve. But we also have colleagues in Iowa, like Kate, South Dakota, and Minnesota, so that kind of helps us get a broader picture of what's happening in rural America.

Olivia Hanlon 02:17
So as part of your work at the Center for Rural Affairs, you put together this new series of publications that we're talking about today, for those who are just beginning in conservation, why don't you tell us a little bit about that?

Kalee Olson 02:28
Sure. So I think it helps to provide a little bit of background on this question, and by that, I just want to step back and say that for the last few years, members of the policy team have been talking with farmers and ranchers on a relatively consistent basis. And one thing that always comes up is their interest in conservation and what they can do to be better stewards for the environment. So on the policy team, we know that these federal cost share programs exist to help farmers and ranchers get involved in conservation, and so we thought why not put together some resources that help answer some of those questions. So this series is kind of a 101 for farmers and ranchers who are interested in implementing conservation on their working lands. And when I say that, I mean beginning farmers, farmers who have been doing this for a couple of decades, it's really for everyone who is interested in contributing to the soil and water health of their areas.

Olivia Hanlon 03:30
Okay, very good. So diving into the series, what does the organization look like? How many publications are there things like that?

Kalee Olson 03:37
Sure. So this series consists of six fact sheets total. And each fact sheet is just a front and back, are really digestible piece of information, which I think is helpful to busy farmers and ranchers. And I like to think of those pieces as addressing three main topics. The first topic is working with your local USDA Service Center. So the USDA is ultimately the entity that distributes and funding and runs these programs. And within the USDA, there's basically two main offices that farmers work with; the FSA, which is the Farm Service Agency, and NRCS, which is the Natural Resources Conservation Service. So that's the first topic that these cover is what do these offices do? Who are they, kind of a USDA 101. And then the second two topics that these cover are those working land conservation programs that I've alluded to earlier. The first is EQIP which is the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. And the second is CSP, which is the Conservation Stewardship Program. And if you're listeners who might not be familiar, I'll kind of define what a couple of those terms mean. When we talk about federal cost share programs, that means that these are reimbursement programs, that the federal government actually will help farmers and ranchers pay to implement some of these practices on their lands. And when we talk about working lands, we're talking about crop ground and pasture land that is still in production. So a lot of producers find these programs appealing because they can still go about their normal work of farming and ranching and still be able to do some practices that are good for the environment.

Olivia Hanlon 05:33
Olivia Hanlon 06:39
For sure. So you mentioned a couple of the topics that are covered in this series. But are there any other topics that the series really dives into?

Kalee Olson 05:40
Definitely. So a few things that I like to point out is, when we’re talking about the USDA Service Centers â€“ FSA and NRCS. One thing that’s really helpful about these fact sheets is that it talks about what to do to prepare for a visit with those service centers. Sometimes, you know, it’s like, we don’t know what we don’t know. And so I think it can be helpful to producers to kind of have a list of questions or a list of things that they need to take with them when they go to meet with these representatives. Some other topics that we cover our answer those common questions that we get from producers, things like how to find out if you’re even eligible to apply for a working lands program. They provide an overview of the application process, what that timeline kind of looks like, as well as information about how the reimbursement payments work. So there’s really a little bit of something for everyone in these guides.

Olivia Hanlon 06:39
Yeah, it sounds like you guys have a lot of good information in these guides. And they sound like they’d be really helpful to some of our listeners. So on that note, how can our listeners find these resources,

Kalee Olson 06:50
The easiest way is to just go to our website cfra.org/publications, and there you’ll be able to find the guides, as well as a handful of other things that folks might be interested in. But for those of you out there, I guess who don’t have access to the internet or just prefer to have a hard copy. You’re definitely welcome to call me here in the Lyons office, and I’ll be happy to put those in the mail for you as well.

Olivia Hanlon 07:16
Great. Okay, Kaylee to wrap this up, can you give our listeners one tip on how to best utilize the information that’s in this series.

Kalee Olson 07:23
Yeah, I think it’s important to remind everyone that these are a 101 guides, which definitely means they’re a starting point for getting involved in conservation. While I wish I were the expert on these programs, the reality is that your NRCS field rep or your FSA agent is going to have bounds and bounds of information about these programs that aren’t covered in the guides. So be thinking of them as a 101 and a starting point. And definitely, yeah, just reiterating that they’re a starting point and it’s really best to build a relationship with your USDA offices, because they’ll be the ones helping you through the application process.

Olivia Hanlon 08:06
Absolutely. So is there anything that we did not cover today that you’d like to add on here?
Kalee Olson  08:11
Sure. I do want to point out really quickly that in addition to all of the fact sheets being in English, we also have them available in Spanish on our website. And it’s also important to note that if you’re a beginning, that trainer farmer of color, this is something that’s also important to point out when you go to your USDA office, because programs like EQIP that we cover in these guides have some things like advanced payment options and special ranking pools that might help you out if you fall into one of those categories.

Olivia Hanlon  08:42
Okay, that is a good bit of information to add on there. And we just want to thank you for joining us today, Kalee, it was great to have you on and hopefully we’ll have you on again in the future sometime.

Kalee Olson  08:53
Great. Thanks so much, Olivia.

Speaker 3  08:54
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