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# Southwest Ledger.news

Kyletta Ray | Southwest Ledger

## City, businesses grapple with multifaceted homelessness issue; Complaints to city hall up

By **Mindy Ragan Wood**  
*Southwest Ledger*

LAWTON – Complaints for homelessness are rising at city hall as leaders grapple to address an issue they say is getting worse before it gets better.

Lawton Mayor Stan Booker said calls to the city about vagrancy “are up” as council members hear more complaints—especially from business owners—about the issue.

Lawton police records obtained by *Southwest*

*Ledger* show 137 calls in which a homeless person was cited with trespassing. The number of unsheltered people in Lawton is unknown until the results of an annual count conducted last month are tabulated later this year.

“We won’t have a count until late May, I think, but everybody believes the count is up,” Booker said.

As the mayor’s housing taskforce to address homelessness reaches its one year milestone, members say they hope

to see Lawton and Fort Sill area residents and business owners come on board.

Meanwhile, the Lawton City Council approved a sign ordinance on Feb. 13 to discourage people from giving money to homeless people. Signs will be posted throughout town with similar language to those in other cities which read, “Say no to panhandling, “Contribute to the solution and give to a nonprofit.”

Booker said panhan-

dlers often spend the cash to support a drug or alcohol addiction instead of attempts to obtain housing.

Though research on panhandlers’ spending habits is limited, a 2002 National Library of Medicine study found most panhandlers spent money on food first but also a significant amount to support their addictions. A 2022 Science Direct study indicated substance abuse is likely more common in the homeless population than

the general public.

### Policies

The council’s sign ordinance steers clear of more controversial policies to crack down on homelessness that could draw costly litigation.

As homelessness rises nationwide, city officials and state lawmakers across the U.S. have turned to legislation to solve the problem. Some of those laws,

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Borrowers to pay higher interest rates p12

## Census figures illustrate alarming loss of family farms

From staff reports

Farm acreage and the number of farms operating in the U.S. have fallen significantly, according to new agriculture census data released by the USDA. The 2022 Census of Agriculture reports that farm acres

fell to 880,100,848, a loss of more than 20 million acres since 2017; total farms have decreased by 141,733.

“The latest census numbers put in black and white the warnings our members have been expressing for years,”

said American Farm Bureau Federation President Zippy Duvall. “Increased regulations, rising supply

costs, lack of available labor and weather disasters have all squeeze farmers to the point that many of them find it impossible to remain

economically sustainable.”

The latest Census data show that farmers over the age of 65 are outpacing younger farmers. Approximately 1.3 million farmers are now at or beyond retirement age, while just 300,000 farmers are under the

age of 35.

“Family farms not only help drive the economy, they allow the rest of the nation the freedom to pursue their dreams without worrying about whether there will be enough food in their pantries,” Duvall said. “We urge Congress to

heed the warning signs of these latest numbers. Passing a new Farm Bill that addresses these challenges is the best way to help create an environment that attracts new farmers and enables families to pass their farms to the next generation.”

## Central High Public Schools voters approve \$6.16M bond issue

By **Mike W. Ray**  
*Southwest Ledger*

CENTRAL HIGH – Approval last week of a \$6.16 million bond issue by patrons of Central High Public Schools ensures new space for agriculture, family and consumer science education, and STEM students.

The bond proceeds will finance construction of two new classrooms, one at the high school/middle school and another at the nearby elementary school, Supt. Kevin L. Dyes told *Southwest Ledger*. Approximately 9,000 square feet of new floor space will be created, enabling the district to repurpose some existing space in district buildings, he said.

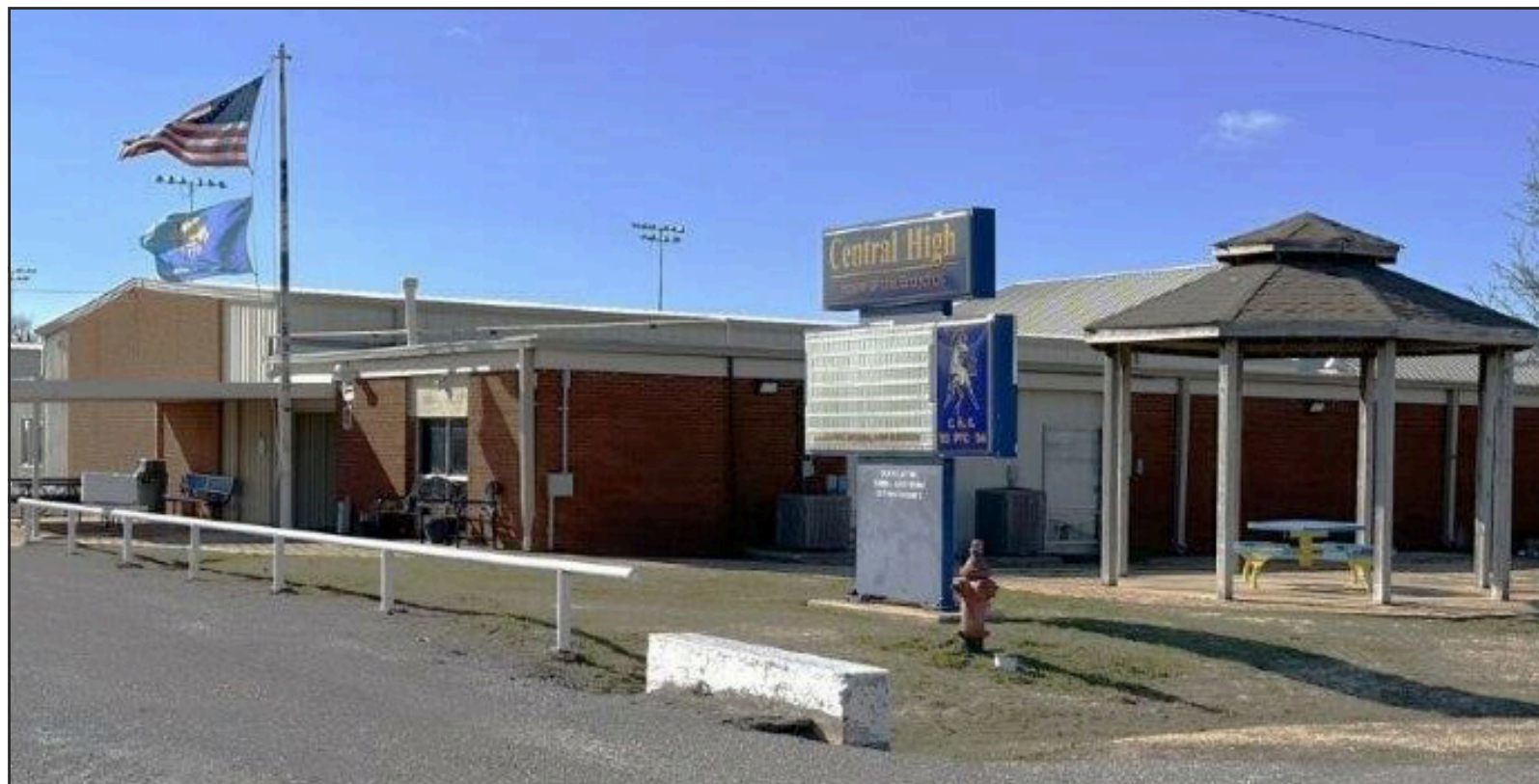
The revised bond issue was endorsed by 172 patrons, or 62.32% of the voters in the Feb. 13 special election, and was opposed by 104 patrons, or 37.68% of the voters.

The 276 voters constituted 19.22% of the 1,436 registered voters in the school district’s nine precincts: 910 in Stephens County, 519 in Comanche County, and 7 in a Grady County precinct.

“I’m excited and thrilled for our students and staff,” Dyes told the *Ledger* on Feb. 14. The new facilities will enhance the school and will “benefit our entire community.”

Proceeds from the sale of the bonds will be earmarked for several projects.

• A “career tech” center will be created on the campus. It will house a STEM classroom, an agriculture mechanics shop, and a new agriculture classroom to replace one that was constructed in the 1980s and “is not big enough,” Dyes said.



Curtis W. Awbrey | Southwest Ledger

Voters in the Central High Public Schools district approved a \$6.16 million bond issue on Feb. 13.

It will house a meat science lab, including a walk-in cooler/freezer. “We have students and a teacher who have an interest in this area,” Dyes said. Furthermore, “It won’t compete with Career Tech courses. We’re not going to compete with anybody, and it won’t have a ‘kill floor,’” he emphasized.

“Maybe during an event we can cut steaks and pork chops and cook them in the culinary arts kitchen” for the participants, Dyes said. “There’s a lot of potential there.”

The new facilities will contain a Family and Consumer Sciences culinary arts kitchen and classroom. “Some of our kids have gone to Oklahoma City for an education in that field and are now working in that industry,” the superintendent said.

• The football concession stand in the Agriculture Building will be renovated, and the existing agriculture classroom

will be converted into a locker room and weight room. The district’s old ag building also serves as a bus barn “and will continue in that role” and also will be used for some storage, the superintendent said.

• A new Family and Consumer Sciences Education classroom will be created in the middle school. Because space is in short supply, an FCS teacher is conducting her classes in the faculty lounge, Dyes said.

• The new STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) classroom will be created because, “Our students have a lot of interest in computer technology and robotics,” Dyes said.

• Central High has two portable buildings: one housing pre-K and kindergarten classes, and the other is a fieldhouse and weight room. The latter portable building will be scrapped because the

locker room and weight room will be relocated to the ag classroom in the Agriculture Building.

Tentative plans call for work on the architectural drawings to start on or about March 1, and will take approximately six months to complete, Dyes estimated. Ground-breaking is expected to occur “around the first of September” and construction will take about a year to complete, he said. School officials hope to occupy the new facilities in September 2025 “or around Christmastime” next year.

Joe D. Hall Construction of Elk City – currently building a new performing arts center for Marlow Public Schools – will be the contractor on the Central High project.

The district’s ad valorem millage levy this year is 35.1, or \$35.10 per \$1,000 of assessed valuation. Approval of the bond issue won’t result in higher property taxes,

Dyes said, because the new bonds will replace existing bonds that will be paid off this year and next year. The new bonds will be retired over a 10-year period.

The earliest the new bonds will be issued is “July or after, depending on interest rates,” Dyes said.

### Enrollment recovering, property values growing

Enrollment K-12 at Central High Public Schools on Dec. 11 numbered 437 – exactly the same as in 2013-14, records reflect. Enrollment began to decline the next year and fell to 388 in school year 2020-21, but since then the student population count has recovered.

Property values in the district have steadily increased during the past decade: from \$12.99 million in 2013-14 to \$15.91 million in 2023-

24. Much of that can be attributed to inflation but some is due to residential construction in the area, Dyes speculated.

The district started this school year with a little over half a million dollars in carryover funding, ledgers reflect.

The new bond issue is a scaled-down version of one that was submitted to the voters a year and a half ago.

Central High officials proposed a 26-year, \$14.5 million bond issue to finance construction of a new elementary school to alleviate crowding; voters rejected the plan outright on Aug. 23, 2022, by a margin of 53.55% against versus 46.45% for. Approval of a school bond issue requires endorsement from a 60% supermajority.

Central High Public Schools are located a mile north of Oklahoma Highway 7, between Lawton and the Duncan Wye.

# OPINION

## Father, son give insightful review of Temple Grandin

By **James Finck, Ph.D.**

I rarely get personal with my articles, but this week's subject resonates with me. One of the hardest days of my life was when a doctor confirmed to my wife and me what we already suspected – that my son, my oldest child had autism.

We knew that not all was lost. Compared to many, we are blessed in that he is high functioning and incredibly smart. Yet it is still a blow to any parent knowing that their child is different and would have challenges many other kids would not have to face.

That has been the case with our child. While he excelled in school, graduating as valedictorian and earning the state regent's scholarship, he struggled making connections. He has always wanted friends, but does not know how to talk to his fellow students. It's difficult for people he meets to understand what is going on in that big brain of his. He struggles to look people in the eye, does not know what to say and can't understand nonverbal cues. It's easy to judge him as slow, until you talk to him about movies. Suddenly, he comes to life and knows more about movies than anyone I know—how they are made, who starred in and directed every film, and even types of techniques the directors used. I have read some of his movie reviews and he sees movies different than

most and understands things that I did not even know I was supposed to understand.

My dream for my son is that the world understands that he is special, and that autism makes him different not lesser. That is the exact message of HBO's Temple Grandin. Grandin's condition allows her to see things differently which has allowed her to improve things in her field. The biopic of her life and struggles have brought hope to thousands of parents like me who want what is best for their kids.

I teach at the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma. I could write dozens of articles about why this school is special, but the one program of which I am most proud is The Neill-Wint Center for Neurodiversity. Started by Kathy Perry and sponsored by Phillip and Katie Wint, the center's mission is to assist students with autism spectrum disorder in their transition to college life and to help ensure postsecondary success. Partly because of the center, on Feb. 23, as part of the Emerson-Weir Liberal Arts Series, Temple Grandin herself will be the keynote speaker.

My son, who is currently part of the Neill-Wint Center and lives on campus, comes home at least once a week and we watch a movie together. With his love of all movies and me being a historian, we tend to watch a classic. However, this past week he asked that we watch Temple Grandin

staring Clair Danes in preparation for her upcoming visit. I was so inspired by this movie that I knew I needed to include a review in my column.

Grandin, born in 1947, dealt with autism in a time when the condition was still relatively unknown. The movie starts with her at a boarding school where, because of a strong mother and sainted teachers who recognized her gifts, she was able to excel. It then followed her through college and graduate school. At each level there were many who stood in her way, believing she was not capable of learning. At each level, she proved them wrong. Not only did she learn, but she excelled and became a published author and expert in animal behavior.

At the end of the movie, she is attending an autism conference where parents were shown trying to handle their autistic children in different ways. When Grandin speaks up and announces that she is autistic and has a Ph.D., suddenly every parent in the room wanted to hear everything she had to say. Symbolically, ever parent of an autistic child, including myself, was in that room. Seeing what she overcame shows each of us that our children can also. There are things I can say technically about the movie, but it only seems right that I turn that part over to my son.

"Temple Grandin is a fine film. It does a good job at explaining who

Temple Grandin is, specifically when it comes to her work in agriculture that first brought her attention, as well as her life growing up with autism that most people know her for. Claire Danes is great as Grandin, disappearing into the role without her performance coming across as cartoony. Director Mick Jackson succeeds at getting across how Grandin thinks, thanks to the stylistic use of on-screen graphics as well as small cutaways to show how she interprets certain phrases literally. Temple Grandin might feel like a TV movie, and it probably won't blow everyone's minds away, but it's still worth a watch."

I am excited to see Dr. Grandin in person. Watching the movie has made her a personal hero. She broke down many barriers in higher education and paved a way for students like my son and the others to chase their dreams. It is because of people like Dr. Grandin that USAO has already seen several students in the Neill-Wint Center walk across the stage at graduation.

That day at the doctors may have been one of my hardest days, but I also know that watching my son cross the stage in April when he graduates college will be one of my absolute best.

*James Finck is a professor of history at the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma. He may be reached at HistoricallySpeaking1776@gmail.com.*

## Farmland values in region remain resilient

By **Cortney Cowley & Jannety Mosley**

Agricultural real estate values in the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City's Tenth District (encompassing the Denver, Oklahoma City and Omaha areas) remained resilient through the end of 2023.

The value of non-irrigated farmland in the region grew around 10% from a year ago despite sharply higher interest rates and a moderation in farm income and credit conditions. Capital spending slowed, however, alongside higher rates and lower farm income. Demand for farm loans picked up for a growing share of lenders at the end of 2023, as lower crop prices and relatively stable production expenses have squeezed margins for some farm borrowers.

The farm economy continued to moderate alongside lower crop prices, but elevated cattle prices and strong farmland values have provided some stability for the sector. At the end of 2023 and beginning of 2024, production forecasts for the current crop year have weighed on crop prices. Prices for corn, soybeans, and wheat declined steadily throughout the fourth quarter, contributing to lower farm incomes compared to a year ago.

Cattle prices have stabilized at high levels alongside historically low inventories, and despite recent concerns related to crop markets, demand for good quality cropland remains robust, supporting real estate values.

Despite lower commodity prices and higher interest rates, growth in farmland values remained firm through the end of 2023. Non-irrigated farmland values across the district increased at a steady

pace, while the pace of growth in irrigated farmland and rangeland values slowed slightly.

Alongside a drop in crop prices, contacts across the district reported some financial strain from increased expenses and lower revenues, but values for all types of farmland still grew by about 8%, on average, from the previous year.

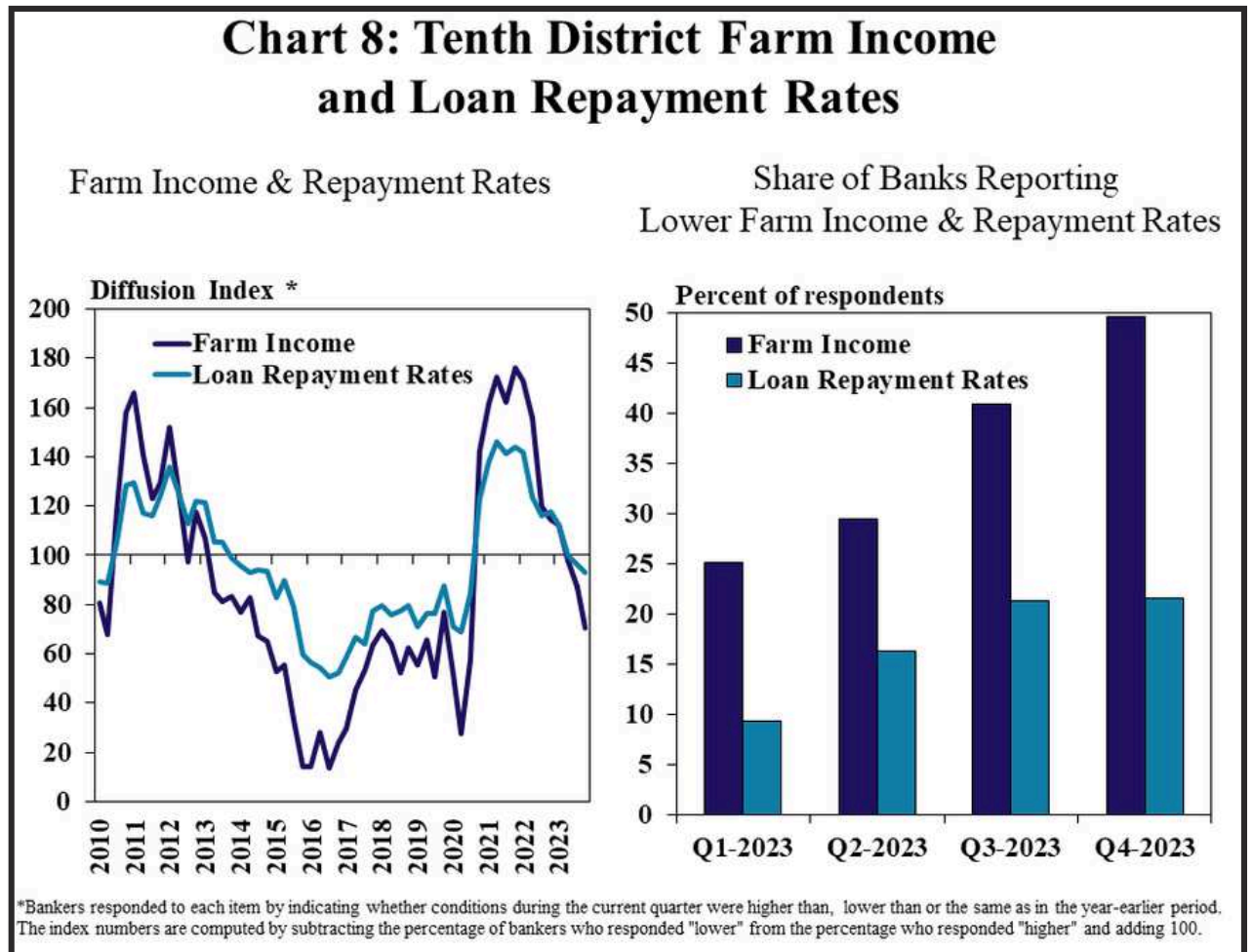
Farmland values remained resilient but varied throughout the district. Increases in non-irrigated land values were particularly high in western Missouri and Nebraska; a Nebraska contact reported that land values have remained high alongside strong demand for cropland.

Irrigated cropland and rangeland values increased at a slower rate in Oklahoma, as contacts there reported slight shifts in demand to land for recreation and other investment opportunities amid higher interest rates and lingering drought in some areas.

Cash rents steadied despite further growth in farmland values. Average cash rents on rangeland inched downward from a year ago during the second half of 2023, while non-irrigated and irrigated rents were largely unchanged.

Contacts in Kansas, Nebraska and Oklahoma reported strong prices and revenues for cattle producers that assisted with stabilizing rangeland cash rents. However, contacts in Nebraska and Kansas reported farmers having less cash on hand, but strong asset values, both of which affect farmers' ability to rent non-irrigated and irrigated land.

A slowdown in the amount of farmland on the market across the district may have contributed to some of the resiliency in farmland



values. Farmland sales slowed across the region and in all states except Missouri, where sales increased slightly from a year ago.

The volume of farmland sales slowed the most in Oklahoma, where 45% of respondents reported that farmland sales were lower than a year ago. Overall, it appears that most of the slowdown was due to limited amounts of land being placed on the market, not because of a slowdown in demand.

Demand for land also has remained strong as the share of farmland purchased by farmers increased across the district. The share of farmland purchased by farmers continued to increase to almost 80%, the highest since 2015. In addition, the share of farmland purchased by farmers grew in every state, and some agricultural lenders commented that they have continued to see farmland buyers with ample funding available.

Most agricultural lend-

ers expected farmland values to remain stable in 2024, and a large share still expected an increase in the coming year. More than 70% of survey respondents expected farmland values to increase moderately or remain unchanged. Moreover, fewer lenders expected a substantial decline in farm real estate markets coming into this year.

Expectations for farmland values remained optimistic despite increased costs and risks associated with higher interest rates. Interest rates on all types of loans leveled off in the fourth quarter but remained at elevated levels. Rates were more than a full percentage point higher than average rates last year and stayed between 8% and 9%. Alongside higher interest rates, interest costs on farmland loans have increased dramatically, but the effects on farm real estate markets have been fairly muted so far.

One risk to the outlook for land markets is that

a large share of farmland loans could reprice at higher interest rates in coming months. At the end of 2023, nearly half of respondents reported more than 80% of farmland loans with variable interest rates in their bank's portfolios. Another quarter of respondents reported at least 40% of farmland loans with variable interest rates.

Of these loans with variable rates, almost 20% were scheduled to reprice in the next six months. About 45% of farmland loans had repricing schedules of 18 months or more. However, farm borrowers whose loans were written with shorter terms could face much steeper interest expenses when those loans reprice, since interest rates have recently become much higher than they would have been on any loans originated in the last decade.

Farmland values also held firm despite a moderation in farm income and credit conditions. The pace of decline in

farm income was faster than recent quarters, as the share of respondents reporting farm income was lower than a year ago neared 50% (Chart 8). Farm loan repayment also softened alongside farm income, and the share of respondents reporting lower rates of repayment grew to 20% in the fourth quarter.

As farm finances moderated, demand for farm loans grew at the fastest pace in nearly three years. Demand for non-real estate farm loans was subdued in recent years alongside financial strength across the sector, but showed signs of picking up in the fourth quarter. Farm borrower liquidity has declined over the past year and the share of banks reporting higher loan demand than a year ago reached the highest level since 2019.

*Cortney Cowley is a senior economist, and Jannety Mosley is a senior survey analyst, in the Oklahoma City Branch of the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City.*

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# City to develop program to discourage panhandling

By **Eric Swanson**  
Southwest Ledger

LAWTON – Before long, Lawton residents may see signs around town discouraging people from giving money to panhandlers.

After a lengthy discussion on Feb. 13, the Lawton City Council directed city staff to create a sign program aimed at deterring panhandling and bring the program back to the council for approval.

Lawton's panhandling problem is less severe than Oklahoma City's but Lawton should take steps to address the issue, said Councilman George Gill. He added that signs warning Lawton residents not to give money to panhandlers could be

the answer.

"In order to do this, we would have to come up with signs, which would not be a very expensive program to put them on some of the selected intersections," he said.

Gill said the council would have to amend the city code to allow the signs at intersections.

But internal auditor Christine James said the city already has authority to install signs at intersections, so the council would not need to amend city code.

City Manager John Ratliff said a Lawton police officer, a representative from Ratliff's office and other officials recently started participating in a city task force designed to address homelessness. "We literally just direct-

ed that," he said. "I know that there's still panhandling out there, but it doesn't seem like we're really giving that (the task force) an opportunity to take root."

Ratliff also said the city is bombarded with requests from people who want to put signs near intersections, especially during campaign season. He said if the city begins installing anti-panhandling signs near intersections, that could open the door to even more requests.

"It's just going to be litter on a stick," Ratliff said. "It's going to be up and down our sidewalks and our streets. There's some other unintended consequences that may occur if we approve this sign program."

# Homeless

from p1

though, encroach on Constitutional rights and don't survive lawsuits from homeless and housing advocates.

As reported by *The Oklahoman*, the City of Shawnee faces a potential lawsuit over an ordinance it recently passed to ban sleeping outdoors in the downtown area. The American Civil Liberties Union of Oklahoma said in a letter to the city that its "no sit, no lie" ordinance violates freedom of speech. The letter noted that Oklahoma City paid \$1 million in legal fees for a lawsuit related to a similar ordinance that banned panhandling in 2015.

Last month, the U.S. Supreme Court announced it will decide whether an Oregon city Grants Pass ordinance to ban homeless people from sleeping outside will be upheld. Three homeless people, who claim they are involuntarily unsheltered, sued the city over several ordinances.

Booker said steering clear of litigation can be done with careful study and planning, but the work to address homelessness remains difficult.

"We have to have a balanced approach," he said. "What that means is we have to have compassion to help people try to get back on their feet, but we also need to understand that society

has rules that must be followed."

## What now?

Lawton officials and nonprofit organizations continue to address what they say is a multifaceted issue with many causes, from substance abuse and mental health to job loss and the rising cost of housing.

"It's like a diamond," Booker said. "There are 57 facets of a diamond and there are 57 facets to this problem."

The local Continuum of Care (CoC), based in Lawton, is a consortium of nonprofit agencies to provide housing and other human services to people who struggle with mental illness, addiction and other housing and employment challenges. Agencies are often funded with U.S. Housing and Urban Development funds and private donations.

CoC head for Comanche County and 16 other counties, Bernita Taylor said their work is a linear, comprehensive approach to address homelessness.

From preventing a person from losing their housing, to gainful employment and treatment for addiction and mental health needs, case managers tailor the plan to the person's needs so they don't become homeless again.

Taylor serves alongside Booker on the housing taskforce but they're still looking for people to join, in particular residents and

business owners, she said. The CoC is largely made up of nonprofit organizations, hospitals and city staff.

The more variety on the taskforce, the better, she said.

"It gives us the ability to know where some of the problem areas are, what are they seeing out there, how can we address it and then how can we support them when they come across issues," Taylor said.

The number of homeless people according to the 2023 point-in-time (PIT) count will likely be lower than the actual number. The count is mandated by HUD to qualify for federal housing money, but people can be absent from a camp on any given day and some refuse to cooperate with the count, Taylor said.

"We think it is rising," she said of homelessness. "Sometimes the number (PIT) reflects that and sometimes it doesn't."

Taylor's outreach team is developing its own data using a geographical information system software to better monitor the number of homeless people who are unsheltered.

CoC members will share their data to be uploaded in the software to identify gaps in services.

"Then we can begin to make informed decisions and plans on how to be effective in reducing those numbers," Taylor said.

# Homeless statistics for Oklahoma, county

From staff reports

The following are statistics from HUD's annual homelessness 2023 report for Oklahoma as provided by the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

From 2022-2023, overall homelessness in Oklahoma increased by 23.8%. The U.S. overall increased by 12.1%.

Unsheltered counts in Oklahoma increased by 44.6% since 2022. Nationally unsheltered counts increased 9.7%.

The largest increases

since 2022 were among individuals at 26.7% and unaccompanied youth under 25 at 21.9%.

The largest increases in overall homelessness in Oklahoma were in the rural areas 61.6% increase, or an increase of 711 people, in rural areas since 2022. Major cities and suburban areas saw single-digit increases since 2022.

Homelessness also grew substantially among Oklahoma's people of color. Since 2022, the number of Hispanic/Latino people

experiencing homelessness increased 42.3%. The number of Black people experiencing homelessness in Oklahoma increased 23.0% during that same time period.

Unsheltered homelessness increased by 158% from 2022-2023 in Oklahoma's rural areas. It decreased 3.9% in suburban areas and increased by only 1.4% in major cities.

Unsheltered homelessness decreased by 4.9% since 2022 in the Oklahoma City area.

# Gov. Stitt continues push for grocery, income tax cuts

By **Barbara Hoberock**  
Oklahoma Voice

OKLAHOMA CITY — Gov. Kevin Stitt on Friday continued to press the Senate for a tax cut.

The action comes after Senate Pro Tem Greg Treat, R-Oklahoma City, said Thursday the state could not afford to both cut the personal income tax and eliminate the state's sales tax on groceries. Treat said he prefers to reduce the grocery tax because more Oklahomans will benefit.

Stitt has been advocating for a 0.25% cut to the state's 4.75% income tax with a pathway toward eliminating it.

Stitt, who supports both an income and grocery sales tax cut, said he will sign whatever bill comes to his desk even if both do.

He said the bills could be on his desk next week. "I think long term my job is to try to grow the state and make us the most business-friendly state," he said. "I would prefer to have an income tax cut. Get us down to zero."

The Board of Equalization met Thursday to determine how much money lawmakers will have to craft a budget.

They will have up to \$14 billion to spend, or about \$1.4 billion more than last year and about \$85

million more than the board certified in December, according to the Office of Management and Enterprise Services.

"We had another growth year in revenue collections for the state," Stitt said. "That is why it is so important for me to think about — let's give some of that back to the taxpayer. Let's do something for the taxpayer."

Working families are being harmed by inflation, Stitt said.

He said he prefers a grocery tax elimination bill that would include a moratorium to prevent municipalities from increasing their rates to fill the gap.

The Oklahoma House has already indicated a willingness to cut both the income and grocery taxes.

Barbara Hoberock is a senior reporter with Oklahoma Voice. She began her career in journalism in 1989 after graduating from Oklahoma State University. She began with the Claremore Daily Progress and then started working in 1990 for the Tulsa World. She has covered the statehouse since 1994 and served as Tulsa World Capitol Bureau chief. She covers statewide elected officials, the legislature, agencies, state issues, appellate courts and elections.



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# Comanche County agrees to inmate housing contract with Seminole County

By **Eric Swanson**  
*Southwest Ledger*

LAWTON – Comanche County has another partner in the county’s effort to ease overcrowding at the Comanche County Detention Center.

The Comanche County Facilities Advisory Board, which is made up of the three county commissioners, approved on Feb. 12 an inmate housing contract with the Seminole County Public Building

Authority. The contract allows CCDC to house some of its inmates at the Seminole County jail at the rate of \$50 per inmate per day.

With the signing of the Seminole County contract, CCDC has agreements to house inmates at six out-of-county jails. The other five counties are Grady, Greer, Okmulgee, Tillman and Pottawatomie.

The Pottawatomie County jail is full, so it is not accepting out-of-county inmates at the

moment, said CCDC Administrator Bill Hobbs.

Officially, CCDC has space for 283 inmates. However, the jail housed 285 inmates as of Feb. 12 and sent 72 additional inmates to Tillman County.

Six inmates were shipped to Grady County, 10 to Greer County and 10 to Okmulgee County for a combined total of 383 inmates.

Commissioner John O’Brien wondered why CCDC was still over capacity on Feb. 12.

“Can you explain?” he asked Hobbs.

Hobbs said CCDC will be able to send some inmates to Seminole County once that contract is approved, which should provide some relief. He added that it’s difficult to control the number of inmates who are booked into the jail.

“We don’t know how many are coming and going, as far as the jail’s concerned,” Hobbs said. “We do our best to keep that number down.”

# City approves \$9.6M Commerce grant

By **Eric Swanson**  
*Southwest Ledger*

LAWTON – With the help of a \$9.6 million state grant, the FISTA Development Trust Authority will tackle a series of projects, including street lighting upgrades on Rogers Lane.

The Lawton City Council voted 8-0 Feb. 13 to approve a funding agreement between the Oklahoma Development Finance Authority, the city and FISTA. Funds for the grant will come from the Oklahoma Department of Commerce’s Public-Private Partnership Military Pooled Finance Program.

The grant will provide funds for the following projects, which would benefit both the City of Lawton and the FISTA Innovation Park in Central Plaza:

- \$2 million for road lights on Rogers Lane near Interstate 44, a partnership between FISTA and the city.
- \$2 million for expanding the Innovation Park’s conference center.

• \$2.2 million for work on administrative space at the Innovation Park. Part of the funding for this project will come from a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development grant, which has already been awarded to FISTA.

• \$2.8 million to create a STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) lab inside the Innovation Park.

• \$600,000 for creating a small-business incubator.

The grant program is funded by the withholding taxes that federal employees pay the state, said FISTA President Dr. Krista Ratliff.

“It’s employment taxes paid by employees that work on Fort Sill,” she said. “Because of that, the Fort Sill leadership team had to sign off on this grant as well.”

Ratliff said the grant will be divided into quarterly installments, and FISTA officials expect to receive between \$500,000 and \$750,000 per quarter.

# Medicine Park hires assistant police chief

By **Eric Swanson**  
*Southwest Ledger*

MEDICINE PARK – Medicine Park has a new assistant chief of police.

After discussing the matter in a closed session Feb. 15, the

Medicine Park Board of Trustees voted 4-0 to hire Anthony Lemaitre for the position. His salary will be \$58,240 per year.

The trustees set the stage for hiring an assistant police chief in January, when they

voted to set the salary range for the position at \$50,000 to \$60,000 a year. The board also approved a pay increase for Police Chief Tom Crawford, boosting his salary from \$62,000 a year to \$70,000.

The trustees also gave the department’s reserve officers a raise, increasing their salary from \$15 an hour to \$23 per hour. The changes were slated to take effect with the next pay period.



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# Corporation Commission donates 32 vehicles to law enforcement

## From staff reports

OKLAHOMA CITY – The Transportation Division of the Oklahoma Corporation Commission downsized its fleet and donated 32 vehicles to 16 other law enforcement agencies, departments and offices.

The decision to downsize was made prior to the executive order Governor Kevin Stitt issued last May to reduce the state's fleet inventory, said OCC spokesman Trey Davis.

Changes related to vehicle use policies reduced the number of vehicles the Corporation Commission needed for its officers, Davis said. This created an

equipment savings of more than half a million dollars, he said.

All Transportation Division enforcement vehicles must now be based at ports of entry and weigh stations instead of being assigned to each enforcement officer.

"After personnel and IT-related costs, maintaining a vehicle fleet is easily one of the largest expenses for an agency," said Brandy Wreath, the commission's director of administration.

"We conducted a full review of our vehicle fleet to ensure we were complying with all state guidelines and that our fleet was operated and assigned efficiently. The result was a realized

savings of more than \$500,000 that we then budgeted for career progression within the division."

The OCC decided to donate its vehicles to law enforcement entities struggling to replace aging fleet vehicles due to budget limitations, rather than putting the vehicles in a state surplus auction.

"It was great being able to help our brothers and sisters in blue with well-maintained police vehicles," Wreath said. "Perhaps best of all, two other state agencies – the Department of Public Safety and the Council on Law Enforcement Education and Training – also benefit-

ted from the donation."

The donations were made on a first-come, first-served basis. Recipients of the 32 Dodge Chargers were:

CLEET, 6; DPS, 5; Atoka County Sheriff, 1; Choctaw County Sheriff, 1; Haskell County Sheriff, 2; Murray County Sheriff, 1; Boley Police Department, 1; Davis Police Department, 1; Gore Police Department, 1; Hugo Police Department, 2; Lone Grove Police Department, 2; Spiro Police Department, 2; Stigler Police Department, 2; Tonkawa Police Department, 2; Valliant Police Department, 2; and Murray State College Police Department, 1.



Provided

# Kiowa County voters approve sales tax for Elkview General Hospital

By **Tim Farley**  
*Southwest Ledger*

HOBART – Kiowa County voters decided overwhelmingly on Tuesday to support a 1.5-cent sales tax that will keep Elkview General Hospital operating for the next 25 years.

More than 80% of voters cast their ballot in favor of the proposition while a slim minority of 16% were against the issue, according to election board figures.

Hospital administrator Lisa Hart said the election was vital to the facility as the only health care facility in Kiowa County. Southwest Ledger reached out to Hart after the election but received no response.

But before the vote, Hart made it clear the hospital would cut services or possibly shut down if the proposition failed.

Elkview is a small, independent hospital that has been in existence for 55 years, but "has never had financial support from the county," Hart said last week. "We won't be able to sustain the same level of services without some help."

Sales tax proponents used radio commercials, social media and town hall meetings to educate

voters about the hospital's needs. Elkview General offers comprehensive hospital services, radiology, surgery and women's health services.

Hart disclosed that hospital admissions are down 30% for July-December 2023 compared to the same time period a year earlier.

The sales tax money is needed because insurance companies have locked down the hospital's ability to maintain its inpatient volume, and lower reimbursement rates from Medicare and Medicaid.

"In many instances, we have to take whatever they pay us. We can't negotiate (better rates) because we're small," Hart said.

Of Kiowa County's 8,800 residents, 3,700 (approximately 42%) live in Hobart.

Rural hospitals have suffered financially the last several years and have been forced to close their doors. Frederick shut down its operation while hospitals in Clinton and Sayre also closed during the last several years. It was reported that Clinton's hospital reopened in late 2023 with emergency room services, radiology and lab services.

# Bill would bar Oklahomans from purchasing alcohol at self-checkouts

By **Barbara Hoberock**  
*Oklahoma Voice*

OKLAHOMA CITY – A Senate panel on Monday passed a bill that would prohibit alcohol sales at self-checkout stations.

The Senate Business and Commerce Committee passed Senate Bill 1866, by Sen. Bill Coleman, R-Ponca City.

It now heads to the full Senate for consideration.

Coleman said the measure is needed to prevent minors from purchasing alcohol.

Minors are scanning other products to disguise the alcohol, he said.

"There has got to be a human touch in there somewhere," Coleman said.

Coleman said it is a safety issue. Other products, such as cigarettes, are placed out of the reach of minors, he said.

Sen. Dusty Deevers, R-Elgin, asked why the government should be regulating decisions that should be left up to individual business owners.

Deevers said the measure would cause more difficulties for businesses than what is necessary.

Business owners should be allowed to police themselves, Deevers said.

Sen. Shane Jett, R-Shawnee, said the state was imposing an inconvenience on a store owner.

Jett said the underage individuals are committing theft if they do not pay.

The bill passed by a vote of 11-2.

Deevers and Jett voted against the measure.

*Barbara Hoberock is a senior reporter with Oklahoma Voice. She began her career in journalism in 1989 after graduating from Oklahoma State University. She began with the Claremore Daily Progress and then started working in 1990 for the Tulsa World. She has covered the statehouse since 1994 and served as Tulsa World Capitol Bureau chief. She covers statewide elected officials, the legislature, agencies, state issues, appellate courts and elections.*

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# Southwest Oklahoma Legislative Update: Senate

By **Debi DeSilver**  
Southwest Ledger

OKLAHOMA CITY – Four southwest Oklahoma senators filed a total of 135 bills by the Jan. 18 deadline and, of those, the majority have seen recent action during the Second Session of the 59th Legislature.

In total, Oklahoma's 48 senators filed 841 bills and 13 senate joint resolutions, according to a Senate press release.

State Sens. Chris Kidd (R-Waurika), Dusty Deever (R-Elgin), Brent Howard (R-Altus) and Jessica Garvin (R-Duncan) addressed numerous issues in their proposals, including Oklahoma's Industrial Hemp Program, sales tax exemption and rebate, crimes and punishment, divorce, abortion, landlord/tenant issues, water rights, firearms, agriculture, prescription drug pricing, economic development, medical marijuana, domestic abuse, alcoholic beverages, oil and gas, health insurance, driver education and much more.

**Sen. Garvin**

The only bill to fail to date is Sen. Garvin's SB 1719, which would have allowed child care

licensees to appeal a decision by the Department of Human Services to reduce the facility's rating. The proposal failed on Feb. 15 in the Health and Human Services Committee. The senator, whose district covers the counties of Stephens, McClain, Grady, Garvin and Cleveland has authored or co-sponsored 82 bills this session.

A majority of her bills and several proposals have been forwarded to the appropriate committees. Thirteen bills will have hearings this week, including SB 453 which proposes to increase monthly benefits of volunteer firefighters.

**Sen. Kidd**

Two agriculture bills regarding Oklahoma's Industrial Hemp Program were authored by Sen. Kidd, whose district covers the counties of Comanche, Cotton, Jefferson, Love and Stephens. He authored or co-sponsored 15 bills this session.

Regarding the hemp program, SB 1934, addresses modifying definitions and modifying the amount of allowable delta-9 tetrahydrocannabinol concentration. It would also allow



**Jessica Garvin**

animal consumption of industrial hemp within certain criteria. HB 3011 is co-authored by Rep. David Smith (R-Arpegar) and, among other statutes and suggestions, would provide guidance for noncompliant hemp, modifying requirements for selling industrial hemp grain and other industrial hemp derivatives.

"The Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (2018 Farm Bill) authorized the production of hemp and removed hemp and hemp seeds from the Drug Enforcement Administration's (DEA) schedule of Controlled Substances," said the usda.gov website. On April 18, 2019, Governor Kevin Stitt signed into law SB 868 which decriminalized hemp on a state level, according to ag.ok.gov.

In addition, one of



**Chris Kidd**

Sen. Kidd's measures marked "pass" is a senate concurrent resolution, SCR 16, co-authored by Sen. Tom Woods (R-Westville). The resolution condemns the atrocities of the terrorist organization Hamas and reaffirms Oklahoman and American support for the State of Israel in their fight to eradicate Hamas.

**Sen. Howard**

Of the 29 authored or co-sponsored bills by Sen. Howard, whose district covers the counties of Jackson, Harmon, Kiowa, Tillman, Beckham, Greer and Washita, HB 2109 has garnered the most traction to date. It is carried over from the previous HB 2109 and was sponsored by 12 representatives in 2023, including Rep. Daniel Pae (R-Lawton). For-



**Brent Howard**

mer Sen. John Michael Montgomery's name was removed from the bill and Sen. Howard's was added.

The bill is titled: Landlord and tenant; prohibiting retaliation; landlord's breach of rental agreement and went through several revisions in 2023.

Several of Sen. Howard's bills are heading toward the appropriate committees for consideration. Included in those is SB 1432, which would update statutory language of the Oklahoma Education Lottery Act. It is headed to the Senate Appropriations Committee.

SB 1628 has been forwarded to the Senate Retirement and Insurance Committee and pertains to prescription drug pricing. It would also prohibit prescription drug manufacturers



**Dusty Deever**

from taking certain actions against certain entities.

**Sen. Deever**

All of Sen. Deever's nine authored or co-sponsored bills have been referred to the appropriate committees for consideration.

One bill's content, SB 1958, garnered attention from an Oklahoma City news station due to proposing a modification of the permissible grounds for divorce. It would also require a court to consider the degree of fault when entering certain orders, therefore eliminating an option for a no-fault decree.

The measure has been sent to the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Senate committees have until Feb. 29 to report on senate bills they have considered.

## Drummond supports FTC proposal to outlaw 'junk fees'

From staff reports

OKLAHOMA CITY – State Attorney General Gentner Drummond is lending his voice in support of the Federal Trade Commission's proposed Trade Regulation Rule on Unfair or Deceptive Fees.

A bipartisan coalition of 19 state attorneys general recently filed a comment letter in response to an FTC notice of proposed rulemaking which would:

- Prohibit bait and switch advertising by requiring businesses, from the outset, to clearly and conspicuously disclose the total price, inclusive of any mandatory fees;
- Require businesses to more prominently display the total price when pricing information is advertised;
- Prohibit businesses from misrepresenting the nature and purpose of any fee; and
- Require businesses to disclose the nature and purpose of certain fees (such as shipping

charges and optional fees) clearly and conspicuously before the consumer consents to pay.

Bait and switch advertising is "a common practice used to deceive consumers and businesses into making decisions," Drummond said. "This proposed rule would help ensure transparency in business, and ultimately is in the best interest for all consumers."

The Feb. 7 letter notes that 'junk fees' hurt consumers by concealing the real prices of goods and services, as well as honest businesses that lose out to competitors that use the deceptive practice to appear as the better bargain.

"Such deceptive conduct also frustrates consumers' efforts in comparison shopping, especially online, where, presumably, many consumers do most of their research," the letter states.

"Hard-working consumers should not have to waste their valuable,

leisure time researching prices by being forced to navigate through multiple webpages of multiple websites, including hyperlinks to exhausting terms and conditions containing verbose legalese in miniscule and sometimes obscured fonts, then entering all of their payment and other personal information to reach the check-out page, so that they can hopefully, finally learn the true and final cost of the good or service."

In their letter, the attorneys general support the FTC's proposed rule and highlight their enforcement efforts in protecting consumers from deceptive fee practices.

Led by Pennsylvania and North Carolina, the letter is also signed by attorneys general from Arizona, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, the District of Columbia, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Vermont, Washington and Wisconsin.

## Senate bill would allow boards to make school safety decisions

From staff reports

OKLAHOMA CITY – Legislation to give local school boards more leniency in deciding how best to protect their districts will be up for consideration before the Senate Education Committee this month.

Senate Bill 1767 by Sen. Jessica Garvin (R-Duncan) would authorize district boards of education to establish qualifications for additional individuals to carry firearms on public and private school property, along with the currently allowed school personnel and others outlined in law.

"This bill is a top priority for me this session to increase the level of security on school campuses and at school events," Garvin said. "Our schools know how best to protect their students and they need the freedom to determine who they want to entrust to carry out

that important task. Paired with my Senate Bill 1254 to increase the penalties for individuals illegally carrying on campuses, we will be able to arm more law-abiding citizens to protect our students, while holding those with criminal intent responsible for their devious plans to harm Oklahoma's children."

Garvin worked with the Oklahoma Rifle Association in drafting SB 1767. ORA President Mark Vaughan said his organization strongly supports the measure.

"Senator Garvin is committed to protecting our students and our schools," Vaughn said. "We know that the only way to combat bad people with bad intentions is through increasing security by putting firearms in the hands of responsible gun owners. As the state's only association who focuses solely on protecting the Second Amendment, we have

been honored to provide her input on this bill and look forward to helping advocate for its passage."

Currently, only specific school personnel authorized by local school boards, along with law enforcement and others specifically outlined in law, can legally carry on school property. It is against both state and federal law for anyone else to carry a firearm on their person into a school facility even if an individual has a handgun license. Citizens with a valid handgun license may have a handgun in their locked vehicle on school property if it is stored and hidden from view when the vehicle is unattended. Weapons used for hunting may also be kept in a vehicle if properly displayed or stored as required by law if the driver is only transporting a student to and from school and the vehicle is not left unattended.

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# Four Chinese nationals linked to Maramec, Mulhall illicit marijuana farms plead guilty

By **Mike W. Ray**  
Southwest Ledger

OKLAHOMA CITY – Four of the five Chinese individuals linked to marijuana farms in Maramec and Mulhall pleaded guilty to a federal charge of money laundering conspiracy.

Two of the four were sentenced, but one of them fled the jurisdiction and has remained at-large for six months.

The alleged owner/operator of the marijuana farms is scheduled for trial in Oklahoma City's Western District federal court next month on 10 felony charges.

Jiu Bing Lin, alias Jack Lin, 45, was indicted on charges of drug conspiracy, money laundering conspiracy, four counts of laundering monetary instruments, and four counts of monetary transaction in criminally derived property. In the latter he is accused of depositing in a bank account multiple checks, each written in an amount in excess of \$10,000 that was derived from illegal activity: buying, selling, and dealing in a controlled substance, marijuana.

A special agent with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration submitted an affidavit in support of a criminal complaint accusing Lin of conspiring to manufacture and distribute 1,000 kilograms (2,204

pounds) or more of "a mixture or substance containing a detectable amount of marijuana."

Although Oklahoma voters legalized medical marijuana, the substance is still illegal under federal law.

A joint investigation by the DEA and the Oklahoma Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs Control "revealed that Lin is engaged in the distribution of black-market marijuana," the DEA agent informed the court.

A federal grand jury in OKC returned an indictment on Oct. 19, 2022, charging Yuan Luo, 30, and her husband, Liang Wu, 37; his sister, Yan Bing Wu, 34, who lived in Colorado; and another family member, Tongfei Wu, 35, with money laundering conspiracy. All four pleaded guilty on March 6, 2023.

The illegal activities cited in the indictment spanned from April 2021 through March 2022, court records reflect.

During a search warrant executed Nov. 8, 2022, at a residence in Country Club Terrace in Edmond, DEA agents and other officers found numerous documents that "suggested the residents were tied" to a marijuana farm at 355630 E. 5400 Road in Maramec, in Pawnee County.

OBND agents inspected marijuana grow operations at the Maramec location on Nov. 29, 2022. One of the marijuana farms is listed as Jack Lin LLC, which law enforcement officers subsequently confirmed is owned by Jiu Bing Lin and his wife, Yanyun Zhu. The other farm was identified as DDLQ LLC; its license expired on Dec. 6, 2022, Oklahoma Medical Marijuana Authority records indicate.

Investigators learned that Jiu Bing Lin paid \$690,000 for the Maramec land in December 2019 and placed the property in his wife's name; nevertheless, he maintained managerial and business control over the operation.

OBND officers later said that while touring the Maramec site they were shown three duffel bags that contained approximately 75 pounds of undocumented marijuana. Agents said they saw no "METRC" [marijuana enforcement tracking reporting compliance] tags on the product; METRC is the web-based software platform selected by the Oklahoma Medical Marijuana Authority as the statewide tracking system.

Throughout grow houses on the property OBND personnel "observed several hundred plants lacking METRC tags."

## Maramec, Mulhall farms searched

Investigators with the OBND, DEA, the State Fire Marshal's office, the state Department of Environmental Quality, and the Pawnee County Sheriff's Office executed a search warrant at the Maramec property. Officers seized 17,334 marijuana plants and approximately 745 pounds of marijuana.

Investigators subsequently discovered that Jiu Bing Lin also owns property at 13586 N. U.S. Highway 77, near Mulhall. That Logan County marijuana farm is registered under the name Qin Fang, the husband of Yan Bing Wu. However, after it was identified by law enforcement officers as "being out of compliance with state law and operating on the black market," Jiu Bing Lin deeded that land on March 7, 2023, to his son, investigators reported.

OBND officers inspected the Mulhall farm on Jan. 31, 2023, and found evidence indicating the owners "are engaged in black-market marijuana distribution," the DEA special agent wrote. For example, multiple duffel bags contained vacuum-sealed marijuana and plastic totes full of processed marijuana that was not labeled and thus not documented.

More than 100 pounds of undocumented processed marijuana was "ready for immediate sale," according to a DEA agent's affidavit.

When OBND personnel conducted a follow-up inspection at the Mulhall site on March 15, 2023, agents found four black trash bags containing marijuana buds. The bags and the marijuana flowers in them were untagged and had no METRC stickers on them.

Since that was the second time law enforcement officers had found untagged and undocumented marijuana product on the property, agents seized the bags, which weighed approximately 84 pounds.

## \$239,450 cash, house forfeited

DEA and OBND agents served a search warrant on Lin's primary residence in Edmond on April 5, 2023, and confiscated six rifles and four handguns; one of the rifles was in the attic next to a metal tin containing more than 300 .223-caliber rounds of armor-piercing ammunition. Agents also found "what appeared to be drug ledgers inside the residence," the DEA affidavit relates.

Also found were "numerous" documents tying Lin to both the Maramec and Mulhall

properties, the agent reported.

The federal government initiated forfeiture proceedings against Lin's house in Edmond and on both marijuana farms.

Yan Bing Wu was sentenced to 12 months and a day in federal prison.

Tongfei Wu was sentenced to 20 months in prison, starting Aug. 2, 2023. But the day before he was to report to prison he removed his electronic monitoring device and remains at-large, court records indicate.

Yuan Yuan Lo and Liang Wu have not been sentenced yet. However, the court ordered the forfeiture of the house in Country Club Terrace in Edmond, and ordered Yuan Yuan Lo and Liang Wu to forfeit \$239,450 in cash that investigators identified as "proceeds obtained as a result" of criminal activity.

During a discussion with the Oklahoma Farm Report's KC Sheperd about illegal marijuana operations, state Attorney General Gentner Drummond vowed, "We're going to find them and we're going to put them out of work."

Since the state began weeding out illegal marijuana operations, the number of marijuana farms has declined by 3,791 in the last 22 months: from 8,062 on April 10, 2022, to 4,271 on Feb. 12 this year.

# Chinese national admits killing 4 near Hennessey

By **Mike W. Ray**  
Southwest Ledger

KINGFISHER – The Chinese national identified on video and by witnesses as the killer of four people at a marijuana farm near Hennessey pleaded guilty to four counts of first-degree murder and was sentenced to life imprisonment without the possibility of parole.

Besides killing four other Chinese nationals, Wu Chen, 47, of rural Hennessey, also shot and wounded a fifth and fired at, but missed, a sixth, Assistant District Attorney Austin Murrey informed the court.

Because of those offenses, Chen pleaded guilty to assault and

battery with a deadly weapon, for which he was sentenced to 20 years in prison.

All five sentences were imposed on Feb. 9 and are to be served concurrently. The state agreed not to seek the death penalty in exchange for Chen's guilty pleas.

The gunplay occurred on Nov. 20, 2022. The farm, located 15 miles west of Hennessey, was registered and licensed with the state as a medical marijuana grow operation. However, investigators discovered it was operating illegally.

Witnesses at the scene said Chen demanded that employees of the marijuana grow operation pay him \$300,000 "as a return of a portion

of his 'investment' in the enterprise," Murrey wrote in a motion urging the court to not release Chen on bail. The fact that the money "could not be handed over on a moment's notice was what precipitated the mass murder," Murrey wrote.

Immediately after the killings, Chen drove to Miami, Florida, where the airport "services several airlines with flights to China," Murrey noted. In addition, Miami is "extremely close to Cuba," which has no criminal extradition treaty with the U.S., Murrey added.

Chen was found and arrested in Miami on Nov. 22, 2022, and was sent back to Oklahoma.



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# Crypto mining center under construction at Muskogee

By **Mike W. Ray**  
*Southwest Ledger*

MUSKOGEE – Polaris Technologies officials announced recently that the company is investing \$100 million to construct a 200-megawatt Bitcoin mining facility at Port Muskogee's John T. Griffin Industrial Park.

This will be Muskogee's first operational data center. Plans announced two years ago for development of two other data centers in the industrial park subsequently failed to materialize.

The Polaris site encompasses "40 acres, more or less," Deputy Port Director Jeff Underwood told *Southwest Ledger*. Construction has already begun and, "I believe Polaris is targeting Phase 1 being energized in April," he said.

"This facility is a testament to our commitment to advancing mining operations within crypto technology," said Alex Zhang, CEO of Polaris Technologies. "Muskogee provides the ideal environment for a project of this scale because of its reliable

power," he said.

Oklahoma Gas & Electric Co. has a 1,716MW generating station just north of Muskogee on the east bank of the Arkansas River. In addition, a 1,000MW electricity substation has been built near the Polaris site, according to Data Center Dynamics.

Polaris Technologies "will focus on developing and deploying digital industry skills within the IT sector" and plans to fill "20 tech positions spanning roles in facilities support, systems administration, data center technicians, and additional support services," Zhang said. "We look forward to contributing to the growth of the local economy and the crypto industry."

"We are proud to welcome this data center to Muskogee as our city positions itself as a prime destination for tech companies," said Kimbra Scott, executive director at Port Muskogee. "We are grateful for Polaris's investment and look forward to how they'll foster talent, innovation and con-

tribute to Muskogee's economic success."

"Polaris Technologies' investment aligns with our vision to become a hub for high-tech, living wage jobs," Muskogee Mayor Marlon Coleman said. "This is a huge win for a community our size."

Zhang said Polaris is "optimistic about a Phase II expansion" that will double capacity by another 200MW, "creating additional investment opportunities and tech jobs for the region."

Besides the planned expansion, Polaris envisions a Bitcoin mining equipment repair facility on-site "in collaboration with Bitman," which would lead to "the creation of further employment opportunities," Underwood told the *Ledger*.

Polaris claims it is a "leading Bitcoin mining data center company, specializing in robust infrastructure solutions tailored to the unique needs of the cryptocurrency ecosystem."

Reportedly dubbed Project Bifrost, the Muskogee center will



Provided

This is a bird-eye view of the Polaris Technologies 200-megawatt data center under construction on a 40-acre site in Muskogee.

be Polaris's first large-scale project in the U.S.

## Other crypto projects announced in 2022

Two years ago, ZZY Capital Holdings announced plans to invest \$100 million, and to buy 136.5 acres, on which to develop two 50MW data centers in Muskogee County: one at the tiny town of Oktaha (between Muskogee and Checotah) and the other in Muskogee's John T. Griffin Industrial Park.

ZZY completed the 50MW project on 10.5 acres in Oktaha and that facility is "currently operational," Underwood reported.

But subsequently ZZY Capital "opted to diversify their Bitcoin mining locations," and because of that "strategic decision" the Muskogee City-County Port Authority has reacquired from ZZY the 126 acres in John T. Griffin Industrial Park, Underwood said.

Also in February 2022, Core Scientific announced plans to develop a 500MW data center in the port's industrial park.

Core Scientific owns a 60-acre parcel in the industrial park "conveniently adjacent to OG&E's 1,000MW substation," Underwood told the *Ledger*. Core

Scientific "dedicated significant investment – tens of millions of dollars – for development of the site," he said. "This included construction of a substation and preparing the location for operational activities."

However, prior to completion of construction, Core Scientific "faced challenges due to a decline in Bitcoin prices, leading them to file for bankruptcy," Underwood related. The company has since emerged from bankruptcy "and is in the process of evaluating their options for the John T. Griffin Industrial Park site," he said.

Besides the one at Oktaha, Oklahoma has nine other data centers in three cities, according to datacenters.com: five in Oklahoma City, three in Tulsa, and a Google data center in the MidAmerica Industrial Park in Pryor.

## Crypto mining produces thirst for electricity

Crypto mining data centers have an enormous thirst for electricity because they employ many computers that require cooling equipment to keep the constantly running hardware from overheating. One

comparison from 2021 was that at least 13 years of typical household electricity is consumed to produce each mined Bitcoin.

It is possible to participate in Bitcoin mining with an at-home personal computer equipped with some of the latest and fastest hardware, but the 'miner' might make only a few cents per day.

On Oct. 18, 2023, a Bitcoin price was approximately \$28,400.

Presumably the Polaris data center will consume a large volume of electricity and thus become a major industrial customer for OG&E.

"OG&E will support Polaris through our current infrastructure, which entails receiving electricity from an interconnected power grid that is managed by the Southwest Power Pool," the utility told the *Ledger* in response to an inquiry. "Many regional power plants, including OG&E's Muskogee Power Plant, supply power to this interconnected grid, allowing electric companies and the SPP to operate economically across the entire grid, ultimately benefitting all customers by increasing reliability."

## Regulators approve 3 AOG customer retention programs

By **Mike W. Ray**  
*Southwest Ledger*

OKLAHOMA CITY – Customer retention programs to be administered by Arkansas Oklahoma Gas Corp. for the next three years were approved unanimously by the Oklahoma Corporation Commission on Feb. 15.

The three retention programs are service line replacement, residential weatherization improvements and rebates for energy-efficient equipment in homes and businesses.

The company's budget for the trio of programs is \$204,677 per year, or \$614,031 over the three-year period of 2024-26. That figure is almost \$76,000 less than the budget the company initially proposed, "because AOG was able to renegotiate its contract with its third-party implementer to reduce delivery costs," the settlement agreement explains.

Consequently, the financial impact on the utility bill for an "average" AOG residential customer will be \$1.595 per month, 20.5 cents less than what the company first proposed.

McKlein Aguirre, a coordinator in the commission's Public Utility Division, testified that all three of AOG's customer retention programs benefit the utility's ratepayers, and that the PUD believes the costs are reasonable.

AOG conducts exit interviews with customers who ask to permanently disconnect their natural gas service, said William Scott Gentry, manager of energy efficiency for the company.

"During these interviews the company attempts to negotiate a resolution to prevent the customer from leaving the system," Gentry said. However, if disconnection is "unavoidable," the company collects data "in an effort to determine what factors contributed to" the customer's decision, he said.

Data collected to date suggest three primary causes of disconnections, Gentry said:

- Repair costs associated with service line replacement;
- High energy bills attributed to energy inefficient homes;
- Minimal usage of appliances fueled with natural gas.

### Customer Retention Programs

Consequently, AOG offers three programs that address those issues.

The company may replace a service line owned by a customer if the line leaks because of deterioration or damage; afterward the line is owned, operated and maintained by the company. AOG also may move the meter from the property line to the house.

AOG will provide rebates to residential and small business customers who install high-efficiency natural gas furnaces, natural gas water heaters, and smart thermostats in new and existing homes and businesses.

The weatherization program targets "severely energy inefficient" homes in order to "improve comfort and reduce energy costs," Gentry said.

Improvements provided at no cost to participants may include attic insulation, duct sealing/repair, window sealing/caulking, low-flow showerheads, faucet aerators, carbon monoxide detectors, and smoke alarms.

To qualify for the weatherization program, the customer must be a homeowner, renter, or tenant of a single-family home or duplex that is at least 10 years of age. Customers who meet those criteria receive a free home energy audit that will determine whether the residence qualifies for weatherization measures.

This was AOG's fourth consecutive three-year customer retention program endorsed by the

Corporation Commission since late 2014.

### Cities that are served by AOG, Summit Utilities

Arkansas Oklahoma Gas Corp. supplies natural gas to approximately 60,000 residential, commercial, industrial, and agricultural customers in Arkansas and Oklahoma. Towns served in Oklahoma include Fanshawe, Red Oak, Poteau, Sallisaw, Spiro, Muldrow, Heavener and West Siloam Springs.

AOG is based in Fort Smith, Arkansas, in the heart of the Arkoma Basin, an area "rich" in natural gas production. "That gives us the ability to access and transport natural gas produced from local wells," the company states. "These local supplies, in combination with our ability to obtain natural gas from interstate pipelines, enable us to provide reliable natural gas service to all our customers."

In 2017, AOG joined a larger group of natural gas utilities when it combined with Summit Utilities, Inc. "This brings added expertise to the team, as well as additional financial resources for ongoing growth and investments to protect the integrity and safety of AOG's natural gas system."

Oklahoma cities served by Summit Utilities include Lawton, Elgin, Fletcher, Sterling, Cache, Geronimo, Altus, Apache, Blair, Burns Flat, Chickasha, Comanche, Duke, Duncan, Mangum, Marlow, Martha, Olustee and Temple.

They also include Cushing, Ada, Arapaho, Blackwell, Canton, Cheyenne, Cromwell, Deer Creek, Earlsboro, Fairview, Garber, Harts-horne, Hominy, Mangum, McAlester, Medford, Nardin, Okeene, Seminole, Stringtown, Talihina, Tonkawa, Vance Air Force Base, Watonga, Weatherford, Wilburton and Wynona.

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# REVIEW

## Reviewing “The Summer of 1876 : Outlaws, Lawmen, and Legends in the Season That Defined the American West”

By **Mindy Ragan Wood**  
*Southwest Ledger*

“The Summer of 1876: Outlaws, Lawmen, and Legends in the Season That Defined the American West,” a book that often reads like a page turning novel, is a must have for history buffs and any Oklahoman with an interest in the Wild West.

Full disclosure, I come from an Old West family. My great, great grandfather Frank Ragan was a former deputy U.S. Marshal who served under “Hanging” Judge Isaac Parker. A secretive man of intrigue, Frank hunted criminals throughout Indian, and later Oklahoma Territory, as he tried to scrape out a meager living for his growing family.

My own ancestor aside, I approach historical books with an aversion to sensationalism and uninformed assumptions, but author Chris Wimmer is also a journalist who has studied the American West. So, when I got the chance to read and review “The Summer of 1876: Outlaws, Lawmen, and Legends in the Season That Defined the American West,” I hoped to learn something new about this time in history. I wasn’t disappointed.

Wimmer transports the reader into the lives of fa-

mous lawmen, outlaws and Native American heroes at a time when the political climate would determine the future of Oklahoma and other western states.

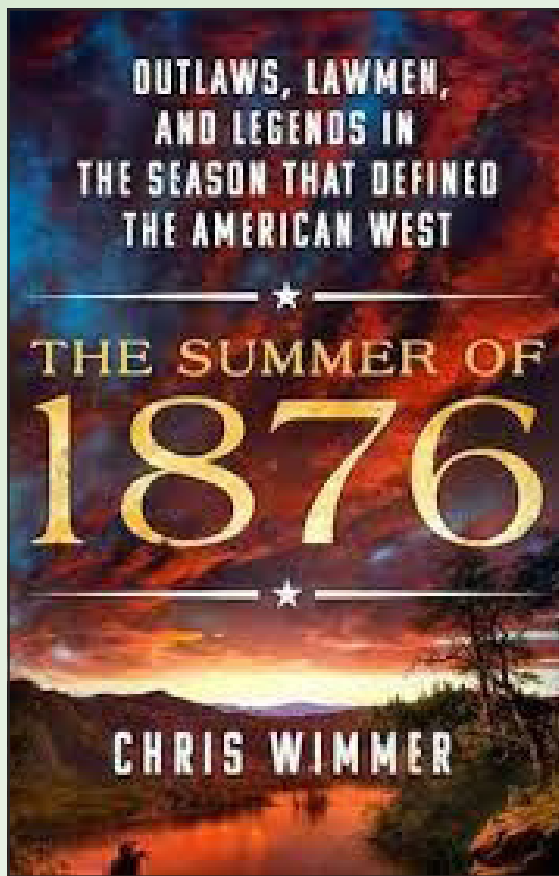
His meticulous research reveals facts, little known stories and the historical nuance of the period to better understand these villains and victors.

Some stories serve as lessons for the reader, like the account of Lakota War Chief Red Cloud. He knew the best way to beat an opponent is to test their reactions and discover their modus operandi.

Wimmer tells the story of Red Cloud’s young warriors ready for battle in northern Wyoming near Fort Phil Kearny. The warriors were itching with bloodthirsty courage and emblazoned with rage, but Red Cloud convinced them to hold back for a wiser war strategy than mere force and speed.

Fortune may favor the brave, but only if they’re wise and Red Cloud was both.

He had his men ambush the fort’s soldiers, but pull



back well short of a sustained attack. From a distance, Red Cloud watched the entire skirmish and in moments learned exactly how soldiers at the fort behaved when surprised, the number of soldiers and their defense procedures.

Upon their return a few weeks later in the dead of winter, the warriors returned and decimated the fort’s army.

Lesson learned.

You won’t find those kinds of details on Wikipedia, but you’ll find it in Wimmer’s book.

Other daring tales include those of outlaws like Billy Thompson and Jesse James. Lawmen’s troubles, too, find their way into Wimmer’s account, such as the story of “Wild” Bill Hickok and the reason he gave up his badge. Hickok mistook his friend and deputy, Mike Williams, as an outlaw during a gun battle and shot him dead.

Hickok was never the same, Wimmer wrote. I don’t suppose Hickok went around telling that story in his day, but Wimmer ferreted it out.

The author holds back no punches when it comes to national politics and public opinion at that time toward Native Americans. National politicians were under pressure to give ambitious white Americans more lands to develop and more gold to glean, and they did not disappoint their constituents. Native Americans were

often forced onto reservations through lies and bloodshed, but the gold and glory would tarnish as history later unfolded the awful truth.

In reading his accounts, the reader can speculate that political leaders of the day could not know or did not care how future Americans would judge these decisions, nor of the social and economic consequences on the nation’s First Americans that linger today.

My one criticism is that Wimmer weaves together so many characters and historical events in numerous locations the book is at times tricky to follow. I found myself having to go back and check a name or wondering what the next three paragraphs had to do with the first—but his vivid storytelling, and the subject, made me forgive and keep reading.

I enjoyed Wimmer’s fairness when telling the stories of all these characters who were often sensationalized by reporters—and certainly in autobiographies—of the time. You won’t find any rose-colored glasses when you pick up this book, but rather an eye-opening retelling and a perspective that captures a single year’s importance in shaping Old West history.

*desperate*  
*afraid*  
*hopeless*  
*anxious*

**PROTECTED**

*hungry*  
*worried*  
*ignored*  
*desperate*

**EMPOWERED**

*painful*  
*dependent*  
*confused*  
*cheated*

**RESTORED**

*ashamed*  
*unemployed*  
*helpless*  
*worthless*

**EQUIPPED**

**WITH YOUR HELP,  
WE CAN CREATE  
FEELINGS OF HOPE  
FOR PEOPLE AND  
FAMILIES IN  
OUR COMMUNITY.**

# PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

United Way of Southwest Oklahoma brings our community together by connecting **resources with those who need them most.**





# Borrowers refinancing farm loans will face higher interest payments

By Ty Kreitman

Growth in agricultural real estate values surged during 2021 and 2022 alongside historically high farm incomes and low interest rates. In 2023, farmland values held firm while interest rates increased alongside benchmark rates. Together, strong real estate valuations and higher interest rates have pushed up interest expenses on land loans, potentially squeezing profitability for crop producers.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, agricultural real estate accounts for more than 80% of U.S. farm sector assets, and real estate debt makes up more than 70% of all liabilities for the sector. Thus, an increase in interest expenses on land debt is likely to have a substantial influence on the sector.

The steep increase in interest expenses is likely to be acutely burdensome for owner-operated farms with high leverage and may deter some farmers from refinancing or taking on new debt.

Notably, these increases in financing costs have occurred at a time when farm operational costs have declined. Total expenses for an average corn and soybean farm without new land debt stabilized in 2023. (Scenarios assume the operation is a 50/50 corn and soybean farm that finances 50% of operating expenses at the beginning of the year and pays interest and principal on operating debt in full at year-end.)

The slight decline in farm expenses reflects a decline in the costs of many key inputs such as fuel and fertilizer after two years of substantial increases. However, total expenses for an average farm with new land debt continued to rise.

Financing costs pushed up total expenses for farms with land debt. Interest expenses per acre grew during 2023 alongside higher interest rates, particularly for operations with large amounts of new debt. A farm with new or refinanced land debt totaling 40% of the value of all operated acres – that is, a 40% loan-to-value ratio – saw an increase in interest expenses of nearly \$100 per acre from 2022 to 2023. A farm with a 65% LTV had an increase of more than \$125 per acre.

Profit opportunities thinned for all crop producers during 2023 alongside a moderation in crop prices, but those with large amounts of land debt could face additional pressures.

In 2023, a farm with a new loan with a 40% LTV ratio on all operated acres would likely break even selling crops at average prices, similar to a farm that rents all operated acres and has no land debt. Moreover, a farm with a new loan with a 65% percent LTV ratio on all operated acres would likely incur losses.

According to the USDA's Agricultural Resource Management Survey, around 45% of U.S. corn and soybeans farms owned all land operated in 2022, around 40% owned a portion of land operated but rented the remainder, and about 15% rented all land operated.

Farms that own land can have varying debt levels and repricing schedules that influence exposure to higher interest costs. Farms with higher leverage and higher shares of newly financed land debt are likely to have the most pressure on their profit margins.

Higher interest costs are likely to weigh on both new land purchases and the incomes of borrowers refinancing existing debt. According to the Survey of Agricultural Credit Conditions, near-term repricing schedules are common on debt secured by farm real estate at commercial agricultural banks. Commercial banks in the survey are, on average, scheduled to reprice about one-fifth of farmland loans every six months.

More than half of farmland loans will assume a new interest rate over the next 18 months. Borrowers refinancing debt secured prior to 2022 will face considerably higher interest payments than when the loan was originated.

Reducing financing costs could require producers to have sizeable amounts of cash on hand for down payments. The average interest rate on farmland loans has more than doubled since the beginning of 2022 and increased loan payments considerably.

For new land purchases, the amount of funds needed to reduce debt balances and lower loan payments has increased alongside strong growth in farm real estate values. For farms refinancing existing debt, higher interest payments could materially reduce repayment capacity and may require paying down a portion of outstanding debt.

Together, these results suggest that in the current interest rate environment, crop producers with new or newly refinanced land debt may struggle to reach profitability without strong equity positions, large cash down payments, or an improvement in agricultural economic conditions.

Considerable strength in farm income in recent years has bolstered working capital and could alleviate the debt burden for some operators refinancing existing land debt. However, high financing costs could reduce demand for newly financed agricultural real estate purchases and be especially burdensome for highly leveraged crop producers.

*Ty Kreitman is an associate economist in the Regional Affairs Department at the Omaha Branch of the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City.*



## Oklahoma Farm Bureau awards 10 state lawmakers

From staff reports

OKLAHOMA CITY – Ten Oklahoma lawmakers received the 2023 Oklahoma Farm Bureau Champion award during the organization's annual leadership conference held Feb. 13. The Champion award is presented to legislators who go above and beyond for Oklahoma farmers and ranchers through the year.

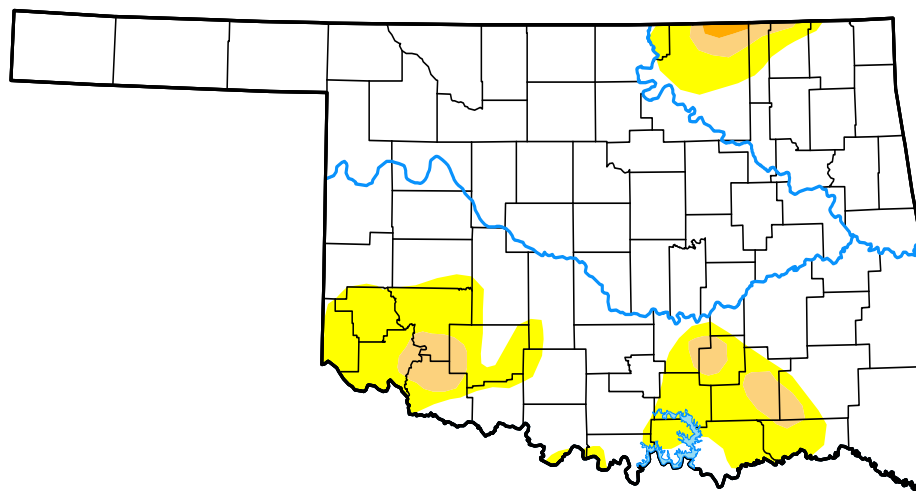
Those awarded were Oklahoma House Speaker Charles McCall (R-Atoka); Reps. John Pfeiffer (R-Orlando), Dell Kerbs (R-Shawnee), David Hardin (R-Stilwell) and Anthony Moore (R-Clinton), and Sens. Brent Howard (R-Altus), Lonnie Paxton

(R-Tuttle), Darcy Jech (R-Kingfisher), Chris Kidd (R-Waurika) and Chuck Hall (R-Perry).

"As Oklahomans, we are fortunate to have state legislators who understand the important role agriculture plays in our state," said Rodd Moesel, OKFB president. "We are proud to honor these individuals for their service to agriculture and rural Oklahoma through their work at the state Capitol."

Those awarded were nominated by county Farm Bureau members and the OKFB board of directors. Recipients received a plaque in recognition of their services to agriculture and rural Oklahoma.

## U.S. Drought Monitor Oklahoma



February 13, 2024

(Released Thursday, Feb. 15, 2024)

Valid 7 a.m. EST

Drought Conditions (Percent Area)

	None	D0-D4	D1-D4	D2-D4	D3-D4	D4
<b>Current</b>	83.39	16.61	3.23	0.19	0.00	0.00
<b>Last Week</b> <i>02-06-2024</i>	78.52	21.48	7.18	1.36	0.00	0.00
<b>3 Months Ago</b> <i>11-14-2023</i>	44.35	55.65	36.34	13.68	1.16	0.00
<b>Start of Calendar Year</b> <i>01-02-2024</i>	55.32	44.68	21.64	3.08	0.00	0.00
<b>Start of Water Year</b> <i>09-26-2023</i>	34.29	65.71	46.76	30.93	12.91	0.00
<b>One Year Ago</b> <i>02-14-2023</i>	14.97	85.03	80.07	66.94	36.58	8.07

Intensity:



The Drought Monitor focuses on broad-scale conditions. Local conditions may vary. For more information on the Drought Monitor, go to <https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/About.aspx>

Author:

Deborah Bathke  
National Drought Mitigation Center



[droughtmonitor.unl.edu](https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu)

# U.S. pork export value sets record; beef finishes strong

From staff reports

Fueled by key markets in Mexico and the Western Hemisphere, U.S. pork exports set a value record in 2023. According to USDA data compiled by the U.S. Meat Export Federation, pork exports reached an \$8.16 billion, a 6% increase from 2022.

A December surge led export volume to its third-largest figure on record of 2.91 million metric tons.

Mexico set records for both volume and value of pork imports from the U.S. in December, climbing 17% year-over-year to 105,451 mt, with export values reaching \$233.8 million.

"2023 saw tremendous growth in global demand for U.S. pork, and it came at a time when the U.S. industry needed it most," said USMEF President and CEO Dan Halstrom. "The expansion of U.S. pork's presence in Mexico has been remarkable but the great news certainly doesn't end there. We are very encouraged by the robust demand we've seen throughout the Western Hemisphere and in a number of Asia-Pacific markets as well."

Central American countries like Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador also experienced increased growth in pork imports from the U.S.

In December, exports to this region rose by 20%, breaking records for both volume and value. Overall, 2023 exports to Central America reached the second-largest volume on record. Despite a slight decline in December shipments, the Dominican Republic also witnessed significant growth. Due to African swine fever in domestic production, the Dominican Republic saw increased reliance on U.S. pork.

Despite a small decrease in pork variety shipments to China, exports rose to 585,806 mt, a 9% increase from 2022, valued at \$1.37 billion, representing a 7% increase. China remained the largest destination for variety meat shipments at 335,591 mt. Pork exports surged 64% in South Korea to 23,912 mt – the largest in more than four years.

U.S. pork exports also rose in the Philippines and Vietnam, and surged in Malaysia where African swine fever has weighed heavily on domestic production. However, exports declined in Japan by 4% for the full year.

While 2023 beef exports have remained strong in Mexico, growing by 14% year-over-year, reaching the highest volume since 2019, the second highest on record. They

have faced challenges in Asian markets where economic conditions impacted foodservice demand.

U.S. beef exports to China and South Korea showed signs of improvement in December, with volume and value increasing from 2022. Notably, Taiwan has remained a significant market for U.S. beef, where the U.S. maintained a dominant position in chilled beef exports.

"There is no question that 2023 was a challenging year for U.S. beef exports, especially in our largest Asian markets where economic conditions have weighed on foodservice demand," Halstrom said. "Of course, we were also challenged on the supply side, with less product available for export. But nevertheless, U.S. beef achieved excellent growth in Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean, and we are encouraged by the December uptick in demand in South Korea and China. It was also great to see such strong per-head export value in December, topping \$430."

Overall, facing varying market conditions, U.S. pork and beef exports have demonstrated resilience and growth in key markets, contributing significantly to the global meat market in 2023.