

October 16, 2026

David Hallauer
District Extension Agent, Crops & Soils

ARC/PLC Resources

As harvest continues, don't forget the deadline to make another Farm Bill election. A choice between Agricultural Risk Coverage (ARC) and Price Loss Coverage (PLC) for payments to be made in October of 2027 will be required by the December 11th deadline (*the election and enrollment period for the 2027 crop year will run from Nov. 2 through March 15, 2027*). That means it's time to evaluate options and review some of the decision-making resources available from the K-State Department of Ag Economics to help you do so.

With prices a component of both program choices, price outlooks are important. Updated monthly as NASS prices are released, two different price information projections are available (link below). The K-State projections come with a detailed explanation of where the numbers come from. Three additional price projection sources are available for cross reference as well.

A second great resource is the KSU Farm Bill Tradeoff Spreadsheet. This Excel tool (with user instructions included...) provides a visual representation of potential ARC and PLC payments based on *your* farm's information. Visit the link below to download.

One of the *best* resources will be an upcoming webinar featuring KSU Ag Economists Robin Reid and Jenny Ifft. For 90 minutes (noon to 1:30; Tuesday November 3rd), they'll provide an overview of current markets, projected commodity prices, county yields and their influence on the 2026 ARC/PLC program. Sign up for a link to the livestream (it will be recorded) at: <https://www.agmanager.info/events/arc-vs-plc-title-i-contenders-webinar>.

Check out the webinar at the link above. Price projection resources and the Farm Bill Tradeoff Spreadsheet can be found under the Farm Bill section of K-State's Department of Agricultural Economics AgManager website: <https://www.agmanager.info/ag-policy/farm-bill-0>.

Ross Mosteller
District Extension Agent, Livestock & Natural Resources

Weaning Time Data Collection

Two recent conversations have reemphasized the reason why data collection is important. Breed associations need more of it for databases and bull buyers appreciate it! We are in that time of year where spring calving cow herds are weaned, and this serves as a good checkpoint for data collection. I fully realize that not everyone has a scale, but many data points can be made through visual observation, transferred to paper by pen.

Comprehensive management decisions used to improve genetics, management practices and profit potential of cow-calf operations should be based on data. Periodically, it is important to step back and evaluate the production system. Weaning time is the best time of year to measure, quantify and document herd performance. This is typically the one time in the year when all animals are caught and under close evaluation. Not only is weaning time a great time to vaccinate and weigh calves, but is also the opportunity to preg check, evaluate and weigh the cowherd. Herd health practices like de-worming and vaccinating can be performed as well.

Weaning day can yield a wealth of information which can be evaluated to direct management decisions. A few pieces of information to consider collecting include: pregnancy status of the cows, weight and body condition of cows, weight of calves, evaluation of – udder, eyes, feet/legs and docility scoring, and evaluation of teeth in older cows has value. This is another good point in time to gauge the general health and condition of animals, check for internal and/or external parasites and apply treatments if warranted.

So how does one use this information? Since the cow is the production machine in the beef production system, maximum output needs to be produced for the system to be the most efficient. This can be measured in weaned pounds of calf, percent body weight weaned, pregnancy rates, etc... The cow herd requires input expenses and there is opportunity cost on the dollars tied up in cow inventory. The only opportunity to operate at a profit is when the production factory yields a weaned calf of greater value than the annual cost of owning and operating the production factory. The data collected can inform you about the efficiency of the production factory.

Production records like the percentage of breeding females exposed that raised a calf to weaning, the percentage of calves born that survived to weaning and the percentage of our cow's mature weight that they are weaning off are some important benchmarks of cow productivity. These serve to determine efficiency and can be used to improve management and selection decisions that will result in more profitability. These benchmarks of productivity can be calculated from the data captured at weaning, so take advantage of the opportunity to collect and use data.

Kansas State University Animal Science has an Excel spreadsheet that can be used to calculate these Standard Performance Analysis (SPA) numbers. It can be found at: <https://www.asi.k-state.edu/extension/beef/files/SPAproductionBlank2014.xlsx>

Laura Phillips
District Extension Agent, Horticulture

Can Your Phone Identify Plants for You?

With thousands of different plants growing in our state, determining what you are looking at can be difficult. While field guides used to be the principal method of plant identification for beginners and experts alike, smartphones are shifting the way we approach the mystery plant in our backyard. Certain phone applications promise to instantly identify a plant using only a picture. The idea of snapping a picture and getting an instant identification has its appeal – but are they accurate, how do you use them effectively, and how can you tell when it is wrong?

The accuracy of these applications depends on the type of plant, what you include in the picture, and your standard for accuracy. Michigan State Extension found that apps were less accurate when identifying plants with subtle differences like grasses. A study at Rutgers University found these applications are better at identifying tree leaves rather than just the bark. Both studies consistently found the applications were good at determining the genus but are far less accurate at pinning down the species. Do not be surprised if your plant identification app thinks your Black Willow is a Red Willow.

Looking at the accuracy of some popular plant ID applications like iNaturalist, PictureThis, and PlantNet (all available on IOS and Android), we also see that these apps are not created equal. In recent studies, PictureThis consistently shows a 95% or above accuracy to the genus, while iNaturalist had around 90% accuracy to the genus. PlantNet and Plant ID trail behind in the 80% accuracy range. These numbers, however, are not static. Earlier studies on these applications show unremarkable accuracy, and our changing technology is continuing to improve their plant recognition abilities.

While recent studies show impressive accuracy, user error can lead to incorrect results. Blurry pictures or pictures with multiple plants confuse the application. A close-up only showing part of a leaf, or a picture taken from far away will not provide the application with enough detail. After you submit a good picture, it will generate a few possible identities, along with descriptions and example pictures. Examine the pictures and description to ensure it matches the plant you are looking at. Your phone only uses visuals for identification, and some plants have specific textures or odors that distinguish them. While many apps use your location to narrow results, use the description to see if the suggested identification grows in your region and the habitat you are in. If it suggests a shade-loving plant while you are in an open field, you have good reason to doubt the results.

What does all this mean? It means these applications are useful in particular instances. Never use these apps to determine what plant your pet ate before it fell ill or to find edible plants for foraging. Instead, consider these applications as one tool in your plant identification toolkit. They can help you determine weeds you might have in your garden, or what kind of flowers you are seeing while hiking. Reading plant descriptions on these apps can help you learn plant terminology and morphology, point you to what chapter in your field guide to turn to, or give you info to start a search on databases like USDA PLANTS. Some apps show what other users nearby are identifying, and help you learn more about the flora in your region. For the average plant enthusiast, these applications can be incredibly useful and, when paired with other tools, can show you the incredible diversity of life in your own backyard.

Note: K-State is neither endorsing nor expressing bias against any of the applications mentioned.

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Teresa Hatfield
District Extension Agent, Family and Community Wellness

Flu Shots Remain One of the Best Defenses for Older Adults

It's that time of year, the leaves are falling, the temperatures this week at least (it's Kansas after all) are cool and crisp. I'm enjoying the cooler weather and the chance to break out a couple of light sweaters. It's also time to think about getting your flu shot. I may be preaching to the choir, but I'm surprised how many folks I talk to that haven't gotten it yet.

No one is immune to the flu, and those older than 65 face greater risk of serious complications, including hospitalization, and death. It's nothing to mess around with. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), between 70% and 85% seasonal flu related deaths and 50% to 70% of flu-related hospitalization occur among people age 65 and older. This is because as we age our immune systems do as well, and they don't quite work as well as they used to. This makes us more vulnerable to illnesses such as influenza. The vaccination helps to support our immune system and reduce the risk of developing serious illnesses like the flu.

While there is still controversy around vaccinations, the flu has been proved safe for many years. The CDC recommends that everyone ages 6 months and older receive an annual flu vaccine, with special emphasis on adults age 65 and older. For this age group, CDC preferentially recommends higher-dose or enhanced flu vaccines, including high-dose, recombinant, or adjuvanted flu vaccines, because they may provide better protection than standard-dose vaccines.

Some people mistakenly believe that the flu is simply a bad cold. In reality, influenza can lead to severe illness, loss of independence, and lengthy hospital stays for older adults. Even healthy older adults can develop serious complications. Vaccination not only helps protect the individual receiving the shot but also helps reduce the spread of influenza to family members, friends, and community members.

The good news is that Medicare makes it easy and affordable for older adults to get vaccinated. Medicare Part B covers one flu shot each flu season at no cost when administered by a provider or pharmacy that accepts Medicare assignment. Beneficiaries pay no deductible, copayment, or coinsurance for the vaccine.

Health officials generally recommend getting vaccinated in September or October, before flu activity begins to increase. However, it is still beneficial to receive a flu shot later in the season if you have not yet been vaccinated.

For older adults, an annual flu shot is one of the simplest and most effective steps they can take to protect their health, maintain their independence, and enjoy a safer, healthier flu season.

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Cindy Williams
District Extension Agent, Food, Nutrition, Health and Safety

Healthy Snacks for Everybody!

Everyone knows holidays are a time for indulgence! Candy, large meals and frequent consumption are part of many of our traditions. While the adage, "Everything in moderation" is true, it is important to remember that looking out for our health is important and can often go overlooked in times of celebration.

Here are some suggestions to keep your healthy eating as a priority during the upcoming holiday months. Firstly, choose to make healthy alternatives over quick snacks, party treats and potluck food. Instead of heavy dips, bags of sodium-high chips or sugar filled cupcakes, investigate other recipes that feature fruits, vegetables, and healthy grains.

Try

- Apple-themed treats
- Pumpkin-themed treats
- Other vegetable and fruit treats
- Whole grain treats such as popcorn
- DIY trail mix

Limit

- Cookies and other baked sweets
- Chips and chip dips
- Meatballs or other meat-centered items
- Pasta salads

Second, if you need store bought prepackaged or single serve items for school parties or trick-or-treaters, opt for healthy options at the store. Look for snacks that do not contain artificial flavors, synthetic colors, added sugars, trans fat or high fructose corn syrup.

Try

- No sugar added applesauce or other fruit cups
- Whole grain snacks such as pretzels, popcorn or cereal bars
- Trail mix

Limit

- Snack cakes
- Cookies
- Pudding packs
- Candy