

Essay winner named

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The Agriculture Council of America (ACA) has announced the national 2008 Ag Day Essay Contest winner, Katlin Wiest.

ACA called upon seventh- to 12th-grade students nationwide to submit original essays of 450 words about the importance of agriculture in the United States. Under the theme "Agriculture - Bigger Than You Think," students were encouraged to focus their essays on the broader scope of agriculture, showcasing the diversity of today's American farms. Though row crops and livestock are still very much a part of the foundation of the industry, agriculture today has multiple touch points in our daily lives and many career opportunities.

Wiest, an eighth-grader at Upper Dauphin Middle School, Lykens, Pa., was named the national winner of the 2008 contest during the Ag Day event held at the USDA Whitten Building Pa-

tio. Wiest read her essay to industry representatives, members of Congress, federal agency representatives, media and others at the Celebration of Agriculture dinner in Washington, D.C. Ag Day is a nationally coordinated program that envisions consumers, young and old, talking about agriculture. The contest is sponsored by CHS Inc., The Council for Agricultural Science & Technology, High Plains Journal, National Association of Farm Broadcasting, National Agri-Marketing Association, Country Living Association and McCormick Company.

This is the 35th anniversary of National Ag Day. The goal of the ACA is to provide a spotlight on the agriculture, food and fiber industries the first day of spring (National Ag Day), not only to help consumers understand how food and fiber products are produced, but to celebrate accomplishments in providing safe, abundant and affordable products.

Thomas County Farm Bureau members insert some information into a book promoting agriculture to be distributed to Thomas County schools and other places. The book distribution complemented National Agriculture Day which was Thursday.



JOHN VAN NOSTRAND/Colby Free Press

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Record high grain prices bolstering rural economy

WICHITA, (AP) — Record-high grain prices are fueling a rural economic boom in U.S. farm states such as Kansas.

Farm equipment dealers have a backlog of several months in orders for new machinery. Crop-land rents are rising, along with agricultural land prices. And with spring planting just weeks away, farmers are watching the volatile commodities markets as they decide which crops to grow during the upcoming season.

While their city neighbors are struggling with foreclosures and fears of a recession, a lot more money is circulating in rural Kansas today, said Jere White, executive director of the Kansas Corn Growers Association.

"They are kind of riding the wave, running counter to the rest of the economy," Terry Kastens, a farmer who also teaches part-time as an agricultural economy professor at Kansas State University, said of his fellow farmers.

White said after several lean years in Kansas agriculture, many farmers are using money they're making from their grain to upgrade, not just on their farms, but in their homes and the rest of their lives.

"If you can envision tens of thousands of farmers in Kansas receiving a good price for virtually any grain they grow, the impact

it has on rural communities has to be substantial," White said. "That filters its way to people who sell cars and tires and shoes and clothing and everything else."

Perhaps one of the most telling barometers of the farm economy is the rising numbers of orders for new farm machinery. Kastens, who farms in northwest Kansas near Atwood, bought his new planter in August to get it in time for spring planting this year.

New combine sales were up 15.4 percent nationwide in 2007, sales of four-wheel-drive tractors were up 22.7 percent, and sales of large-scale, two-wheel-drive tractors were up 25.7 percent, Kastens said.

Although equipment prices haven't increased much more than 10 percent, farmers are buying a lot more "bells and whistles" such as the newest technology for that machinery that is pushing the cost of equipment up as much as 20 percent, Kastens said.

Input costs — such as fertilizer, herbicide and seed prices — for the upcoming season are also soaring, something farmers will take into consideration when deciding what and how much to plant.

"Corn is very expensive to plant," said Mike Woolverton, grain marketing economist at Kansas State University. It takes a lot of fertilizer and seed costs are

high." Still, Kastens said, grain prices are "plenty high" to cover the increased costs.

"Another big plus for farmers today is that despite the fact there is a lot of borrowing — all input costs have risen — interest rates have been pretty low.

Government officials lowered the interest rates, which is another nice, positive thing," Kastens said.

While grain growers are relishing an unprecedented market for their crops, some sectors of the rural economy are hurting from the

high prices. Cattle feedyards, particularly in big cattle-feeding states such as Kansas and Texas, have been hard hit. Higher feed costs are also affecting cow-calf producers.

"The livestock industry is not doing all that great. They are just kind of plugging along," Kastens said.

Such is the backdrop as grain farmers decide in the coming weeks how many acres of what crops to plant. And that brings the commodities futures market into play.

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