

# *Chapter Six*

## **2012-2022**

### *Highlights from Randy DeSutter*

Randy DeSutter of Woodhull, IL initially began serving on the ICGA board in November of 2012. He has very distinct memories of wanting to do more to help improve the lot of corn farmers and increase the stability of the industry in the wake of a major drought that year.

He was amongst those hit by the historic drought of 1988 too. It became abundantly clear how important strong programming and strategic legislation - like that pursued by Illinois Corn Growers Association - was to position farmers to make the best of the good years and survive the tough ones.

The critical connection between the checkoff program and the fortunes of ICGA and National Corn Growers Association was also driven home by a reduced crop size and cuts in farmers income. But DeSutter feels the organization has done a good job of developing quality programs and keeping them growing through good fiscal management and developing strong partnerships.



During the drought of 2012, corn yields in Illinois were decreased by about 50 percent, which in turn decreased checkoff income by about 50 percent. The IL Corn Marketing Board was forced to significantly lower funding to partners and projects to compensate.

He points out the Precision Conservation Management (PCM) program as a good example he saw developed during his early years on the ICGA board. Building PCM became a defining moment for the organization, DeSutter says, because it put a spotlight on an issue of concern to both the Ag community and the public alike.

“During this time there was real concern about the effects of nutrient losses. By taking the initiative ICGA helped set the tone and direction on this important issue. We began to collect significant data to show nutrient management can make Illinois farms more profitable,” DeSutter said. “At the same time, we positioned ourselves as being proactive in meeting growing public concern related to conservation and nutrient management.”

“We’ve doubled the number of acres in the program and the number of counties involved, and we were glad to welcome Illinois Soybean Association to the program. The goal is really simple; do more with less and maintain a strong viable farm businesses doing it,” DeSutter said.



Members of the Precision Conservation Management team pose at the 2019 Farm Progress Show. Pictured L-R: Shane Sinclair, Dave Fulton, Collin Roemer, and Travis Deppe.



Senator Dick Durbin and Representative Cheri Bustos held a news conference to celebrate Lock 25 on the Mississippi River receiving full funding in January 2022. L-R: Colonel Jesse T. Curry, District Commander; Marty Marr, ICGA President; Senator Durbin; Rep. Bustos; Gary Perniar, Mid-America Carpenters Regional Council.



DeSutter chuckles when asked about working to modernize the locks and dams on the Upper Mississippi and Illinois River. Like everyone who has been involved with ICGA for the last 20 years, river infrastructure has been a priority issue.

“Modern locks and dams are critical to our competitiveness and economic future. Thankfully, we have had successes along the way which has kept the membership engaged. I’m proud that we have had such a clear vision on what farmers need and the tenacity to reach our goals,” he said. “We stuck with our principles even though the public doesn’t appreciate the importance of transportation infrastructure. And as a result, we had a major funding victory in 2022.”

Sometimes ICGA goes to Washington DC to reconnect and keep lines of communications open with elected officials, agencies, think tanks, embassies and industry partners. DeSutter notes, other times you go on a mission with a serious ask on issues like ethanol, locks and dams or a farm bill, that can change the short or long-term direction and success of the industry.



A farm bill that works is important for all Illinois farmers, so farm bill program advocacy is a consistent priority for IL Corn. In 2017 at the Farm Progress Show, farmers were able to hold up their choice of many signs advocating for different aspects of the new farm bill and sign their name to the bottom. The photos were posted on social accounts with relevant elected officials tagged.

“Every farm bill has that potential critical nature and sometimes trade legislation does too. During my tenure as president a small team that included myself, Jim Tarmann and Mark Bunselmeyer made the trip to DC to work on the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA). This bill opened doors to increased corn and soybean sales to Mexico and Canada at a time when we really needed the markets,” DeSutter remembers.



In the fall of 2019, ICGA was working hard to push the U.S. Mexico Canada Agreement for trade over the finish line. A small delegation went to work in Washington, DC making one last plea for final passage of the bill. L-R: Jim Tarmann, Congressman Bill Foster, Mark Bunselmeyer, Randy DeSutter

“We were all over Capitol Hill and met with the entire Illinois delegation. When the smoke cleared, all but one person voted for the bill, including Rep. Jan Schakowsky, who had never voted for a pro-trade bill. The victory super-charged our markets,” he said. “One thing I know is that the world changes, but one constant is farmers wake up every morning needing strong markets here and overseas. ICGA never loses sight of that.”

### *Highlights from Roger Sy*

Roger Sy’s introduction to Illinois Corn was much like a running leap off a cliff, with his first meeting being the Commodity Classic in Long Beach, CA. He joined ICGA to support his friend and neighbor Susie Harbaugh in her run for the board. Little did he know that his commitment to a friend would translate into 26 years of commitment to Illinois Corn Growers Association and Illinois Corn Marketing Board.

“In my early years corn supplies were outstripping markets and killing prices,” Sy said. “I ended up in a photo on the front of the 2004 ICGA annual report standing in a pile of corn that had been dumped on the football field at my old high school. The pile was taller than the goal posts.” Sy said.

Fast forward to today and Illinois is the nation’s top corn exporting state and shipped over a billion bushels of corn out of state in 2021 – most of it destined for overseas markets.

“Supply issues aren’t going to go away but they just aren’t as persistent as they were even a decade ago,” he said. “Yields have grown substantially but so have our market development efforts.”

Closer to home, Sy says, consumer education is one of his favorite activities. ICMB efforts, big and small, make a difference in the future economic health of farms and how farmers go about their business.

“We’ve made huge gains in bringing the public up to speed on how we farm today. Our farming practices are greener and the varied products we provide have never been so essential,” he said. “Captain Cornelius education efforts, DC initiatives like Corn Farmers Coalition, ethanol education via NASCAR and Crappie Masters, and Illinois Runs on Home Grown Corn keep our message in front of the public.”

Sy said he also finds it satisfying that Illinois Corn has had commercials during football’s big game the last two years. “These projects totally changed the way we message consumers and we’ve made huge gains in public awareness as a result.”





Donna Jeschke, ICMB Chairwoman in 2008, waves the green flag during a July 2012 NASCAR race in Joliet, Illinois. The Illinois Corn Marketing Board sponsored NASCAR in partnership with many other state checkoff associates and the National Corn Growers Association from 2010-2014.



The first regional Superbowl ad from IL Corn featured Brett and Krista Swanson and their family from Oneida, IL, a shorter clip of the brand anthem video produced by IL Corn in 2019. The ad aired in February 2020.

One of Sy's fondest memories is working with Congressman John Shimkus to make the National Corn to Ethanol Research Center (NCERC) a reality and getting it located at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, Illinois.

"NCERC was completed in 2003, the year I was ICGA president. I still have a photo from the opening with U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Ann Veneman and John Shimkus touring the building," he said. "It was a good chance to let them see the facility, see the potential of specific projects, and reinforce why growing the ethanol market is important."

Sy notes that COVID19 also proved to be an important issue during his ICMB leadership. Illinois Corn filled an important role on several fronts including: being a conduit of information to farmers on staying safe while getting the job done during a pandemic; assuring consumers farmers were still in the trenches providing food; and providing ethanol-based hand sanitizer to Ag retailers, implement dealers, grain elevators and other frontline ag workers to help get the 2020 crop in the ground.

"Throughout the pandemic, we provided information about food safety and the expectation of food delivery remaining constant," he said. "We've also capitalized on people spending more time at home and online by sharing virtual farm tours."

*"The thing I wasn't prepared for was the pull Corn Growers had politically at the county, state and national level," Roger Sy said. "I was a total rookie involved in very little political activity, but once I saw how public officials and elected leaders listened to us, I was sold. This ability to be heard and carry my neighbor's message is an honor and a serious responsibility. I immediately began working to get to know my elected officials better. It's usually a positive experience but political and industry leaders are not beyond reproach. ICGA is not afraid to take people to the mat."*



During the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020-21, the stay-at-home orders caused transportation to halt. The ethanol industry felt the overnight drop in demand for fuel. IL Corn helped some Illinois ethanol plants transition their ethanol production to hand sanitizer production by purchasing several pallets and distributing them to ag retailers and other front line workers during planting season 2020. Pictured: Marty Marr and Joe Ratliff, Bartlett Grain in Jacksonville, IL.





In the early 2010s, IL Corn was just beginning to understand what would be required from farmers as the conservation and climate movement progressed. Mike Plumer spent most of his career as a University of Illinois Extension educator, serving on the ICGA board as an ex-officio member for many years in that capacity. He was an early no-till adopter and researcher, so after his retirement, he lent his expertise to IL Corn as they began to build new programming in the conservation area.

News articles, member letters, postcards, social media and educational sessions were a part of spreading the word, but water testing was key to getting the job done. Hartman notes ICGA partnered with the Council on Best Management Practices conducting hundreds of water tests across the state, including doing water testing at the Farm Progress Show for members.

### *Highlights from Kenny Hartman*

Farmers' affinity for healthy soil and clean water has been well documented over the years but with time, knowledge, and technology, the definition of "success" evolves according to Kenny Hartman. That's why growing awareness of a need for better nutrient management was a hot issue in 2015 during Hartman's presidency.

ICGA moved assertively to make water quality a marquis initiative with the hiring of Dr. Laura Gentry and the formal launch of the Precision Conservation Management program. PCM rapidly became a high-profile success that was recognized by USDA NRCS as being one of the best programs of its kind in the country. Hartman notes. He is particularly proud of the strong support from farmers and companies who share ICGA's goals like PepsiCo.

"Emerging science showed we could do more to improve water quality and we had the best management practices like no-till and cover crops to get the job done in a way that made economic sense," Hartman said. "Doing less tillage and maintaining or growing farmer income is easy for us to support. And we have the data to show conservation gains, so the public supports it too."

“Not only did we spread the gospel of nutrient loss reduction, but we also provided local and regional water-quality data, so farmers knew what needed to be done,” Hartman said. “Research supported by Illinois Corn Marketing Board studied watersheds and resulted in tons of water flow monitoring.”

The other big grassroots victory during Hartman’s presidency was a broad membership effort to fight off proposed cuts to crop insurance in the farm bill negotiations.

“There was an effort to cut \$3 billion dollars from crop insurance and ICGA launched heavy lobbying to head this effort off,” he recalls. “Our message was pretty simple; crop insurance is too important to farmer’s financial success and Ag had taken more than its share of cuts already.”



*“The best part of being a leader is the great friendships and relationships you build, and then being able to use them to make a difference for growers now and in the next generation,”*  
Hartman said.

*“We don’t talk about it a lot, but giving our kids an opportunity to farm is a driver in a lot of things we do.”*

Since 2015 and the implementation of the Illinois Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy, IL Corn has mailed thousands of postcards to farmer members, encouraging them to rethink their nitrogen application strategy, test the water running on or around their farms, plant cover crops, participate in educational sessions, and complete other actions to mitigate nutrient loss and decrease their environmental footprint.

Kenny Hartman served as chairman of the Illinois Corn Marketing Board from 2003-2004 as President of the Illinois Corn Growers Association in 2015, and is currently on the National Corn Growers Association Board of Directors. His dedication to the work of these associations and the drive to build an ag economy for the next generation is evident. Pictured L-R: Mike Homerding, Congressman Bill Foster, Kenny Hartman, Jim Reed in Washington, DC in 2015.





Hartman says he is also proud of the work ICGA did to develop a new funding mechanism to deal with the backlog of key Army Corps Projects for locks and dams. The effort created a 45% increase (9 cents a gallon, to the existing fuel tax of 20 cents/gallon).

“We worked for four years to get this Capitol Development plan in place so the Army Corp of Engineers could prioritize and tackle work that needed to be done to head off any failures in the system. It led to the completion of the Olmstead Lock in 2018,” he said. “It says a lot that this was needed badly enough that the barge industry supported taxing themselves.”

Hartman dealt with ethanol on several fronts including working to pass an E15 sales tax credit at the state level. The goal was to transfer a portion of the E10 tax credit to build demand for E15. ICGA also lobbied U.S. EPA and the administration regarding proposed restrictions in RFS II ethanol volumes.

“We had a high-profile rally in Washington, DC on RFS II, and another in Kansas City. We weren’t successful, but we set the stage for the leaders coming behind us. It’s amazing how far we have come but you need to stand back to see it. There have been many clear victories. It’s like climbing a ladder. Ethanol and river transportation are great examples. You pull yourself up one rung at a time, but always getting closer to your goal.”



Illinois corn farmers have a long history of promoting renewable fuel sources over petroleum fuel – especially imported petroleum fuel. This rally in July 2015 near the nation’s capital featured an address from Illinois Senator Tammy Duckworth and comments from National Corn Growers Association President Martin Barbre from Carmi, IL while farmers held signs and called “American Bushels not Foreign Barrels.”



Leadership from the Illinois Corn Growers Association met with the members of the Illinois delegation in March and July of each year during their regularly scheduled Washington, DC Fly-Ins during this decade. Other meetings happened in district throughout the year as well. Each time, the corn farmers advocated for lock funding and farm bill programs, which changed throughout the decade but almost always included crop insurance, revenue based safety nets, and trade program funding. Pictured L-R: Randy DeSutter, Tom Mueller, Cong. Bustos, Kate Danner, Aron Carlson.

### *Highlights from Aron Carlson*

Policy development and management were front and center for Winnebago farmer Aron Carlson during his term as president because it coincided with the final months of writing a new farm bill. He made many lobbying trips to Washington, DC, one of which was out and back in 24 hours.

“When you have meetings with the House and Senate Ag Committees and a large chunk of the Illinois Congressional delegation, it makes for a very long day,” he said, “but it’s time well spent when you are working on issues like WOTUS, risk management and ethanol, that can have such an impact on our farms.”

Waters of the US or WOTUS proved to be a big topic as efforts were afoot the change the Clean Water Act. The environmentally responsible regulations that brought clarity to clean water efforts and provided the consistency, timeliness, and transparency critical to running a farm business were at risk, Carlson said.

“The proposed rule change gave the federal government the ability to regulate ditches, ephemeral drainages or low spots on farmlands and pastures. It could literally turn a ditch into a waterway with a big rain event,” he said. “Simple activities would have been more regulated, permitting times longer and costs greater for farmers. This was a big win.”

On the ethanol front the growing number of small refinery waivers were hurting ethanol sales and corn demand. Illinois worked with NCGA and a few other states to re-score the carbon footprint of ethanol, Carlson recalls. The information used to assess ethanol’s environmental benefits was outdated and inaccurate.



“The waivers were handcuffing market growth in the industry and corn prices were taking a hit,” he said. “Our job was to encourage scientists to provide relevant data from state-of-the-art research, document ethanol’s true environmental benefits and change the discussion.”

Carlson also has strong feelings about making sure that state policy development and Corn Congress get their due in the history of the organization. The policy effort can be tedious, but it is critical to capture input from the grassroots members. Policy ideas come from the county level, are debated and refined at the state level, and finally gets broader perspective and goes through vetting at the national level at NCGA Corn Congress.



During corn congress 2020, Terry Smith of Clayton, IL stood up to speak in favor of a policy that supported the enactment of a low carbon, high octane fuel standard that removed regulatory and legislative barriers for higher blends of ethanol. This policy was one of several that set the stage for NCGA and IL Corn to support the Next Generation Fuels Act in the early 2020s.

“Policy can be tedious work. But the process works and means we are well prepared for the issues we lobby in DC,” Carlson said. “It becomes difficult for an elected official to ignore a well thought out position that represents the best interests of the Congressional District or state when they know the farmer in front of them has the power of thousands of farmers behind him. It changes the game, and that’s especially true when the message is carried by a constituent who took time to travel to Washington, DC.”

Carlson said it was the crucial need for farmers to stay on top of policy and build future leaders that led to ICGA launching its FFA leaders to Washington, DC program that began in 2017.



IL Corn began sponsoring an FFA student leader to Washington, DC program in 2016. The program gives these future agricultural leaders an opportunity to expand their ag literacy training and begin to understand the ag advocacy world. Pictured here, the FFA team in 2017 met and took photos with Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue in the USDA cafeteria.

“When we began inviting FFA leaders to join us in Washington DC, we thought it was important for them to see how policy works, to see they have direct access to elected officials and that their voice matters.” Carlson said. “We need to assure future generations understand the importance of farmers carrying the message and taking the time to engage. It’s refreshing to hear their point of view and to see them get motivated. It’s also not bad to see them impress legislators and let them know the industry has a future.”

During Carlson’s presidency another historic development was the ending of the longstanding management services contract between ICGA and Illinois Farm Bureau and a shift to an independent management services agreement.

“The agreement was in place since 1982 so it is a significant change. There is less integration and structure in communications between IFB and ICGA, as well as other Illinois commodity groups effected by the change,” Carlson said. “It’s part of the evolution of the organization, and it requires us to be more purposeful in our interactions.”

*“Getting involved in ICGA was an awakening really. I was familiar with some of the issues corn growers face of course but the depth of ICGA’s involvement, the scope of what they were doing, made my head spin. It became obvious right away we were facing a lot of challenges. ICGA tackled those issues but at the same time was proactively looking for opportunities to improve our family businesses.” – Aron Carlson*



### *Highlights from Paul Jeschke*

Ethanol continued to be a tremendous success story in the last decade as its track record of grinding corn and boosting corn prices remained unbroken. However, repositioning the fuel for future growth may be the big story of Paul Jeschke's long involvement with Illinois Corn.

The Mazon, IL farmer and recent chairman of the Illinois Corn Marketing Board (ICMB) cites efforts to make fuel pumps more compatible with higher blends of ethanol, ethanol exports, and the growing attention on ethanol as an aviation fuel as key steps in an anticipated new wave of ethanol use.

"ICMB has been working on testing and research of fuel dispensers to prove existing pumps can handle higher blends of ethanol," he said, "And if necessary, find or develop parts that are compatible. ICMB has invested a lot of time and checkoff dollars to get certification for fuel pumps and other infrastructure that can handle higher blends because it's critical to the future ethanol growth. Without corn farmers dedication to this it wouldn't have happened."

Jeschke credits Dave Loos, ICMB's Director of Biofuels and Research, for spearheading this initiative. He notes Loos played a key role in getting Underwriters Laboratories (UL) certification for Wayne pumps which made it possible to market fuel pumps capable of dispensing 25% ethanol (E25) and a recent upgrade with no changes to handle up to E40 blends.

"We believe car manufacturers want higher blends of ethanol to meet their octane goals and the infrastructure is now available to do that. Our work will affect the design and efficiency of cars for a long time to come. And that in turn will have major implications for the economy and environment, especially for farmers as it opens the door wider for ethanol. We've come a long way and the end is in sight for this hurdle of infrastructure being a limiting factor."



Paul Jeschke from Mazon, IL testified in front of the U.S. House of Representatives Energy and Commerce Committee in 2018. He was speaking about the 21st Century Transportation Fuels Act which would be introduced by Congressman John Shimkus in December 2018 that would have established a new high-octane fuel standard and allowed for consumers to fill up with higher blends of ethanol. Paul was joined by others representing the auto industry, the oil industry, and by Growth Energy.



In October 2015, the corn association members of the U.S. Grains Council asked them to add an ethanol export focus to their mission and the USGC agreed. In this photo, the 2019 Global Ethanol Summit brought fuel and energy experts from many different countries to the U.S. to better understand our industry and enjoy hands-on tours of U.S. farms and ethanol plants.

Work to open overseas markets to U.S. ethanol is another noteworthy accomplishment, Jeschke said. Checkoff investment in U.S. Grains Council created a significant market that didn't exist a decade ago.

"It took gentle and persistent engagement here and overseas to make it happen. There have been ups-and-downs, but the market is real. In the 2020/2021 marketing year, the United States exported 1.22 billion gallons (434 million bushels in corn equivalent)," Jeschke said. The long-term potential is important and to corn grower's future."

The growing interest in ethanol as a sustainable aviation fuel is another example of how opportunistic market development needs to be. Even five years ago nobody dreamed turning ethanol into jet fuel was a viable option. Now, Jeschke said, aviation fuel looks like a good avenue to boost ethanol use and expand corn grind in the future.

In December of 2021 a Boeing 737 MAX 8 jet operated by United Airlines made a historic flight from Chicago's O'Hare to Washington's Reagan National Airport with 115 people on board and a jet fuel made from ethanol in the tank. It was the first commercial flight with passengers on board to use 100% drop-in sustainable aviation fuel (SAF) for one of the aircraft's two engines.

"ICMB was formed to explore new markets for corn, so exports are a fundamental part of Illinois Corn's story," Jeschke said. "Whether its corn, beef, pork, chicken, or eggs. That's why we have worked with groups like U.S. Grain Council, U.S. Meat Export Federation and U.S. Poultry and Egg Export Council for decades."



### *U.S. Feed Grains Council Highlights*

- Successfully encouraging China to honor their phase-one agreement to purchase corn.
- Continued expansion of exports to Mexico which already ranks as one of our biggest customers.
- Opening new markets in Latin America such as Peru and Colombia for corn and DDGs.
- Getting a foothold in pioneer markets like India, Tanzania, and Sub-Saharan Africa.

“Our market development partners protect and grow established markets, seek better ways to service them, and are always looking for new customers” Jeschke noted. “When you talk about value added you must tip your hat to the livestock industry. Running corn through livestock first and sending the final product overseas, is a major contributor to the success of corn farmers. Our exports of meat and meat product, poultry and eggs, continue to increase dramatically.”



This 2019 postcard from the Illinois Corn Marketing Board helped farmers across Illinois understand the link between their check off dollars, the projects they were funding, and the impact to red meat exports and corn farmers' bottom line.

### *U.S. Meat Export Federation Highlights*

- U.S. beef exports slammed previous volume and value records in 2021, surpassing \$10 billion for the first time. Pork exports remain near record volumes and set a new value record, topping \$8 billion for the first time.
- South Africa opened to U.S. beef and pork in 2016. Networking and educational activities began immediately and in 2019 the red meat industry started serving the region with in-country representation. The region is now a major buyer of U.S. beef variety meats.
- In-country staff enables participation and support at the local level. In 2011 the red meat

industry worked with Japanese retail and foodservice partners to serve meals to those who were left homeless by an earthquake and tsunami. In 2020-2021, the industry worked closely with partners in key export markets to provide support to local communities impacted by COVID-19.

- In 2008, 100,000 South Koreans lined the streets in protest of the market re-opening to U.S. beef as consumer confidence in U.S. beef safety and quality was at 5% in 2010. Confidence has risen to 64% and in 2021, Korea became the top value market for U.S. beef at \$2.38 billion.
- Beef was added to the list of products eligible for export to China in 2017 allowing shipments for the first time in 13 years. Within days of the announcement, the industry began market development activities, and the U.S. has become China's largest supplier, providing approximately 68% of China's grain-fed beef imports.

### *USA Poultry and Egg Export Council Highlights*

- In 2021, total U.S. poultry and egg export value reached \$5.5 billion which was just shy of reaching the record level of \$5.8 billion in 2013 prior to the devastating Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza outbreak in 2014.
- Avian Influenza (AI) seminars that began in the Middle East in 2015 continued in early 2022 with the aim of facilitating a better understanding of how the U.S. prevents and manages AI outbreaks potentially limiting disruptions in trade during current and future AI outbreaks.
- In 2018, India officially opened to U.S. poultry and eggs after a decade of negotiations between the U.S. and the Indian governments. Increasing demand for poultry as a protein source is forefront in the development of the Indian market.
- Poultry became the leader in World Meat Production in 2016 showing firsthand the growing demand for poultry worldwide.
- China re-opened its borders to U.S. poultry in 2020 after five years of being banned from the market. Broiler exports to China in 2021 reached an all-time high in value of \$864 million. Of which, 80% or \$697 million were chicken paws.

“Checkoff investment doesn’t mean  
markets won’t change or not go up and down.  
But it is a shock absorber that allows us to take advantage  
of opportunities to the best of our ability,” Jeschke said.  
“It’s been a major part of our life, what we have done with corn.  
It’s been a life changing experience to be a part of the organization  
and play a small part in its success story.”



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ICGA ran this advertisement in several publications in 2019, advocating for a positive vote on the U.S. Mexico Canada Agreement for trade.