

OPINION

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Come see why agriculture makes Kentucky great at the Kentucky State Fair

Agriculture Commissioner Jonathan Shell

FRANKFORT, Ky. (Aug. 7, 2026) – As we celebrate the 122nd Kentucky State Fair this year, we also celebrate America’s semiquincentennial – the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

This year’s Kentucky State Fair theme, “Where County Traditions Meet Our Country’s Celebration,” is a nod to that celebration and the Commonwealth’s united identity. Just like Kentucky, America’s heritage is tied to agriculture as it represents what we eat, the clothing we wear, and the fiber we use.

Many of our country’s founding fathers were farmers. The same qualities that made them successful in the fields are what also made them successful in the creation of this country. As Kentucky’s agriculture commissioner, I see the hard work our farming families do today to keep our country’s entrepreneurial spirit thriving. Blending grit, innovation, and respect for the land, our farmers embody what it takes to succeed in one of the world’s oldest professions. Those connections to our ancestral agricultural roots can be found every year at the State Fair. It’s a connection many in Kentucky don’t personally have anymore, but one that can be re-established each August.

The State Fair is the perfect showcase of Kentucky’s agricultural spirit. Rural and urban residents come together in this unique atmosphere to celebrate the very best of Kentucky and everything it has to offer. Farming’s impact is vital for every resident, and that’s displayed in everything we do at the fair.

As much pride as we take in bringing you a State Fair that’s the envy of many states, we are not standing still. As a member of the Fair Board, I can assure you lots of behind-the-scenes actions take place to make the Kentucky State Fair a showcase. Planned renovations, being furnished by a \$200 million appropriation for the State Fair by our General Assembly, are expected to be complete next year. Last year, fairgoers

saw the beginning of those renovations, and you will see more progress taking place this year. When finished, this once-in-a-lifetime expansion and renovation will be one of our state’s largest economic investments.

While we are ready for physical changes, our commitment to agriculture history and agricultural fun will remain the same. AgLand brings together more than an acre of agriculture exhibits in the South Wing, highlighting Kentucky’s farm and field heritage, including the future of farming and agribusiness. Interactive and immersive exhibits will return this year for the delight of our youngest fairgoers. AgLand is also where you’ll find exhibits from Kentucky 4-H and FFA.

At the State Fair, you will see why we’re Kentucky Proud of our agriculture industry. Kentucky’s leading youth livestock exhibitors will compete for the highest honors of the livestock show season. Kentucky’s commodity groups will serve delicious locally grown and raised food at the Great Kentucky Cookout Tent. Agricultural displays in the West Hall will highlight the best our Kentucky farmers have to offer.

Creating an inclusive experience for all our residents will once again be highlighted this year as we offer our Sunshine Class. Now in its fifth year, the event offers an opportunity for special needs youth to get hands-on experience with the agriculture industry by showing livestock in a show ring. It’s worth the price of admission just to see the smiles on their faces. You don’t want to miss it!

As always, your Kentucky Department of Agriculture will be on the job at the fair. Our employees meet the public and talk about the ways agriculture affects everyday lives. We help manage the livestock shows and the agricultural exhibits. We also help livestock producers and exhibitors protect their investments in their animals.

I want you to leave the State Fair with fond memories that will last a lifetime. Please join me at this year’s Kentucky State Fair, Aug. 20-30. I hope to see you there!



JONATHAN SHELL



When the last reporter leaves: Kentucky’s spreading news desert

James Branscome, Bill Bishop
Kentucky Lantern

In the late summer of 1974 somebody set fire to the Mountain Eagle in Whitesburg. The blaze took the offices, the files, the bound archives — most of the institutional memory of Letcher County that Tom and Pat Gish had been accumulating since they bought the paper in 1956 and changed its masthead from “A Friendly Non-Partisan Weekly Newspaper” to the two words that made it famous: “It Screams.”

When the next issue came out, Tom had changed the words beneath the eagle. Now it read “It Still Screams.”

A Whitesburg city policeman, Johnny Caudill, had paid two young men \$50 apiece to pour the kerosene, in retaliation for the paper’s reporting on his department. He was convicted of arson in 1975 and given a year, suspended, by a judge who owned coal mines. In January 2022, Caudill filed to run for mayor of Whitesburg. The Eagle — Ben Gish now in his father’s chair — reported it straight, in a single sentence noting the conviction. He withdrew within days. That is what a local paper is for. Subtract it from a county, and the arsonist runs unopposed.

The Eagle survived the firebomb, the deaths of Tom and Pat, and the 2022 flood. What almost no paper like it can survive is the quiet economic erosion that has carried off close to a third of all American newspapers in a single generation. Northwestern University’s Medill School counts nearly 3,500 papers lost since 2005, and 213 counties now have no local news outlet at all. Nearly 80% of those news deserts are nonmetropolitan, and the digital startups filling the gap cluster in the metros. They do not, by and large, reach the hollows. The firebomb was an attack the Eagle could see coming. The news desert is an attack with no arsonist to name.

Advertising left Main Street when retail monopolies eliminated the local drugstores and groceries, then migrated to Google and Facebook. The cuts that followed made a thinner

paper, the thinner paper shed readers, and lost readers drove revenue down again. Ben Gish says his news space is limited by another frightening fact: he has to print so many obituaries because of Letcher County’s aging population.

A 2025 landscape study commissioned by the Appalachia Funders Network found that where the average American county has 2.5 news outlets, rural Central Appalachian counties have 1.2. Ninety-three of the region’s 249 counties do not have so much as one full-time-equivalent local journalist working inside them, and of the 60 counties in the Appalachian Regional Commission’s original Central Appalachia, 39 have less than one.

Letcher is the exception, and a thin one. The Eagle’s full-time reporting staff is two people, Ben Gish and Sam Adams. That is enough to put Letcher at 9.4 full-time-equivalent local journalists per 100,000 residents, above a national average of 7.8 that stood near 40 in 2002. It is not a sign Letcher is well covered. It is a sign of how far the bar has dropped, when a two-person weekly clears it.

Kentucky’s coalfield and Cumberland Plateau counties have taken some of the worst of it. Around the turn of 2023, the Citizen Voice & Times and the Clay City Times published their last issues, and the Todd County Standard retreated online. Community Newspaper Holdings — owned by the Alabama state pension fund — folded its northeastern Kentucky weeklies into its Ashland daily, so that Morehead, a university town, lost its own paper. The Paducah-based Paxton Media Group has swallowed dozens of community weeklies, many now run with a single staffer. Much of Kentucky now reads what the industry calls ghost papers — nameplates kept alive to harvest the last subscribers, with almost no reporter behind them.

Population and press

Lay a second map over the first. Between 2020 and 2025 those 60 coalfield counties lost close to 49,000 people, and the counties bleeding population fastest are the same counties whose papers have gone dark. Our chart pairs each county’s population loss with the reporters it has left. Each starves the other. Once the paper is gone, so is the institution that recorded what the government did and told a young family whether the schools were worth staying for. The reasons to leave multiply. The reasons to stay go unwritten.

There are counterweights. In July, WEKU at Eastern Kentucky University and the Appalachia + Mid-South Newsroom launched the Appalachian News Exchange, a content-sharing network whose partners include Kentucky’s Nolan Group Media papers and the Kentucky Lantern.

Press Forward Blue Grass is the state chapter of a national coalition that has raised \$400 million to aid local news. Press Forward has help pay for three Report for America reporters in Kentucky.

Press Forward is intent on building local news from the community up. For example, the group has helped the publisher of the Woodford Sun in Versailles to convert the family-run paper into a nonprofit. The idea, says Press Forward Blue Grass executive director Melissa Newman, is to help “newsrooms across the state look within themselves and into their communities to create a sustainable local news model that is unique to them.” In Eastern Kentucky, Newman says, the goal of Press Forward “isn’t to replace” existing news organizations, “it is to strengthen them.”

So Press Forward doesn’t seek to import reporters, but to bring emerging journalists in the community into the newsroom.

In Versailles, the publisher of the Woodford Sun donated the

paper to the community this summer, the first legacy Kentucky newspaper to convert to nonprofit ownership. But the funders’ own study warns there is not enough philanthropy in the country to run a rural news industry on grants.

What the chains did to the mountain press is what absentee corporations did to the coalfields a century earlier — bought the local asset, took the cash it still threw off and ran it thin. The cure for absentee ownership of land is to put the land back into local hands. The cure for newspapers is the same. Rebuild Local News calls it replanting: helping local nonprofits and residents buy back the papers the chains have hollowed. It is, in plain terms, a home-stead act for the press, and the rest of the menu — a payroll-tax credit to keep a reporter on staff, a set-aside of the state’s public-notice spending — is modest and nonpartisan. It is the difference between treating the news desert as weather and treating it as policy.

In March 2023, the Welch News, in McDowell County, West Virginia, printed its last edition. Missy Nester had bought it in 2018 to try to save it and went five years without paying herself. When it closed, McDowell lost its only independent record of what its government was doing — just as long-delayed federal money for the county’s failing water and sewer systems began to arrive, with no one left to follow where it went.

“Like, can any of y’all hear us out here screaming?” she asked an Associated Press reporter on her way out the door.

Sixty miles to the southwest, across the Kentucky line, the Mountain Eagle still screams. Two papers, one verb. The history of the Appalachian press in this last half-century lives in the distance between Tom Gish’s defiance and Missy Nester’s despair.

(Editor’s Note: the Kentucky Lantern recently received a grant from Press Forward Blue Grass to help fund a public policy partnership/intern program with UK.)

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