

# RESEARCH ROUNDUP

## A center for the future and a wellness check

compiled by Shauna Hermel, editor

### ▶▶▶ New center for advanced ag launched

The ag landscape is changing. Increased food production is needed to support the world population. Innovative efficiencies are needed throughout agriculture. Climate change scenarios suggest significant modifications.

To address these issues and use informed scientific discovery and technology-driven innovation to develop solutions, the Virginia Tech College of Agriculture and Life Sciences has created the Center for Advanced Innovation in Agriculture (CAIA).

According to the university, the center's work will operate in the intersection of technology, data analytics and decisions to address challenges and security in the natural world and in human society in the domains of plants, animals and food systems.

Faculty members from across the college with experience ranging from precision agriculture and cyberbiosecurity to genomic design and machine learning will be part of the new center.

"The Center for Advanced Innovation in Agriculture positions the college and Virginia Tech to make global impacts on the discovery and application of emerging agricultural technologies," says Alan Grant, the college's dean.

Susan Duncan, CAIA director and associate director of the Virginia Agricultural Experiment Station, adds: "The center will facilitate agricultural innovations to address challenges through the creation of an agile and responsive network of interdisciplinary researchers, transdisciplinary teams and Virginia Cooperative Extension specialists."

Some of the existing expertise and platforms the center will utilize

include the SmartFarm Innovation Network; cyberbiosecurity and biosecurity in ag and life sciences; and data analytics, decisions and machine learning for food, ag, communities and health systems.

With the collaborative forces of the CAIA, affiliated faculty and extension agents across the commonwealth will work together to prepare agricultural and food systems for the challenges of tomorrow. CAIA affiliation provides the benefits of resources, reputation and the interdisciplinary collaboration to advance agriculture and life sciences.

To learn more about the center, visit <http://caia.cals.vt.edu/>.

### ▶▶▶ COVID-19 taking toll on farmers' mental health

A strong majority of farmers/farmworkers say the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their mental health, and more than half say they are personally experiencing more mental health challenges than they were a year ago, according to a new poll by the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF).

The survey of rural adults and farmers/farmworkers explores how the pandemic has affected their mental health personally and in their communities, as well as how attitudes and experiences around mental health have changed in rural and farm communities since AFBF conducted its first rural mental health survey in 2019 (see <http://bit.ly/ABB-AFBF-Mental19>).

"My takeaway from this survey is that the need for support is real, and we must not allow lack of access or a 'too tough to need help' mentality to stand in the way," said AFBF President Zippy Duvall. "We are stepping up our efforts through our Farm State of Mind campaign, encouraging conversations about

stress and mental health and providing free training and resources for farm and ranch families and rural communities. The pandemic added a mountain of stress to an already difficult year for farmers, and they need to know that sometimes it's OK not to be OK, that people care, and that there's help and hope."

The results of the new poll clearly demonstrate the pandemic is having broad-ranging effects among rural adults and farmers/farmworkers. Key findings include:

- ▶ Two in three farmers/farmworkers (66%) say the pandemic has affected their mental health.
- ▶ Rural adults were split on COVID-19's effects. Half of rural adults (53%) say the pandemic has affected their mental health at least some, while 44% say it has not affected their mental health much or at all.
- ▶ Younger rural adults were more likely than older rural adults to say the pandemic has affected their mental health a lot.
- ▶ Farmers and farmworkers were 10% more likely than rural adults as a whole to have experienced feeling nervous, anxious or on edge during the pandemic (65% vs. 55%).
- ▶ The percentage of farmers/farmworkers who say social isolation affects farmers' mental health increased 22% since April 2019, a significant finding given the long hours many farmers work alone.
- ▶ Half of rural adults (52%) aged 18-34 say they have thought more about their mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, more than other age groups.

▶ Three in five rural adults (61%) say the COVID-19 pandemic has affected mental health in rural communities. Farmers/farmworkers were more likely than rural adults to say COVID-19 has affected mental health in rural communities a lot (37% vs. 22%).

The survey of 2,000 rural adults was conducted by Morning Consult in December. It also identified the main obstacles to seeking help or treatment for a mental health condition, the most trusted sources for information about mental health, impressions of the importance of mental health in rural communities and the importance of reducing stigma surrounding mental health. A presentation with additional detail on the full survey results is available at <http://bit.ly/ABB-AFBF-mental>.

At its 2021 Virtual Convention, AFBF hosted a session titled "Farm State of Mind: Responding to the Challenges of Rural Mental Health." The session featured diverse perspectives on the issue of rural mental health and highlighted Farm Bureau's efforts to respond to this key moment in agriculture. Visit <https://annualconvention.fb.org/> for more information.

If you or someone you know is struggling emotionally or has concerns about their mental health, visit the Farm State of Mind website at [www.fb.org/land/fsom](http://www.fb.org/land/fsom) where you can find crisis hotlines, treatment locators, tips for helping someone in emotional pain, ways to start a conversation, and resources for managing stress, anxiety or depression. ■

Editor's note: Adapted from articles provided by Virginia Tech and AFBF.