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Illinois farmers brace for another bruising season as Iran war spikes fertilizer prices

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From sunrise to well past sundown, Rodney Bushmeyer has been driving his tractor over freshly turned soil on his western Illinois farm, planting soybean seeds. He has covered nearly 800 acres. But with another 2,200 acres to go, spring planting season is far from over.

Bushmeyer has been cultivating fields in Hull for over 50 years, growing corn, soybeans and wheat on land that's been farmed by his father and grandfather before him. Like many other Illinois farmers, Bushmeyer had already applied nitrogen fertilizer to the ground last fall to prepare corn crops for planting.

But as the Iran war enters its fifth week and fertilizer prices surge, he's not sure he will be able to afford additional applications that could boost his crop production.

"We'll put some fertilizer on after the crop comes up," Bushmeyer said. "But if the price stays where it is now, we may not. We may need to sacrifice yield for it, but it's a balancing act."

In early March, Iran closed the Strait of Hormuz, a vital shipping route between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, to global commercial traffic due to U.S. and Israeli strikes. The disruption has driven up the cost of nitrogen-based synthetic fertilizers such as urea and ammonia — essential for corn production across the Midwest.

From large commercial operations to small-scale organic plots, farmers across Illinois and the country are trying to weather the sharp spike in agricultural costs driven by a conflict thousands of miles from their fields.

"We're at the mercy of the weather and the government," Bushmeyer said. "And we're not sure which is worse."

This latest challenge comes after President Donald Trump escalated a trade war last year with China that hit Illinois soybean farmers especially hard.

Roughly 20% of Illinois' nitrogen fertilizer is imported from countries such as Russia and Saudi Arabia and passes through the strait, said Illinois Farm Bureau President Philip Nelson.

"The more we can do domestically I think is in the best interest of everybody, from the consumer to the farmer," he said. "So when you come into a conflict like this, you're not as dramatically impacted."

On top of fertilizer, fuel costs have increased, affecting farmers and average Americans nationwide.

"With fuel (not) moving through the Strait of Hormuz and everything, it's really jacked these prices up in the short term as we're about to head to the fields to plant a crop," Nelson said.

According to a recent report by Farmdoc Daily, a research publication by the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, urea prices in Illinois have jumped 42% in the past three weeks. That means farmers can expect to pay as much as $823 per ton of fertilizer compared to $579 per ton before the conflict.

The report warns the increase may only be the beginning as supply shocks often take months to fully ripple through the market and will likely remain high into the fall harvest.

The timing of this disruption is particularly tough, said seventh-generation farmer John Yeley, who grows corn and soybeans on over 3,500 acres in Clark County, which is south of Champaign.

Illinois farmers are planting crops now that will be harvested in the fall. Without timely fertilizer applications, annual yields could suffer significantly.

Illinois is the No. 1 producer of soybeans and No. 2 producer of corn in the United States, and together they account for more than $21 billion in market value for the state, according to a 2022 census by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

“Not having that (fertilizer) source locked in is a little concerning,” said Yeley, who advocates for farmers in his county as president of the Clark County Farm Bureau. “It’s already gone up 20% from where we were before this (war) started.”

Farmer Rodney Bushmeyer operates a tractor pulling a planter that plants soybean seed at the Bushmeyer farm in Hull, March, 25, 2026. (Josh Boland/Chicago Tribune)

Bushmeyer said his farm may fare better than some. He applied much of his nitrogen fertilizer last fall, whereas other farmers waited, hoping the price would go down.

“Some farmers are just now putting their nitrogen on (crops),” he said. “It could affect them a lot worse than us.”

Politics at play

On Tuesday, Illinois Gov. JB Pritzker met with farmers and agriculture leaders for the state’s annual Agriculture Legislative Day and addressed the impacts on farmers.

“We need to get out of that conflict right now, in part because we need to bring our economy back,” Pritzker said during a news conference following the event. “(President Trump’s) going to take us into a recession if we’re not careful.”

He also reassured farmers of his support amid the ongoing uncertainty.

“To all the farmers here and across the state, we have your backs,” Pritzker said.

Cash crops, hidden costs

At the federal level, Trump’s Department of Agriculture says the administration’s One Big Beautiful Bill will provide a safety net for farmers navigating these market shifts.

“The Trump Administration has been working around the clock since January 20 to put American Farmers First after inheriting one of the worst farm economies the country has experienced in decades,” a USDA spokesperson said in an email to the Tribune.

“President Trump is utilizing all the tools available to ensure farmers have what they need to continue their farming operations – emphasizing the long-term gains will far outweigh any short-term disruptions,” the USDA spokesperson added.

Farmer Rodney Bushmeyer holds a tube connected to a seed tender where soybean seeds flow into a planter at the Bushmeyer farm in Hull, March, 25, 2026. (Josh Boland/Chicago Tribune)

Bushmeyer and other Illinois farmers feel at the mercy of price swings driven by politics and global conflicts.

“If Trump says we’re going to make a deal, that changes our corn price and bean price,” Bushmeyer said. “Then the next week, they’re not making a deal, it’ll go up. You just never know.”

“I do know that something needs to be changed,” he added. “We’re just so dependent on foreign oil, we’re dependent on whether China buys our soybeans, which they’re not right now. That really hurt our market. It’s all stuff we have no control over.”

Earlier this month, Illinois Sen. Dick Durbin met with Illinois Farm Bureau leaders, including Yeley, in Washington, D.C., to discuss the strains on farmers.

“I have never seen current policy issues in Washington come together like this against farmers,” Durbin said in a March 18 statement. “With this tariff policy and war in the Middle East, the Trump Administration keeps asking farmers to carry more of the costs of their decisions.”

The U.S. agriculture industry depends on imported fertilizer, leaving farmers exposed when global supply chains are disrupted. Corn requires significant nitrogen inputs, while soybeans need phosphate or potassium fertilizers to support a high yield. Urea, a widely used solid nitrogen fertilizer, is especially affected by global market disruptions. Around 10% of the world’s urea is produced in the Middle East, according to the FarmDoc report.

Yeley said some farmers are considering planting more soybeans this season to avoid the high cost of nitrogen fertilizer needed for corn.

“The buzz in the agriculture world right now is ‘what should I plant for spring?’” he said. “What I’ve been seeing is guys saying, ‘well maybe I ought to be planting more beans this year.’ But if there’s enough guys to do that, there’ll be a crash in the bean market.”

At the same time, most farm machinery, including tractors, runs on diesel fuel, so spikes in fuel prices are adding further financial strain.

Nelson said many farmers are already financially stretched.

“Farmers have burnt through a lot of the working capital the last couple years,” Nelson said. “So all of these things have come to a head.”

Recent global conflicts underscore the risk.

In 2022, fertilizer prices surged during the war in Ukraine, with ammonia prices climbing as high as $1,600 per ton, according to a Farmdoc report. Both ammonia and urea fertilizers are used for corn yields, but ammonia is typically applied in the fall after harvest, according to the University of Minnesota. Urea is usually used in the spring during planting, when drier soil conditions reduce the risk of nitrogen loss.

Russia remains a leading global producer of nitrogen fertilizers, while the Middle East supplies much of the natural gas used to produce them.

In 2024, Illinois exported more than $1.4 billion worth of soybeans to China, the world's largest buyer, according to the Illinois Department of Agriculture. After Trump imposed tariffs last year, Beijing cut all of its U.S. imports of soybeans from May until an agreement was reached in October to restore a fraction of those purchases.

Pritzker, in an October statement, said the trade war with China had pushed soybean prices below break-even levels. He issued an executive order that month declaring an agricultural trade crisis for Illinois and directing state agencies to develop domestic markets for the state's agriculture.

In December, Trump's Department of Agriculture awarded $12 billion in relief to farmers facing market disruptions.

But Yeley said his margins haven't widened since the Ukraine war price spikes, and now the Iran conflict is causing another input disruption.

"Between the fertilizer and fuel issue and other input costs, we've not really recovered from that, and now we're right back to where we were again," Yeley said.

This time, analysts say urea is the primary concern, with significant amounts coming from the Persian Gulf.

As the United States and Iran remain at a stalemate over peace talks, both sides have hardened their positions.

Iran rejected Trump's 15-point ceasefire plan and put forward its own conditions, while continuing to block ships linked to the United States and Israel at the strait.

The current conflict highlights the vulnerability of relying on global markets to sustain domestic agriculture.

"I hope this conflict is not long-term," Nelson said. "But when you start looking at how much of the fertilizer that we import, it's significant."

A sustainable alternative

In LaSalle County, organic farmer Paul Hoffman has taken a different approach to getting fertilizer.

A fifth-generation farmer, Hoffman transitioned his family's farm to organic practices 12 years ago. Today, he rotates crops such as corn, wheat, oats, soybeans and rye, alongside a flock of 30 sheep.

Like Bushmeyer, Hoffman has seen his fuel costs rise by as much as 38% since his last purchase. But unlike conventional growers, he's largely insulated from rising fertilizer prices.

Instead, Hoffman relies on nutrient cycling – using manure from his own sheep and nearby livestock operations as a natural fertilizer.

"It's out there and needs to go somewhere," Hoffman said. "So finding a way to use it for its highest use seems like good practice."

By spreading manure across his fields, Hoffman reduces reliance on synthetic fertilizers while maintaining soil health. As a certified organic farmer, he's also able to source waste from nearby concentrated animal feeding operations turning a disposal challenge into an agricultural input.

"In some ways, having organic farms mixed amongst CAFOs offers an opportunity to spread that animal waste over more acres," he said. "It's an economically viable fertilizer option for an organic farm."

Drew Blankenbaker, vice president of farmer relations at Iroquois Valley — an Illinois-based firm that finances organic farms like Hoffman's — said organic systems offer resilience and reliability in volatile markets.

"By relying on biologically based fertilizers, including responsibly sourced manure, organic farmers don't depend on expensive synthetic nitrogen that can spike in price due to global disruptions like those in the Strait of Hormuz," Blankenbaker said.

Yeley echoed the benefits of nutrient cycling for his farming operations. For about 15 years, he's applied manure from his neighbor's hog farm to roughly 400 acres, helping to supply nitrogen to corn – especially in Clark County, where timber soils derived from white oak tend to be low in nutrients.

"Anytime you can add organic material into your soil, you're helping a lot of things out," Yeley said.

He views nutrient cycling as a win-win: livestock producers gain a way to manage waste, while crop farmers like him and Hoffman secure a reliable alternative source of fertilizer.

"(My neighbor) needs some place to go with it and I'm happy to get it," he said. "That could be a pretty good frontier."

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Still, Yeley said he can't use nutrient cycling for his entire operation and sees the costs as prohibitive for more large-scale production.

For now, most farmers brace for uncertainty. Bushmeyer says he will weather this next crisis like he's done the last, by reducing costs where he can.

"We'll have to tighten our belts and cut corners," he said. "We'll have to repair what we've got and try to do what we can control. There's only a few things we can control."

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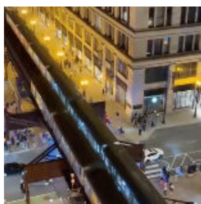

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