NEWSPAPERS Continued from page 2

would subscribe to a paper if it existed, and 21% said they would be willing to donate to help fund a newspaper beyond subscribing.

"The absence of papers is really noticed in those communities," Gessele said.

Joy Schoch, publisher of the Dickinson Press, a Forum Communications newspaper, said having data to back up the vital importance of newspapers has been an important outcome from the project.

"It's essential," she said. "It's essential to keep people informed. It makes a healthy community."

The next step in the effort is to pilot several solutions that tap into the deep reservoirs of trust, demand and opportunity while acknowledging the current structural risks many newspapers face.

"This is a vital, trusted, necessary industry that people want and need, and we need to find a way collectively forward that benefits society," Wehrman said.

Translating the value

Currently, 24% of households across the state are reached by a newspaper, but looking deeper at county-level data shows much deeper penetration.

Out of 53 counties, 20 have over 75% of households receiving a local newspaper and 15 more show figures of between 50-75%.

Wehrman said those numbers more accurately reflect the impact newspapers have locally, and losing them means communities lose out.

With the $199 million in federal Rural Health Transformation funding being rolled out in the coming year, the importance of local newspapers in communicating what programs are available and how the funding can be used in those communities is crucial, Wehrman said.

People need to understand newspapers are "not a public utility," she said. "These are individual businesses that need the support of their local communities in order to continue doing the work people value so highly."

That disconnect between valuing newspapers and being willing to support them through subscriptions or donations is something that needs to be tackled by both the newspapers themselves and the communities they serve if their survival is to continue.

"People aren't seeing newspapers as a business like they see their hardware store as a business, and they may not be aware of their struggles," said Ellen Huber, rural development director for NDAREC.

"We talk a lot about retaining and growing other kinds of businesses in the state, but I don't think anyone has thrown newspapers in that bucket of important, vital businesses, and ones that are worthy of focusing on, retaining and strengthening and growing," Huber said.

The real value of local newspapers needs to be better communicated to the wider public, participants in the initiative said.

"People think it should be free," Schoch said. "I think people forget about us. People forget about it until they really need us."

Piloting real action

The next step for the initiative is taking forward several pilot projects centered on succession planning, exploring new revenue models, providing print and digital samples for the next generation of news consumers, and developing readymade promotions and content that can be adopted statewide.

Whether those have a deep impact or not depends on securing grant funding to take them forward, Wehrman said.

The hope is that these don't become moonshots, but practical, replicable interventions.

One of the most immediate concerns is the succession planning component, since so many independent publishers are close to retirement age.

Currently, while group-owned newspapers show stronger margins and sustainability, independent, family-owned papers are under pressure from owners nearing retirement, the high cost of printing and distribution, and the heavy reliance on revenue from public notices.

Younger journalists are interested in taking over the reins of these papers, but are constrained by a lack of training and the need for financing to sustain operations, the research found.

"Succession planning is something that we need to offer newspapers, because there is an urgent need for newspapers to change hands," Wehrman said.

Another aspect those involved in the initiative hope can gain traction is to meet demands of news consumers, particularly younger Gen Z and Millennial ones,

Newspaper cont. on 10

LEADER-NEWS | PHAIDRA YUNKER
From left, ranchers Darrell Oswald, Rob Kramer and Dave Bauer sit on the mentor panel Feb. 2 in Underwood, N.D. Kramer shares his experiences with the crowd as the panel digs into grazing challenges, soil health and lessons learned on the land.

LAND Continued from page 7

form fleece and adaptability to harsh grazing conditions.

His sheep produce soft wool suitable for socks and long underwear, but also, he joked, "The kind of wool for suits that people who raise sheep can't afford and don't want to wear anyway."

A natural storyteller, Kramer kept the crowd laughing with tales of his dog Pete and his "no-eared miniature mule" named Myrtle.

"They make a great team, but it's opposite of what you'd expect: she herds the sheep, and Pete goes after the coyotes," said Kramer. "They're like an old married couple."

Kramer acknowledged the challenges of raising sheep but praised the ecological changes they've brought to his land.

"For 18 years, I worked for the Forest Service, and I sprayed so many chemicals," Kramer said. "I don't do that anymore. The sheep have taken care of the spurge and you should see all the critters I have on my land. The insects, the spiders, the worms and the birds. They are all there because of the sheep. Because I don't have to spray."

The final panelist, Darrell Oswald of Wing, discussed his cover crop program. He began by thanking Bauer and Kramer, whom he considers "local thought leaders" in using ruminants to improve land and soil health.

Oswald has practiced holistic ranching since 2006

Jay Reiser of Washburn, Chair of the North Dakota Grazing Lands Coalition, welcomes participants to the Feb. 2 workshop in Underwood, N.D., opening the day with remarks on the value of shared grazing knowledge and community.

and views carbon as a form of currency: something that must be replenished.

"The most potent tool for building soil health is a living plant," he said.

Using cover crops, he added, is a "no-brainer when it comes to the five soil health principles," which emphasize keeping soil covered, minimizing disturbance, maximizing biodiversity, maintaining continuous living roots and integrating livestock. Together, these practices build healthier, more resilient soils that support long-term productivity.

"More diverse cover crops bring diverse beneficial bacteria, fungi, insects, birds and animals," Oswald said. "The longer a plant is growing the longer it is building soil."

Before the event concluded, attendees participated in a Q&A session on how long it typically takes to see positive results from cover crops and which plant combinations work well together. Participants also raised questions about the North Dakota Century Code's definition of a fence, prompting ranchers to discuss how the statute applies to modern grazing systems.

As the crowd packed up to head back into the snow, the conversations revolved around insects and cover crops, dogs and coyotes and the land that ties it all together. For a few hours in Underwood, the focus wasn't on the snow outside but on the shared belief that healthier soil, smarter grazing and a little creativity can build a stronger future for the people who depend on this landscape.