

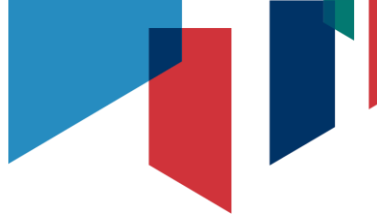


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Economic Impact of the Iowa State Fair

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About the Author

Andrzej Wieciorkowski is a Research Analyst with Common Sense Institute Iowa. Before joining CSI, Andrzej attended the College of the Holy Cross where he majored in Political Science and Economics. Andrzej also worked as an intern for the Heritage Foundation's Center for Education Policy, where he developed public policy and research experience in education, economics, law, immigration, and international affairs.

About Common Sense Institute

Common Sense Institute (CSI) is a non-partisan research organization dedicated to the protection and promotion of Iowa's economy. CSI is at the forefront of important discussions about the future of free enterprise and aims to impact the issues that matter most to Iowans. CSI's mission is to examine the fiscal impacts of policies, initiatives, and proposed laws so that Iowans are educated and informed on issues impacting their lives. CSI employs rigorous research techniques and dynamic modeling to evaluate the potential impact of these measures on the economy and individual opportunity.

Teams & Fellows Statement

Common Sense Institute is committed to independent, in-depth research that examines the impacts of policies, initiatives, and proposed laws so that Iowans are educated and informed on issues impacting their lives. Our commitment to institutional independence is rooted in the individual independence of our researchers, economists, and fellows. At the core of CSI's mission is a belief in the power of the free enterprise system. Our work explores ideas that protect and promote jobs and the economy, and the CSI team and fellows take part in this pursuit with academic freedom. Our team's work is informed by data-driven research and evidence. The views and opinions of fellows do not reflect the institutional views of CSI. Common Sense Institute operates independently of any political party and does not take positions.

Introduction

Held from August 13-23, 2026, the Iowa State Fair welcomed 1,218,834 attendees this year, the most in its 172-year history. Thirty-first state by population in 2025, Iowa's fair last year had the third largest state fair in the nation by total attendance and second largest by visitors per day. It also had the third most attendees of any state fair relative to its population. The fair showcases Iowa agriculture, food, and entertainment. Spending tens of millions of dollars, families come to Des Moines to enjoy live entertainment, eat unique and delicious foods, enter fun contests, participate in arts and crafts, and more. This spending brings with it a surge in economic activity, which translates to jobs, personal income, and economic growth for the region. In this report, CSI analyzes the economic activity at the state fair and uses a dynamic economic model to estimate the fair's economic impact on Iowa.

Key Findings

- This year's Iowa State Fair had the largest real (2026 dollars) economic impact of any in the fair's 172-year history, **contributing \$199 million to the state's GDP** and \$104 million in personal income.
 - The economic impact of the fair is equivalent to the value of 15.9% of Iowa's total 2025 milk production value.¹
- This year, **fair attendance totaled 1,218,834**, a record year in the state fair's history. The fair also set 4 new single-day attendance records.
 - Day 4: 123,140 (2026) versus the previous record of 115,048 (2024).
 - Day 5: 111,159 (2026) versus the previous record of 105,522 (2017).
 - Day 9: 114,256 (2026) versus the previous record of 112,981 (2019).
 - Day 10: 130,654 (2026) versus the previous record of 128,732 (2024).
 - Day 10 of the fair also set an **all-time single-day** attendance record.
- Common Sense Institute estimates **fairgoers spent a total of \$95.8 million dollars at the fair this year**, an 8.2% increase from \$88.5 million in 2025.
 - This means the average family of three spent an estimated \$235 per visit at the Iowa State Fair this year, a 3% increase from 2025.

America's Classic State Fair

Starting with a budget of just \$323 and an estimated 7,000 to 10,000 people in attendance at its inception in 1854, the Iowa State Fair now attracts over a million attendees from all over the United States every year.² Fairgoers spend tens-of-millions of dollars annually into the state's economy while enjoying 11 days of attractions and festivities. This last week, Iowans of all ages enjoyed countless activities at the fair. Children walked along the Little Hands on the Farm interactive exhibit to learn about Iowa's diverse agricultural economy.³ History buffs marked the nation's 250th birthday through this year's "Fair Spirit" theme, which paired a 250-flag display and a "Spirit of '76" historical exhibit with dozens of contests and competitions commemorating the anniversary.⁴ And as per tradition, every Iowan in attendance enjoyed witnessing the traditional butter cow—making its 111th appearance—alongside "Meet Me at the Pepsi Clock," the companion sculpture honoring the small-town landmarks, agriculture, music, and hometown pride that define the state.⁵ With over 50 options of mobile foods on a stick and 84 new foods across nearly 200 food stands this year, fairgoers were also able to enjoy the nightlife full of fireworks, drone shows, and more than \$500,000 in free nighttime entertainment.⁶ This year's grandstand entertainment ranged from alternative rock band Staind and pop-rock trio AJR to country stars Lainey Wilson and Riley Green and Texas rapper BigXthaPlug, among other celebrities.⁷ All in all, the fair brings Iowans and out-of-state visitors together through unique and fun experiences, providing positive social impact, and as discussed in this report, meaningful economic impact.

The scale of that turnout stands out well beyond Iowa's borders. Figure 1 ranks the nation's largest state fairs on three measures of attendance. The first measure, nominal attendance, counts total admissions across the full run of each fair. The second, average attendance per day, divides that total by the number of days each fair operates. This adjustment matters because fairs range in length from a long weekend to nearly a month. The third, average daily attendance per 100,000 residents, scales the daily figure by each state's population. Iowa places in the top three on all of them. Iowa ranked third nationally in total attendance in 2025 with 1,160,121 visitors, trailing only Texas at 2,020,064 and Minnesota at 1,940,869. Measured per day, Iowa rose to second at 105,466 visitors, ahead of North Carolina, Texas, and Wisconsin. Adjusted for population, Iowa ranked third at 3,257 daily visitors per 100,000 residents, behind only North Dakota and South Dakota.

Figure 1. Ranking the Nation's Biggest State Fairs by Attendance: Total, Per Day, and Per Capita (2025)

State	Rank	Value
Nominal Attendance		
Texas	1	2,020,064
Minnesota	2	1,940,869
Iowa	3	1,160,121
Arizona	4	1,032,674
Ohio	5	969,082
Average Attendance per Day		
Minnesota	1	161,739
Iowa	2	105,466
North Carolina	3	86,074
Texas	4	84,169
Wisconsin	5	81,179
Attendance Per Day (Per 100k Residents)		
North Dakota	1	4,956
South Dakota	2	3,869
Iowa	3	3,257
Delaware	4	3,038
Minnesota	5	2,774

Source: Source: CSI analysis of reported 2025 attendance from state fair organizations and U.S. Census Bureau population estimates.
 Note: Average attendance per day divides total reported attendance by the number of days each fair operated in 2025. Per-capita figures express average daily attendance per 100,000 state residents.

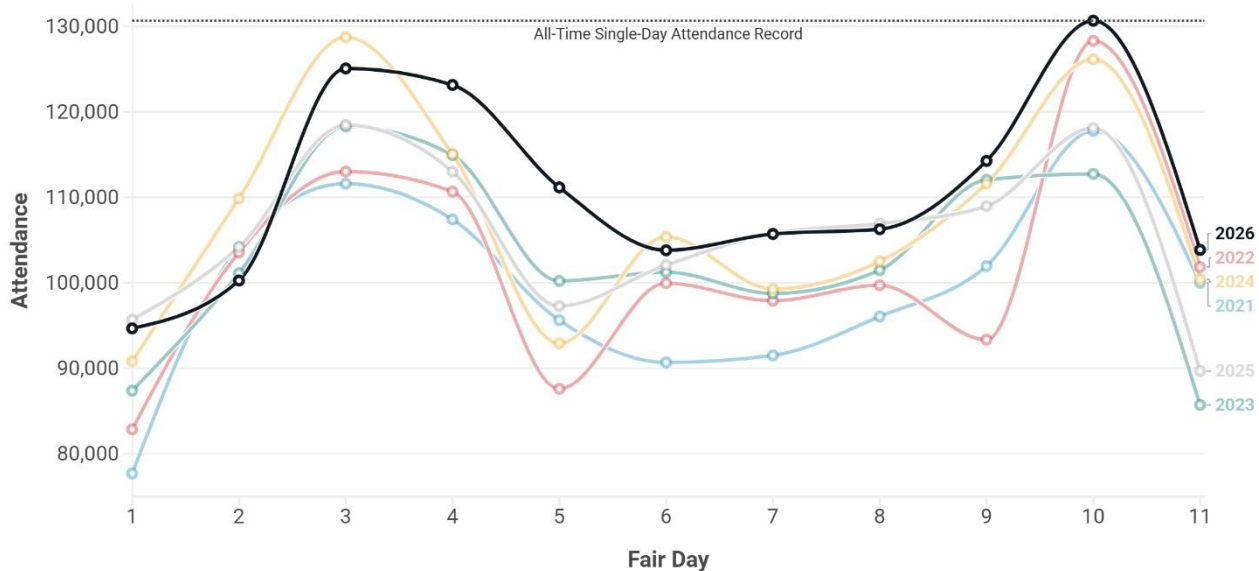


When over a million visitors travel to Des Moines for the fair every year, an economic ripple effect reverberates through the state's economy. Over the 11 days of the fair, consumer spending surges, generating revenue for businesses and government. Businesses owners then pay workers and reinvest into the economy, boosting personal incomes and creating economic growth. The increase in disposable income for businesses allows them to expand and improve their operations with the extra profits generated from the event. This often results in higher wages and more employment opportunities for many Iowans, which in turn directly fuels more growth, investments, and spending in the economy. While the full economic impact of a State Fair extends beyond fairground attendance and on-site spending, the ripple effect through the economy starts with these two factors.

Fair Attendance and Spending

The Iowa State Fair is one of the largest and most visited fairs in the nation. Over the last decade, the state has maintained attendance levels between 1 and 1.2 million. This year's fair posted four single-day attendance records. Day 4 of the fair, Sunday, August 16 set a first Sunday attendance record at 123,140.⁸ Day 5 of the fair, Monday, August 17 set a Monday attendance record at 111,159.⁹ Day 9 of the fair, Friday, August 21 set a second Friday attendance record at 114,256.¹⁰ Day 10 of the fair, Saturday, August 22 set both a second Saturday and **all-time single-day** attendance record at 130,654.¹¹ This left the 2026 fair setting the highest overall attendance record at 1,218,834, ahead of the prior record set in 2024 at 1,182,682. Figure 2 compares daily attendance at the Iowa State Fair over the past six years.

Figure 2. Iowa State Fair Daily Attendance

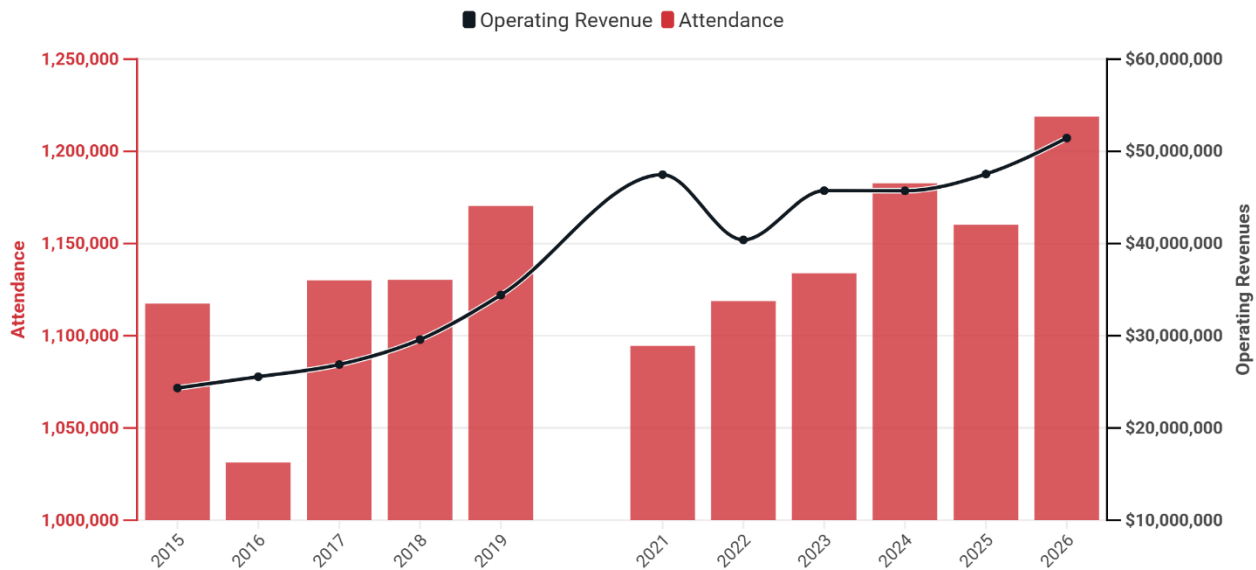


Source: Iowa State Fair Authority

As foot traffic on the fairgrounds continues to increase each year, operating revenues also grow.¹² Total operating revenue is the total value of the fair's sales of goods and services, such as admission and concert tickets, parking, campground fees, and fees directly sourced from independent vendors. Independent food, beverage, and merchandise vendors are charged a fixed fee of their total gross sales to operate at the Fair. This fee is added to the fair's operating

revenue, while the remaining post-tax revenues are kept by vendors. Figure 3 compares attendance numbers with operating revenues in nominal dollars going back to 2015.

Figure 3. Iowa State Fair Attendance and Operating Revenues (2015-2026)



Source: Iowa State Legislature, Office of Auditor of State Iowa, CSI Estimates

Note: CSI estimated operating revenue for 2025 & 2026 based on historical trends, auditor reports, and actual attendance.

Operating revenues have doubled since 2015. While attendance has fluctuated within a range of about 150,000 attendees over this timeframe, revenues have trended up. Nominal revenue has grown by an average of 8.5% annually since 2015. State Fair operating revenues have remained on a consistent growth trajectory over the last four years. According to the Iowa Legislative Services Agency (LSA), fair operating revenues grew 12.5% from fiscal year (FY) 2022 to 2023, followed by 0.8% in 2024, 5.2% in 2025, and 8.2% year-over-year growth in 2026.¹³

Fairgoers spent a record amount on concessions and entertainment last year, and those spending habits have continued into the 2026 state fair. This year, the average family of three is estimated to spend \$235 per visit to the fair, according to total estimated spending in table 3. These attendance numbers and the money each fairgoer spends serves as the basis for this report's economic impact analysis.

Measuring State Fair Economic Activity

Common Sense Institute's analysis of the 2026 Iowa State fair uses publicly available information on State Fair financials to determine an annual economic impact. These variables include food, merchandise, and alcohol sales, overall operating revenues, state and local taxes and fees, and tourism spending. Data for past years is also revised as new information comes out, such as the State Auditor's most recent 2025 State Fair audit. Therefore, this section relies on state estimates that for 2024 and 2025 are revised and finalized. The values presented in this section serve as inputs into REMI (Regional Economics Models, Inc.) to produce an estimate of the Fair's economic impact on Iowa. The model outputs appear in table 5 under the section "Economic Impact of the Iowa State Fair." Given the constraints in data availability, the model simulation assumes all spending at the fair is new spending that would not have occurred had the fair not taken place.

Common Sense Institute did not input employment directly into the REMI model for its economic impact simulation. Employment is nonetheless significant to mention given the magnitude of additional jobs added each year. Employment numbers in table 1 were sourced directly from the Iowa State Fair website and supplementary financial audits done by the Iowa Department of Revenue. The fair employs roughly “1600 seasonal or fair-time members.”¹⁴ Additional workers hired by concessionaries and exhibitors is estimated to be approximately 1,000.¹⁵ Information on payroll, specifically for the 1,600 employees contracted with the State Fair authority, is available through auditor reports—the most recent being in 2025.¹⁶ Estimates for the remaining 1,000 employees were computed through a proportional increase, assuming each employee was paid the same wage. Wage values in table 1 represent the actual wage payroll and is measured in thousands of nominal dollars.

Table 1. Iowa State Fair Employment and Wages

Model Input	Industry	2024	2025	2026
Employment	Amusement, gambling, and recreation industries	2,600	2,600	2,600
Wages	Amusement, gambling, and recreation industries	\$10,848	\$11,526	\$12,473

Source: Iowa Auditor of State, CSI Estimates

Note: Employment in standard units and currency in thousands of current dollars. Estimates for 2024 and 2025 are final, and 2026 preliminary

The CSI simulation in the next section inputs state and local government taxes into REMI as new state and local government spending, respectively. These policy variables assume all the taxes and fees that go directly to the state and state fair authority will be spent back into the economy. The data for these values were derived from total gross sales of food, merchandise, and alcohol, all of which were available through the state fair’s audited financial reports. According to the state fair’s website, food and drink vendors pay a 19.5% fee of all gross sales after sales tax to operate at the fair while merchandise vendors pay only 15%.¹⁷ These vendors also pay a fixed fee per square foot of space used, but this data is not readily available. Sales tax estimates were split between 6% for the state of Iowa, and an additional 1% county sales tax for Polk County.

Table 2. Iowa State Fair Tax and Fee Revenue

Model Input	Industry	2024	2025	2026
Taxes and Fees	State Government	\$9,479	\$9,595	\$10,383
Taxes	Local Government	\$405	\$410	\$444

Source: Iowa Auditor of State, CSI Estimates

Note: Currency is in thousands of current dollars. Estimates for 2024 and 2025 are final, and 2026 preliminary

For its economic impact simulation, CSI added the remaining operating revenues and vendor sales to a “Detailed Industry Sales (Exogenous Production)” policy variable in the REMI model. Industry sales values in table 3 represent the total spending of attendees at the fair and is measured in thousands of nominal dollars. This value is the summed total of the fair’s operating revenues and private vendor sales and reflects the total production or output of vendors and fairground transactions. Notably, spending was revised upwards in 2024 from \$84.1 to \$85.7 million (1.9%), and upwards in 2025 from \$85 to \$88.5 million (4.1%).

Table 3. Iowa State Fair Spending

Model Input	Industry	2024	2025	2026
Detailed Industry Sales	Other amusement and recreation industries	\$85,693	\$88,524	\$95,794

Source: Iowa Auditor of State, CSI Estimates

Note: Currency is in thousands of current dollars. Estimates for 2024 and 2025 are final, and 2026 preliminary

Tourism spending plays a significant role in economic impact. Every year, out-of-town visitors fly or drive to Des Moines and spend their discretionary budgets on hotels, restaurants, public transportation, merchandise, and more. This spending stimulates the broader Iowa economy by inducing higher levels of production, employment, and business growth. In 2022, tourists made up 48% of attendees and spent roughly \$100 million during their stay in Iowa, according to data retrieved from the State Fair Authority. Assuming tourists spend 50% more at the fair than residents, CSI estimates around 42% of total tourism spending occurs outside the fairgrounds. Table 4 illustrates the simulation's policy variable for tourism spending, as well as the final spending estimates outside the fairgrounds between 2024 and 2026 that CSI input into the model.

Table 4. Tourism Spending

Model Input	Variable Type	2024	2025	2026
Tourism Spending	Nonresident	\$67,837*	\$68,273*	\$73,776*

Source: Iowa State Fair Authority, CSI Estimates

Note: Currency is in thousands of current dollars. Estimates for 2024 and 2025 are final, and 2026 preliminary.

*CSI Estimates

Economic Impact of the Iowa State Fair

Common Sense Institute estimates the Iowa State Fair contributed to \$199 million in economic output and \$104 million in personal income growth in 2026. Table 5 shows the economic impact of the fair over the past three years. All data from past years are presented in inflation-adjusted 2026 dollars and were subject to revisions due to new data by both the State Auditor and LSA. The fair has also supported job growth throughout the Iowa economy in addition to the 2,600 fair-specific jobs. Employment is reported as the direct and indirect jobs gained from the fair spread across various industries such as entertainment, food and beverage, and construction, to name a few.

Table 5. Economic Impact of the Iowa State Fair

	2024	2025	2026
GDP Contribution	\$179	\$186	\$199
Personal Income Growth	\$93	\$97	\$104
Employment	880	882	928

Source: REMI

Note: Currency in millions on inflation-adjusted 2026 dollars. The economic impact estimates for 2024 and

2025 vary from CSI's report on the [Economic Impact of the 2025 Iowa State Fair](#) due to the new values being fixed to 2026 dollars versus 2025 dollars last year.

Common Sense Institute estimates this year's fair overperformed past years in real dollar terms—assuming spending rates remain consistent, and prices were moderately impacted by inflation. This means the 2026 Iowa State Fair had the largest real-dollar economic impact on Iowa's economy in the fair's history, pending updated data by both the LSA and State Auditor in the coming months.

End Notes

- ¹ "2025 State Agricultural Overview," United States Department of Agriculture, 2026, https://www.nass.usda.gov/Quick_Stats/Ag_Overview/stateOverview.php?state=IOWA.
- ² Iowa State Fair, "Media," 2026, <https://www.iowastatefair.org/media>.
- ³ Iowa State Fair, "Little Hands on the Farm," 2026 <https://www.iowastatefair.org/visit/kid-friendly-activities/little-hands-on-the-farm>.
- ⁴ Iowa State Fair, "11 Days. 11 Ways to Celebrate Fair Spirit. August 13–23," July 6, 2026, <https://www.iowastatefair.org/media/news-releases/11-days-11-ways-to-celebrate-fair-spirit-august-13-23>.
- ⁵ Iowa State Fair, "History of the Butter Cow," 2026, <https://www.iowastatefair.org/about/butter-cow>.
- ⁶ Iowa State Fair, "Food on a Stick," 2026, <https://www.iowastatefair.org/food/food-on-a-stick>; Susan Stapleton, "Meet the 84 new foods debuting at the Iowa State Fair in 2026," Des Moines Register, July 7, 2026; Iowa State Fair, "Taste the Fair Spirit—Discover New Foods at the 2026 Iowa State Fair," July 9, 2026, <https://www.iowastatefair.org/media/news-releases/taste-the-fair-spirit-discover-new-foods-at-the-2026-iowa-state-fair>; Iowa State Fair, "11 Days. 11 Ways to Celebrate Fair Spirit. August 13–23," July 6, 2026, <https://www.iowastatefair.org/media/news-releases/11-days-11-ways-to-celebrate-fair-spirit-august-13-23>.
- ⁷ Iowa State Fair, "Grandstand," 2026, <https://www.iowastatefair.org/entertainment/grandstand>.
- ⁸ Iowa State Fair, "Fair Dates and Attendance," 2026, <https://www.iowastatefair.org/about/fair-dates-attendance>.
- ⁹ Iowa State Fair, "Fair Dates and Attendance," 2026, <https://www.iowastatefair.org/about/fair-dates-attendance>.
- ¹⁰ Iowa State Fair, "Fair Dates and Attendance," 2026, <https://www.iowastatefair.org/about/fair-dates-attendance>.
- ¹¹ Iowa State Fair, "Fair Dates and Attendance," 2026, <https://www.iowastatefair.org/about/fair-dates-attendance>.
- ¹² Office of Auditor of State Iowa, "Audit Reports," <https://www.auditor.iowa.gov/reports/audit-reports?keyword=iowa+state+fair&EntityTypeID=&CategoryID=&ReleaseDate=&ReleaseDateTo=&ReportPeriodEnding=&ReportPeriodEndingTo=&FirmID=>.
- ¹³ Legislative Services Agency, "State Fair Statistics," 2025, <https://www.legis.iowa.gov/docs/publications/FCTA/1460292.pdf>; Office of Auditor of State Iowa, "Audit Reports," <https://www.auditor.iowa.gov/reports/audit-reports?keyword=iowa+state+fair&EntityTypeID=&CategoryID=&ReleaseDate=&ReleaseDateTo=&ReportPeriodEnding=&ReportPeriodEndingTo=&FirmID=>; CSI Estimates.
- ¹⁴ Iowa State Fair, "Employment," 2026, <https://www.iowastatefair.org/about/employment>.
- ¹⁵ Iowa State Fair, "Trivia," 2026, <https://www.iowastatefair.org/about/trivia>.
- ¹⁶ Office of Auditor of State Iowa, "Audit Reports," <https://www.auditor.iowa.gov/reports/audit-reports?keyword=Iowa+State+Fair+&EntityTypeID=&CategoryID=&ReleaseDate=&ReleaseDateTo=&ReportPeriodEnding=&ReportPeriodEndingTo=&FirmID=>.
- ¹⁷ Iowa State Fair, "Rental Space Guide," 2026, <https://www.iowastatefair.org/participate/commercial-space/space-rental-guide>.