



**August 2025**

# **Economic Impact of the Iowa State Fair**

## 2025

**Author:** Andrzej Wieciorkowski



## 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 7-17, 2025, the Iowa State Fair welcomed 1,160,121 attendees this year, the third most in its 170-year history. Thirty-first state by population in 2024, Iowa's record fair last year had the sixth largest state fair in the nation by total attendance and third largest by visitors per day. It also had the second 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, Common Sense analyses 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 third-largest real (2025 dollars) economic impact of any in the fair's 171-year history, **contributing \$177 million to the state's GDP** and \$92 million in personal income. This year fell short of 2024's record year by \$2 million, and 2023's impact by \$1 million in real GDP.
  - This year's butter cow contained about \$30,000 worth of butter. The fair generated enough economic impact to pay for approximately 5,900 butter cows worth of butter.<sup>1</sup>
  - The economic impact of the fair is equivalent to the value of 13.4% of Iowa's total 2024 milk production.<sup>2</sup>
- This year, **fair attendance totaled 1,160,121**, exceeded by only the 2019 fair of 1,170,375 and the 2024 record of 1,182,682. The fair also set 3 new daily, post-pandemic attendance records.
  - Day 1: 95,671 (2025) versus 90,822 (2024), short of the 101,262 set in 2018
  - Day 7: 105,787 (2025) versus 99,281 (2024), short of the 109,323 set in 2019
  - Day 8: 106,925 (2025) versus 102,510 (2024), short of the 107,449 set in 2015
- Common Sense Institute estimates **fairgoers spent a total of \$85 million dollars at the fair this year**, a 1.1% increase from \$84.1 million in 2024.
  - This means the average family of three spent an estimated \$220 per day at the Iowa State Fair this year, a 3.11% increase from 2024.
- At this year's fair, turkey legs cost \$19, lemonade \$8, funnel cake \$10, footlong hotdogs \$10, and kettle corn \$8.

# America's Classic State Fair

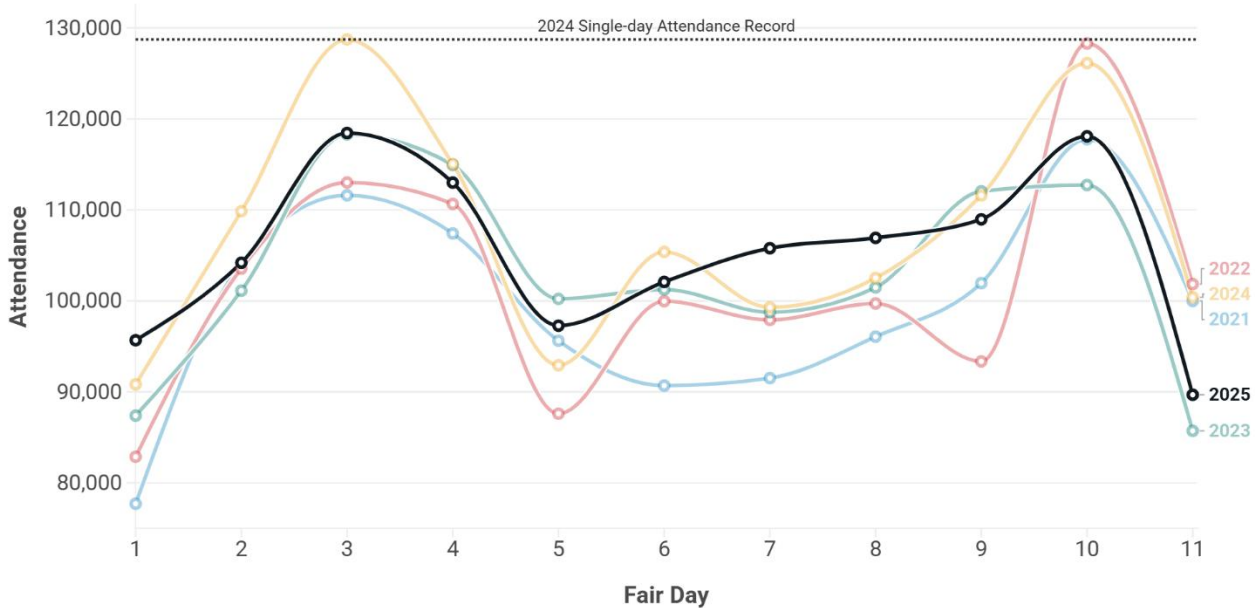
Starting with a budget of just \$323 and an estimated 7,000 to 10,000 people in attendance at its inception in 1854, the Iowa State Fair now attracts over a million attendees from all over the United States every year.<sup>3</sup> Fairgoers spend tens-of-millions of dollars annually into the state's 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.<sup>4</sup> Music-lovers enjoyed listening to the best fiddlers at the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fiddlers' contest.<sup>5</sup> And as per tradition, every Iowan in attendance enjoyed witnessing the traditional butter cow alongside butter-sculptures of Toy Story themed characters.<sup>6</sup> Even pumpkin enthusiasts had a great time witnessing a record-sized, 1,409-pound pumpkin win this year's contest—eclipsing the previous State Fair record of 1,323 pounds.<sup>7</sup> With over 50 options of mobile foods on a stick this year, fairgoers were also able to enjoy the nightlife full of fireworks and entertainment. This year's grandstand entertainment ranged from Mr. Worldwide (Pitbull) and hip-hop star T-Pain to rock legends Def Leppard and country star Parker McCollum, among other celebrities.<sup>8</sup> 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.

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. While this year's fair did not post any single-day attendance records, fairgoers did set three **post-pandemic**, single-day attendance records. Day 1 of the fair, Thursday, August 7 set a post-pandemic attendance record at 95,671 but fell short of the pre-pandemic record of 101,262 set in 2008.<sup>9</sup> Wednesday, August 13 also set a post-pandemic attendance record at 105,787 but again fell short of the pre-pandemic record of 109,323 set in 2019. But despite relatively strong attendance through most of the week, Sunday, August 17 posted the second-lowest post pandemic single-day attendance for day 11. This left the 2025 fair setting the third overall attendance record at 1,160,121, behind 2019 at 1,170,375. Figure 1 compares daily attendance at the Iowa State Fair over the past five years.

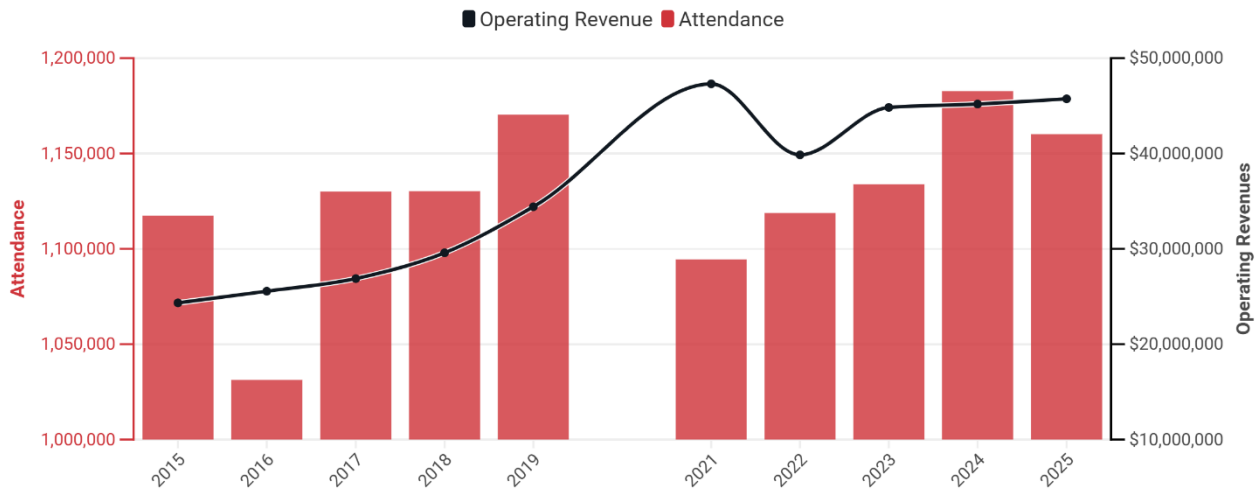
**Figure 1. Iowa State Fair Daily Attendance**



Iowa State Fair, "Fair Dates & Attendance," 2025.

As foot traffic on the fairgrounds continues to increase each year, operating revenues also grow.<sup>10</sup> 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 2 compares attendance numbers with operating revenues in nominal dollars going back to 2015.

**Figure 2. Iowa State Fair Attendance and Operating Revenues (2015-2025)**



Source: Iowa State Legislature. "State Fair Statistics," 2024.  
 Note: CSI estimated operating revenue for 2025 based on historical trends and actual attendance.

Operating revenues have almost 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% annually since 2015. Notably, state fair operating revenues have remained on a consistent growth trajectory the last two years, despite lower attendance in 2025. According to the Iowa Legislative Services Agency (LSA), fair operating revenues grew 0.8% from fiscal year (FY) 2023 to 2024.<sup>11</sup> This growth came after a sharp increase of 12.5% over the prior year. Despite the slowdown in operating revenue, this did not directly translate to a slowdown in consumer spending. The LSA estimated fairgoers spent over \$41.5 million in vendor sales in 2024, an increase of at least \$5 million or 13.7% from 2023.

Fairgoers spent a record amount on concessions and entertainment last year, and those spending habits have continued into the 2025 state fair. This year, the average family of three is estimated to spend \$218 per day at the fair, according to total estimated spending in table 3. Staple foods drove much of that consumer spending, like turkey legs (\$19), lemonade (\$8), funnel cake (\$10), footlong hotdog (\$10), and kettle corn (\$8), among many new food items.<sup>12</sup> 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 2025 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 2023 State Fair audit. Therefore, this section relies on state estimates that for 2023 are revised and finalized, for 2024 are revised, and for 2025 are preliminary. 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.”<sup>13</sup> Additional workers hired by concessionaries and exhibitors is estimated to be approximately 1,000.<sup>14</sup> 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 2023.<sup>15</sup> 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**

<b>Model Input</b>	<b>Industry</b>	<b>2023</b>	<b>2024</b>	<b>2025</b>
Employment	Amusement, gambling, and recreation industries	2,600	2,600	2,600
Wages	Amusement, gambling, and recreation industries	\$9,726	10,500	\$10,556

Source: Iowa Auditor of State

Note: Employment in standard units and currency in thousands of current dollars. Estimates for 2023 are final, 2024 revised, and 2025 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%.<sup>16</sup> 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**

<b>Model Input</b>	<b>Industry</b>	<b>2023</b>	<b>2024</b>	<b>2025</b>
Taxes and Fees	State Government	\$8,467	\$9,071	\$9,166
Taxes	Local Government	\$363	\$389	\$393

Source: Iowa Auditor of State

Note: Currency in thousands of current dollars. Estimates for 2023 are final, 2024 revised, and 2025 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 2023 from \$77.8 to \$81.1 million (4.3%), and downwards in 2024 from \$87 to 84.1 million (-3.3%).

**Table 3. Iowa State Fair Spending**

Model Input	Industry	2023	2024	2025
Detailed Industry Sales	Other amusement and recreation industries	\$81,134	\$84,076	\$85,034

Source: Iowa Auditor of State

Note: Currency in thousands of current dollars. Estimates for 2023 are final, 2024 revised, and 2025 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 2023 and 2025 that CSI input into the model.

**Table 4. Tourism Spending**

Model Input	Variable Type	2023	2024	2025
Tourism Spending	Nonresident	\$66,117*	\$67,837*	\$68,273*

Source: Iowa State Fair Authority

Note: Currency in thousands of current dollars. Estimates for 2023 are final, 2024 revised, and 2025 preliminary.

\*CSI Estimates

## Economic Impact of the Iowa State Fair

Common Sense Institute estimates the Iowa State Fair contributed to \$177 million in economic output and \$92 in personal income growth in 2025. Table 5 shows the economic impact of the fair over the past three years. All data from past years are presented in inflation-adjusted 2025 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**

	2023	2024	2025
GPD Contribution	\$178	\$180	\$177
Personal Income Growth	\$93	\$94	\$92
Employment	866	867	849

Source: REMI

Note: Currency in millions on inflation-adjusted 2025 dollars. The economic impact estimates for 2023 and 2024 vary from CSI's report on the [Economic Impact of the 2024 Iowa State Fair](#) due to the new values being fixed to 2025 dollars versus 2024 dollars last year.



Common Sense Institute estimates this year's fair slightly underperformed past years in real dollar terms—assuming spending rates remain consistent, and prices were moderately impacted by inflation. This means the 2025 Iowa State Fair had the third largest real-dollar economic impact on Iowa's economy in the state's history, behind 2023, pending updated data by both the LSA and State Auditor in the coming months.

# End Notes

---

- <sup>1</sup> Iowa State Fair, "Butter Cow History," 2025, <https://www.iowastatefair.org/about/butter-cow>; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Average Price: Butter, Stick (Cost per Pound/453.6 Grams) in U.S. City Average [APU0000FS1101], retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, August 18, 2025, <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/APU0000FS1101>.
- <sup>2</sup> "2024 State Agricultural Overview," United States Department of Agriculture, 2024, [https://www.nass.usda.gov/Quick\\_Stats/Ag\\_Overview/stateOverview.php?state=IOWA](https://www.nass.usda.gov/Quick_Stats/Ag_Overview/stateOverview.php?state=IOWA).
- <sup>3</sup> Iowa State Fair, "Media," 2025, <https://www.iowastatefair.org/media>.
- <sup>4</sup> Iowa State Fair, "Little Hands on the Farm," 2025 <https://www.iowastatefair.org/visit/kid-friendly-activities/little-hands-on-the-farm>.
- <sup>5</sup> Chris Meglio, "Fiddler returns after 52 years to win age group in Iowa State Fair's oldest contest," Des Moines Register, August 10, 2025, <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/local/iowa-state-fair/2025/08/10/iowan-wins-iowa-state-fair-100th-fiddlers-contest-52-years-after-first-title/85599987007/>.
- <sup>6</sup> Iowa State Fair, "Iowa State Fair Butter News," June 19, 2025, <https://www.iowastatefair.org/media/news-releases/iowa-state-fair-butter-news>.
- <sup>7</sup> Iowa State Fair, "2025 Biggest Pumpkin," August 8, 2025, <https://www.iowastatefair.org/participate/competition/results/2025-biggest-pumpkin>.
- <sup>8</sup> Iowa State Fair, "Food on a Stick," 2025, <https://www.iowastatefair.org/food/food-on-a-stick>; Iowa State Fair, "Grandstand," 2025, <https://www.iowastatefair.org/entertainment/grandstand>.
- <sup>9</sup> Iowa State Fair, "Fair Dates and Attendance," 2025, <https://www.iowastatefair.org/about/fair-dates-attendance>.
- <sup>10</sup> 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=>.
- <sup>11</sup> Legislative Services Agency, "State Fair Statistics," 2025, <https://www.legis.iowa.gov/docs/publications/FCTA/1460292.pdf>.
- <sup>12</sup> Estimates collected by CSI in 2025.
- <sup>13</sup> Iowa State Fair, "Employment." (2025), <https://www.iowastatefair.org/about/employment>.
- <sup>14</sup> Iowa State Fair, "Trivia," 2025, <https://www.iowastatefair.org/about/trivia>.
- <sup>15</sup> 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=>.
- <sup>16</sup> Iowa State Fair, "Rental Space Guide," 2025, <https://www.iowastatefair.org/participate/commercial-space/space-rental-guide>.