

MINNESOTA VALLEY ■

business

April 2026
\$4.99

A photograph of three people, two women and one man, all wearing glasses and smiling while reading a large book together. The woman on the right is holding the book open. The book's cover is visible, showing the title 'THE END OF LIFE' and a picture of a person. The background is a simple indoor setting with a window.

MAF MAKES MANKATO GREATER

NEW HORIZON ACADEMY
creates a new childcare vision

LOCAL PHILANTHROPIC DOLLARS
at work, from food insecurity to the arts

The Free Press
MEDIA

MAGAZINE EDITOR Leah Call

DESIGNER Christina Sankey

COPY EDITOR Kathy Vos

CONTRIBUTING
WRITERS Kent Thiesse
Harvey Mackay
Dana Melius
Leah Call
Jane Turpin Moore
Holly Marie Moore

PHOTOGRAPHER Casey Ek

COVER PHOTO Casey Ek

ADVERTISING
Sales Joan Streit
Jordan Greer-Friesz
Marianne Carlson
Shelby Levos

ADVERTISING
ASSISTANT Barb Wass

ADVERTISING
DESIGNERS Christina Sankey

ADVERTISING
MANAGER Jordan Greer-Friesz

EXECUTIVE EDITOR Leah Call

For editorial inquiries, call
507-344-6382 or email
rmurray@mankatofreepress.com

For advertising,
call 507-344-6364, or e-mail
advertising@mankatofreepress.com.

MN Valley Business is published by
The Free Press Media every other month
at 418 South 2nd Street
Mankato MN 56001.

■ Local Business memos/ Company news.....	5
■ Business Commentary.....	6
■ Business and Industry trends.....	16
■ Retail trends	17
■ Agriculture Outlook.....	18
■ Agribusiness trends.....	19
■ Gas trends.....	21
■ Stocks.....	21
■ Minnesota Business updates.....	22
■ Job trends.....	22
■ Schmidt Foundation.....	24
■ Greater Mankato Growth.....	26
■ Greater Mankato Growth Member Activities	28



■ From the executive editor

By Leah Call

Mankato Clinic Foundation, Mankato Area Foundation, Horizon Academy

As a fairly recent transplant to this state, the treatment of each fellow Minnesotan as a neighbor and a friend makes me all the more sure that I don't want to leave.

What's key to the Mankato area's comprehensive appeal? Mankato Area Foundation leads that charge, dispersing 701 grants totaling over \$4.2 million, as reported in MAF's 2025 Philanthropy Review. Those grants supported non-profit organizations in numerous categories, with the largest chunks (in amounts ranging from \$400,000 to just over \$800,000) broadly serving children/youth, food insecurity, health and human services, scholarships, arts, culture and humanities, faith-based initiatives and general community benefit.

"We wouldn't be here without MAF," said Darla Makela.

Makela, a specialist in assisting people with dementia, is programming coordinator for End of Life Doula Collaborative, which is comprised of nine independent doulas who support individuals and families in managing illness, terminal diagnoses, death, grief and loss.

When the doulas realized they could do more of their meaningful hands-on care and outreach by banding together for administrative tasks, they sought to establish their collaborative with MAF's help.

On a windy Mankato day, local philanthropist Tim Huebsch stands proudly in front of a large mural on the side of the Mankato Youth Place building.

Huebsch, vice chair of the Mankato Area Foundation Board of Directors, is also an advisor for the Marian Anderson Fund.

The fund, a subset of the foundation created in the early 2020s to honor the southern Minnesota artist it's named after. The fund has now awarded well over \$100,000 since it started.

Meanwhile, the Mankato Clinic Foundation is working to support health and wellness in more ways than one.

To Feeding Our Communities Partners, receiving \$5,000 from the foundation's quarter one grants means additional

opportunities to address food insecurity in rural areas.

Sheri Sander-Silva, Feeding Our Communities Partners executive director, said this quarter's grant funding will specifically go towards supporting the Maple River school district.

"I think that rising costs in general, and the rising costs in food hits everybody, and of course for those that are living on a very tight budget even more so often," Sander-Silva said. "What we hear year over year from the families that we serve, is that most often when budgets get tight, adequate food is the first sacrifice made."

■■■■

Kent Thiesse, ag columnist and contributor to the magazine, discussed concerns about U.S. agricultural profitability in 2025 and 2026. The agency's early February report from the USDA Economic Research Service lowered its 2025 net farm income estimate by \$25 billion from its previous September projection, bringing it to \$154.6 billion, with 2026 projected slightly lower at \$153.4 billion. While these figures remain historically strong compared to pre-2021 levels, they fall well below the 2022 record of \$186 billion.

He notes that recent income strength has been driven less by crop production and more by robust livestock profitability, along with unusually high government payments.

"There are certainly some "yellow caution flags" in net farm income and profitability levels revealed in the latest USDA farm income report for the U.S. farm sector as we look ahead to 2026. A big key going forward will be if we see some improvement in crop prices during the next 6-12 months," he writes.

Thiesse points out that crop receipts for 2025 and 2026 are projected to be among the lowest in several years, with tight or negative profit margins due to lower commodity prices and persistently high input costs. Total farm expenses are projected to climb further in 2026, led by higher livestock, fertilizer, labor and property tax costs, while total farm debt is expected to reach \$624.7 billion. Improved crop prices, stable export demand, manageable interest rates and clarity on



Members of Mankato's End of Life Doula Collaborative from within their gathering space in Shared Spaces at Emy Frenzt.

MAF makes Mankato greater

By Jane Turpin Moore | Photos by Casey Ek

What's key to the Mankato area's comprehensive appeal? Is it the meandering rivers? The scenic bluffs? Thriving post-secondary educational options? Stimulating collegiate sports and theater programs? Varied parks and pools? A strong public school system?

Maybe it's as simple as a benevolent, forward-thinking populace and business community that recognize the merit in giving back and investing in their own future. And for nearly 20 years, Mankato Area Foundation has led that charge.

"We're everyone's secret weapon," said Maureen Gustafson, MAF's donor relations and programs director.

Added MAF president and CEO Nancy Zallek, "It's our role to understand the landscape of the community, to know what challenges and opportunities are out there and to marry an incredibly important project or program with the people who are passionate about it."

Under Zallek's leadership since 2009, MAF has built an

asset base of over \$40 million, shepherding change-making initiatives like the Children's Museum of Southern Minnesota and Shared Spaces non-profit center, among several others.

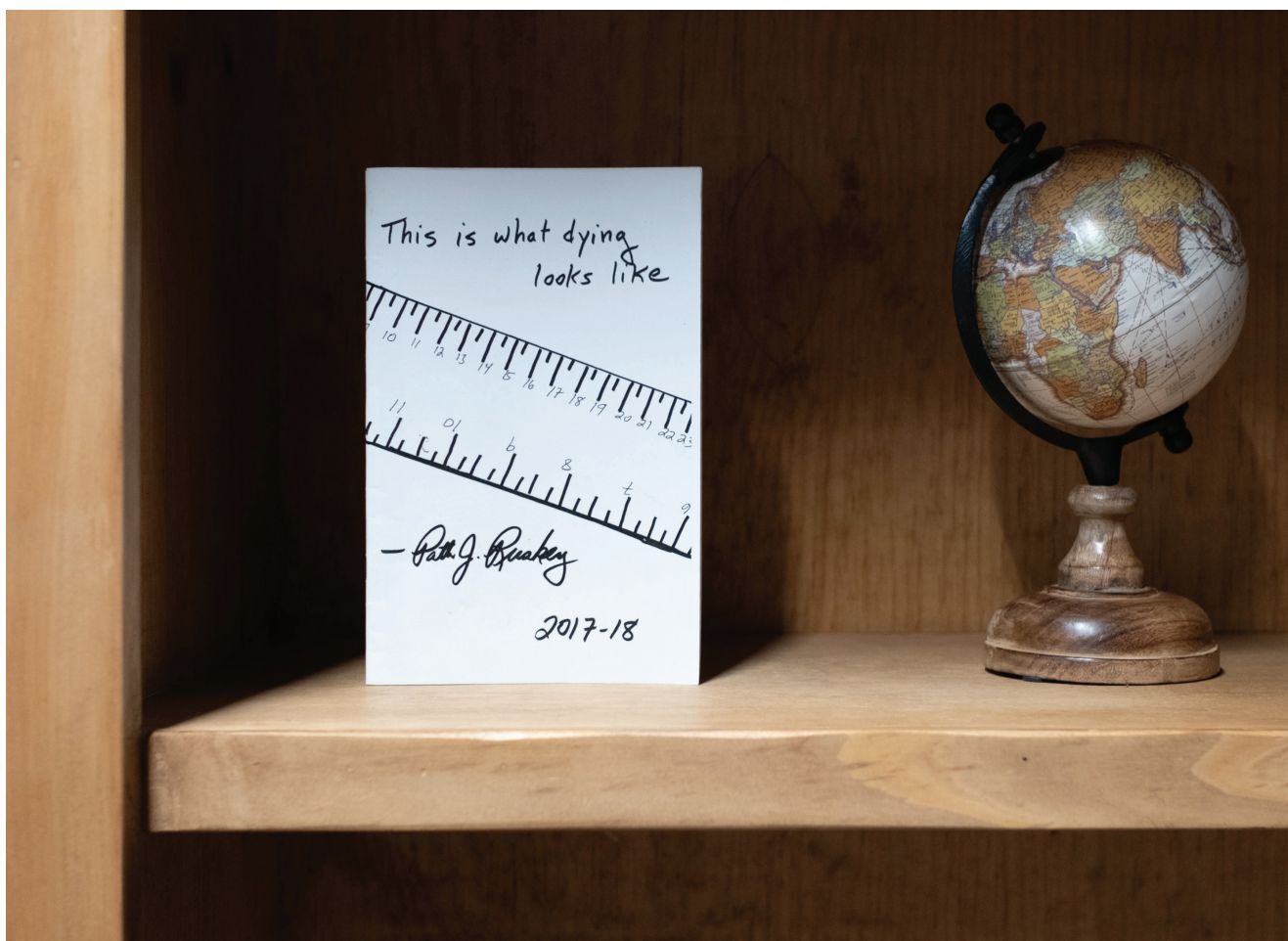
"Our major goal is to grant out to specific projects, and about half our staff is dedicated to the non-profit

sector," said Zallek.

"The other half of what we do is work with generous individuals who come to the foundation and say, 'I want to give this money away; please help me find a way to make the biggest impact.'"

In its fiscal year ending June 30, 2025, MAF dispersed 701 grants totaling over \$4.2 million, as reported in MAF's *2025 Philanthropy Review*. Those grants supported non-profit organizations in numerous categories, with the largest chunks (in amounts ranging from \$400,000 to just over \$800,000) broadly serving children/youth, food insecurity, health and human services, scholarships, arts, culture and humanities, faith-based initiatives and general community benefit.

Cover Story



Objects heralding the end of life are a common sight at the End of Life Doula Collaborative's gathering space.

Zallek is justifiably proud of MAF's growth and impact in the area, but she's quick to turn the credit for its vibrancy back to contributors and the community at large.

"After 17 years with MAF, I have the interesting perspective of seeing how unique our region is in its philanthropy," said Zallek, who gets the job done with a lean staff of seven and a 19-member board of directors.

"I participate in a lot of peer and cohort discussions, and there's constant conversation about what's the 'secret sauce' in Mankato," she continued. "They ask me, 'Why can you get things done down there that don't happen elsewhere?'"

Zallek and Gustafson attribute it to a culture that values the concept of generosity to others on both personal and corporate levels.

"Individuals and businesses here take a great deal of joy in seeing their names associated with accomplishing something important, and the generation currently entering the workforce wants to

"After 17 years with MAF, I have the interesting perspective of seeing how unique our region is in its philanthropy," said Zallek, who gets the job done with a lean staff of seven and a 19-member board of directors.



Nancy Zallek

know their employers support giving back to the community so a lot of times, we're working with companies to get their employees involved with volunteerism," said Zallek.

That kind of attitude draws and retains productive citizens, including Gustafson herself.

"I came here for college [in the 1980s] and I never left," said Gustafson, who's been a MAF staff member since 2020.

"Mankato is home, and with all my work in both for-profit and non-profit entities, I feel so proud that an urban area of our size has such a high level of arts and recreational opportunities."

MAF board member and Jones

Metal CEO Sarah Richards agrees.

"MAF knows what's important to the success of our communities and how to help donors support what matters to them," said Richards.

"With their finger on the local pulse, MAF makes charitable giving easy, rewarding and impactful."

Two initiatives fueled in part by 2025 MAF funding are among their many grantees bursting with ideas and momentum.

End of Life Doula Collaborative aids residents in navigating the physical, emotional and administrative challenges that inevitably catch up with every human as their earthly lives wind down, while a unique, open-to-all 10-mile mountain bike trail (coupled with a for-profit campground and water park still in development stages) will provide active fun for bikers ranging in age and capability.

End of Life Doula Collaborative

"We wouldn't be here without MAF," said Darla Makela.

Makela, a specialist in assisting

Ask to speak to a loan officer about our low rate HELOC loans.



Hello HOME IMPROVEMENT

**Financing
Dreams
Since 1934.**



**MINNESOTA VALLEY
FEDERAL CREDIT UNION**
Greater Mankato's Community Credit Union Since 1934

507-387-3055
MNVALLEYFCU.COOP

EQUAL HOUSING LENDER
NMLS ID 504851
FEDERALLY INSURED BY NCUA



Doula's Marie Schutter, left, and Karyn Block cut loose after one of their group's "Death Cafe's" in early March.

people with dementia, is programming coordinator for End of Life Doula Collaborative, which is comprised of nine independent doulas who support individuals and families in managing illness, terminal diagnoses, death, grief and loss.

When the doulas realized they could do more of their meaningful hands-on care and outreach by banding together for administrative tasks, they sought to establish their collaborative with MAF's help.

"MAF is our fiscal sponsor; we're still working to gain our 501(c)(3) status," said Makela.

One need the doulas faced was finding a space for their administrative work and for holding regular caring circles, education classes, workshops and presentations (a few recent offerings were "Caring Circle for Widows," "Life and Legacy Workshop," "Funeral and cremation planning" and "I have a terminal diagnosis...now what?").

"MAF helped locate us in the Emy Frentz building [at 523 S. Second St.], and MAF was instrumental in securing funds and donors to support our first year," said Makela.

"They don't control anything but they're so supportive—for instance, helping us learn how to fundraise—and one of the most instrumental things they did was provide [non-profit business development consultant] Kim Snyder to work with us for several months.

"She was a lifesaver; without her

help, we wouldn't have been as intentional and strategic. She knew in about a minute what we needed."

Granting Snyder's assistance to non-profits like End of Life Doula Collaborative is a win-win, Zallek believes.

"Providing Kim as a consultant-in-residence has been so impactful," said Zallek.

"She brings a whole other level of expertise to the table and has seen the large landscape of non-profits in the state."

Makela said Snyder walked them through all the necessary "baby steps" in clear and strategic fashion, enabling them to focus on setting up a board and beginning to fundraise.

"Kim has also done a four-part presentation series [sponsored by MAF] for all non-profits in town that we've attended," said Makela.

While Makela primarily serves people with dementia, her doula colleagues each have their primary interests and specialties, whether that's aiding families in nailing down nitty-gritty details like a loved one's passwords, paperwork and memorial service plans or companionship or creating legacy projects (letter-writing or recipes, for instance) or facilitating difficult family conversations.

"We all operate our own businesses but come together as a resource hub for the community," said Makela.

"We walk with people on their journeys where they are, and our connection and support can be a real gift to families."

Similarly, MAF's support and non-profit development expertise are gifts to local non-profits like End of Life Doula Collaborative.

Mountain bike trail at Rockwell Adventure Park

When complete, the former Jefferson Quarry site will be home to an innovative new recreational area.

Dubbed Rockwell Adventure, the site will eventually include an RV park and campground, aqua and cable parks—and 10 miles of world-class, single-track mountain bike trails, which the website rockwelladventure.com promises will “welcome riders of all skill levels.”

It's hoped that the trails might ultimately expand to 16 miles of fun, said Charley Serrill, a board member of the non-profit Mankato Area Mountain Bikers (MAMB) that's behind the trail plan.

“The design and layout are still awaiting approval from the [Lime Valley] township and city, but we're expecting approval this spring or early summer,” said Serrill.

“These will be our trails to

maintain, and that's fantastic. So we're fundraising to build and then maintain these trails, which will be free and open to the public.”

MAF helped MAMB connect with project donors, including major partners Curt and Debbie Fisher, who bestowed an important lead gift.

“A gift like the Fishers' proves the project is real and worthy, and then other donors recognize it's really happening and are willing to invest,” observed Gustafson.

“We [MAF] helped MAMB get their 501(c)(3) designation, met with various groups and helped with a grant presentation to the Taylor Foundation,” she listed. “Those steps will make all the difference in the world.”

Serrill, himself an enthusiastic cyclist and 20-year Mankato resident, has long been involved as a volunteer and participant with community-funded projects—but this one is, well, mountainous.

“Personally, I hadn't done anything at this scale before so I'm really appreciative of MAF's advice,” said Serrill.

In terms of mountain bike

tourism, Serrill is confident the Rockwell trails will prove an enormous draw for biking buffs.

“There's room for expansion, and not only will this attract tourists but ultimately it's for the community and will benefit our citizens,” said Serrill. “The projects [mountain bike trails, campground and water park] together will be like nothing else we have here—or in the state, for that matter.”

“MAF is a bigger non-profit supporting smaller non-profits like ours here, and that's really helpful for us,” he continued.

“Their involvement is helping us make this dream a reality, and it's a great chance to give back to the community in a super unique, fun, outdoor recreation way.” **MV**

Focused expertise for what counts.

Expertise for Labor & Employment Law.

Gislason & Hunter provides legal and human resources consulting services to employers to help them establish policies, respond appropriately to complaints and comply with state and federal laws. We counsel clients on how to handle specific terminations, disciplinary actions, layoffs, restrictive covenants and other employment matters.

GISLASON & HUNTER LLP
ATTORNEYS AT LAW

Call 507-387-1115 or visit
gislason.com



Tim Huebsch stands next to a mural on the outside of the My Place building along Stadium Road in Mankato. Huebsch is a trustee for the Marion Anderson Fund, which secured funding to paint the mural on the building in the summer of 2025.

From food insecurity to the arts: local philanthropic dollars at work

Local region sees a rise in food security needs

By Holly Marie Moore

Photos Jackson Forderer

On a windy Mankato day, local philanthropist Tim Huebsch stands proudly in front of a large mural on the side of the Mankato Youth Place building. Huebsch, vice chair of the Mankato Area Foundation Board of Directors, is also an advisor for the Marian Anderson Fund.

The fund, a subset of the foundation created in the early 2020s to honor the southern Minnesota artist it's named after, donated \$8,000 last February to help make the mural possible.

But Huebsch's connection to the artwork goes beyond that. He was Anderson's long-time friend before she passed away in 2021.

Feature

"When she passed, she used the funds from her estate to create [the fund,] which really is to

invest dollars back into the community around visual arts," Huebsch said.

"Her passion was artwork, and she also really had a huge love of teaching kids art and getting them excited about art. That's why that combination of being able to do the mural but also to engage the students

from MY Place in the mural really felt like it fit a lot of things that Marian always loved.”

MY Place aims to remove barriers so families can access their academic, music and art programs and more.

That’s why Nancy Zallek, Mankato Area Foundation president and CEO, said getting kids involved in painting it “hit the nail on the head.”

“Something like a mural at MY Place that is dedicated to children and exposing them to the arts, it was just perfect,” she said.

Zallek said Anderson was heavily involved with creating the fund before her passing. The fund has now awarded well over \$100,000 since it started.

Most recently, the fund awarded \$25,000 at the end of last year towards Mankato Makerspace’s expansion plans.

“When individuals like Marian Anderson, who spent her lifetime embedded in the arts, and in particular with children and educating children and exposing them to the arts, has an estate that she wants to [utilize to give back] to the community, it perfectly makes sense that she would decide to target the same type of things that were important to her,” Zallek said.

Addressing food insecurity and more

As the Marian Anderson Fund invests in the importance of exposing more southern Minnesotans to the arts, the Mankato Clinic Foundation is working to support health and wellness in more ways than one.

To Feeding Our Communities Partners, receiving \$5,000 from the foundation’s quarter one grants means additional opportunities to address food insecurity in rural areas.

Sheri Sander-Silva, Feeding Our Communities Partners executive director, said this quarter’s grant funding will specifically go towards supporting the Maple River school district.

“That includes our Backpack Food Program, our Power Pack Program and high school food pantry resources,” she said, adding that the grant dollars help supplement student meal needs during weekend and school breaks.

According to Sander-Silva, FOCP currently supports nearly 100 Maple River K-12 students, or over 10% of the school population.

She said the organization has seen a 25% increase in program enrollment from the Maple River school district compared to last school year.

“I think that rising costs in general, and the rising costs in food hits everybody, and of course for those that are living on a very tight budget even more so often,” Sander-Silva said. “What we hear year over year from the families that we serve, is that most often when budgets get tight, adequate food is the first sacrifice made.”

The Mankato Clinic Foundation approved a total of \$161,693 in grants during its quarter one funding.

Marie Wood, Mankato Clinic Foundation president, said she’s seen a rise in grant applications related to food access and an increase in funding requests overall.



The mural painted on the side of the My Place building in the summer of 2025, includes the large emblem with Hope Lives Here. Tim Huebsch, a member of the board of directors for the Mankato Area Foundation, said the mural adds some life to the Stadium Drive corridor.

“A good example is, in quarter one of 2025, we had 21 requests and in quarter one of 2026 we had 26 requests, and the dollar amount requested was four times higher year over year,” she said. “Definitely, there’s been a notable jump in food security and access, so you can see that families and nonprofits are feeling that strain.”

Other local efforts that received funding during this round of grants include the Region Nine Development Commission’s food rescue program and PACT Ministries’ monthly food distribution, among several others.

But Wood said the foundation supports other basic needs like housing, child care, education and employment. A Minnesota Valley Action Council project will use their grant funding to provide bike helmets for children in Head Start, and the Children’s Museum of Southern Minnesota plans to create a Healthy Me exhibit with their dollars.

“Our foundation helps us extend our care beyond the clinic and into the communities where people live, work and raise their families. By supporting these needs, we can really strengthen the overall health of our community,” she said.

According to Wood and the grant announcement, in the last 10 years, the Mankato Clinic Foundation has provided more than \$3 million in grants and scholarships.

The importance of giving back

In addition to his roles with the Mankato Area Foundation and Marian Anderson Fund, Tim Huebsch has also had the opportunity to serve on Minnesota State University’s alumni and foundation boards.

He described what it means to give back to his community.

“I’ve volunteered for many years. It’s just a great way to be able to give back and to see the impact that you have on the participants and the students that have the chance to be a part of it,” he said.. MV

■ Business and Industry Trends

By the U.S. Energy Information Agency

Energy

Global oil prices

The Brent crude oil price averaged \$67 per barrel (b) in January, the highest since September 2025, as weather-related events disrupted the global crude oil supply and escalating tensions with Iran put upward pressure on prices. Despite these short-term events, we expect oil prices will decline in 2026, as global oil production exceeds global oil demand, causing oil inventories to rise. Global inventories continue increasing into 2027. We forecast the Brent crude oil price will average \$58 per barrel (b) in 2026 and \$53/b in 2027

U.S. distillate inventories

We expect growth in distillate consumption will be supplied mostly by biomass-based diesel fuels. As a result, demand for petroleum-based distillate grows much less than total distillate demand overall. In our forecast, we assume biomass-based diesel production will resume growth following lower production and lower net imports in 2025. Renewable diesel and biodiesel are biomass-based diesel fuels that can replace petroleum-based distillate and be used to comply with renewable volume obligations (RVOs) in the Renewable Fuel Standard (RFS) administered by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Biomass-based diesel product supplied increases nearly 70,000 barrels per day (b/d) from 2025 to 2026 and another 40,000 b/d from 2026 to 2027. This growth is driven by our assumption that RVOs in the forecast years will increase, incentivizing biomass-based diesel plant utilization close to pre-2025 levels. We may adjust this assumption as the EPA

releases more RVO guidance for 2026 and 2027.

Natural gas prices

Natural gas prices rose sharply in January. The Henry Hub spot price averaged \$7.72 per million British thermal units (MMBtu), up 81% from December, in response to increased heating demand, reduced production, and large inventory withdrawals as Winter Storm Fern blanketed a large portion of the United States. We now expect that the United States will finish the withdrawal season at the end of March with less than 1.9 trillion cubic feet of natural gas in storage, 8% less than previously forecast. As a result, we raised our Henry Hub spot price forecast in February and March by an average of almost 40% from the January STEO. We expect the price increases will moderate as drilling activity drives increases in natural gas production later in the forecast period. Our forecast now assumes the Henry Hub spot price will average about \$4.30/MMBtu this year and almost \$4.40/MMBtu in 2027.

Coal exports

The Quarterly Coal Distribution Report provides detailed U.S. domestic coal distribution data by coal-origin state, coal-destination state, mode of transportation, and consuming sector. All quarterly data are preliminary and will be updated in the *Annual Coal Distribution Report*.

Highlights for the third quarter of 2025

- Total domestic coal distribution was an estimated 111.1 million short tons (MMst) in the third quarter of 2025. This value is 12.8% (12.6 MMst) higher than the previous quarter and 5.6% (5.9 MMst) higher than the third quarter of 2024.
- Wyoming was the leading