

Ecosystem Services and Idaho's Farmers

Interview Eight

I: All right, let's begin with a little bit of background information. Please tell us a little bit about how you got into the farming business.

R: I grew up in the farming business. My grandpa and dad had it and I just kind of fell into it, so stuck in a rut.

I: How long ago, or how many years have you or your immediate family been farming in this area?

R: Since probably the 1930s.

I: What do you grow?

R: We are raising wheat, hay, and corn, and we have a feedlot.

I: And how many acres do you farm?

R: About 1,400.

I: In what ways, if any, has urban expansion or any nearby construction affected you and your farm?

R: It has not yet.

I: Do you have any current plans to sell or lease part of your farm in the future?

R: I do not.

I: Do you have any idea what you will do with your farm when you stop farming it yourself?

R: I am hoping somebody in the family takes it over.

I: How important would it be to you that your farm remains an agricultural operation?

R: It would be very important.

I: Have you implemented any conservation practices into your farming operation?

R: We have.

I: What type of conservation practices?

R: We are careful about water runoff. We are careful about the feedlot and containing the manure and turning it into compost, making sure it does not get into the close-by canal, make sure that does not happen. We are careful about how much we put on, so we don't put too much on the acres and get the fields out of balance.

I: So it is mostly for water conservation and then water quality.

R: Exactly, water quality.

I: What kind of pesticides and/or herbicides do you use on your farm?

R: We use Roundup and we use some broad-leaf herbicides and occasionally some insecticides.

I: How do you make decisions about pesticide and herbicide use and application?

R: We scout the fields. I have a field man that helps me. I make all those decisions.

I: So, the use of GE (genetically engineered – also sometimes referred to as GMO) seeds has been in the news a lot recently, but the coverage only rarely discusses how American farmers are being impacted – either positively or negatively – by this technology. Has the use of GE seeds affected you as a farmer, and if so, how?

R: We use corn that has been modified. It works very well for us. As far as I know, the research that I've seen, Roundup is pretty much neutralized once it hits the soil. I think that probably there is more hype to it than what it is.

I: So you would say it has affected you positively as a farmer?

R: Yes.

I: So far have you run into any problems selling your crops that are?

R: No.

I: You said you use, is it the Roundup Ready corn? Do you have any other crops?

R: That's it.

I: What is your opinion of genetically engineered crops?

R: I think it is a good deal, as long as it's not hurting anybody. If we go back the other way, as far as farming, it's just not that feasible. We wouldn't get the kind of yield of crops that we'd get if we didn't have it. I consume the products that are coming from it; so that tells you how worried I am about it.

I: So positives of increased yield and what about having to treat the fields with any kind of more pesticides. Do you find that there is?

R: We use less and less trips across the field, very effective.

I: Where would you say the opposition is coming from for genetically modified seeds?

R: Uninformed public.

I: Just lack of knowledge?

R: I think so. I think sometimes folks hear something and then they just get on the wagon and maybe don't do the research. I have researched pretty hard and asked a lot of questions.

I: Turning now to the subject of environmental change, have you noticed any changes in the environmental conditions in your area that seem beyond normal variation from year to year?

R: I don't. I think we are a little bit more of a dry spell; but they come and go.

I: Do you keep track of precipitation and stuff like that to know that it has been a dry spell; or is that just kind of like a general sense that it has been drier and there is less water?

R: Both.

I: Have you noticed any persistent changes in the length of your growing season, or the first and last frost dates of the year?

R: They seem a little longer. A week or so in the spring. It seems like we are getting a little more in the spring. But like last year we had a real early frost in the fall, so balanced it out.

I: How many years if you have noticed like about a week different, how many years has that been going on you think?

R: Maybe just the last two or three.

I: Have you noticed any persistent changes in average winter temperatures and average yearly snowfall?

R: Snowfall seems to be less. I am assuming we will get a spell. We will get a bunch of snow.

I: Many of us have heard about the drought affecting the western U.S. right now. Have you noticed any persistent changes in yearly precipitation?

R: Yes. We have definitely had less. We have been lucky to get the rains in the mountains which have filled the reservoirs and so on.

I: Do you worry about water availability or maintaining your water rights?

R: Yes. Oh, yes. I go to the meetings.

I: Where do you think the concern comes from? Is it competition among farmers? Is it coming from government regulations? Or does lack of water? What concerns you the most about water?

R: I think it's farmers getting along. I think the competition sometimes. I think we need to work more together. That doesn't like that happens.

I: You said you go to the meetings. What is often discussed at those meetings?

R: New wells put in sometimes. Where is that water coming from? Guys below that have senior rights above what we have here and we have to meet their demands; even though they maybe, they waste it it does not matter.

I: Who decides whether somebody can put in a new well?

R: The water department. If they can find shares and they can be moved around, that's fine. Those questions were asked, and they were explained well enough for me that yeah they were within their legal rights.

I: Any other issues that often come up at those meetings?

R: No. Just talking about the groundwater being, has been depleted some. I'm not sure how they measure that and figure that out. I wonder about that one.

I: There are just kind of some general concern about the amount of water to go around then, if the ground water is depleting?

R: I personally think there is enough there. That's just me. But we are very careful. We have systems on the canal. We have some deep water. We try to be very careful about how much water we use and not wasting it, overwatering, ? so we just flush it down the drain. We try to be careful that way.

I: Where and how do you receive your water?

R: It comes from canal system.

I: All of your shares or all of your water comes from that?

R: We have some deep water too out of the underground aquifer.

I: If you have a certain amount of water allocated to you, about how much of that water do you usually use?

R: We have only had to buy extra water twice.

I: In the last like how many years?

R: Twenty. Seems to be plenty.

I: So mostly you have enough and you don't even run up all the way to your water allocation.

R: No. We usually have some leftover.

I: Do you rely on bees to pollinate any of your crops?

R: No.

I: Have you noticed any changes in bee populations around here recently?

R: I haven't. I am not paying that much attention.

I: What about any other kinds of insects or pests. Have you noticed any changes in those populations?

R: No. I haven't. They seem about the same, the flies, the mosquitoes are still as pesky as they always were. More rodents than normal though.

I: We've heard some people talk about mice and rabbits.

R: Yes. Tons of mice and gophers. Rabbits are starting to show up again a little bit, cottontails and a few jackrabbits.

I: Thinking specifically about changes to the climate, how concerned are you about climate change?

R: I am a little concerned about it I guess, not a lot. I guess. I'm one that thinks there is probably a rollercoaster with those kind of changes. I think a lot of money and effort sometimes is spent on some things that maybe we can't do anything about.

I: What do you think is causing the changes that you are kind of concerned about?

R: El Nino and maybe volcanoes somewhere else or those kind of things.

I: Do you think that any of the changes to the climate some people are talking about are caused by human activities?

R: Yes, there probably are a few.

I: What kind of human activities do you think about when you think about changes to the climate?

R: Probably, large factories I guess are maybe not complying. Emissions.

I: For you, other than water, since we know that is extremely important, what is the most valuable natural resource for successful farming?

R: Probably some of the chemicals we use and fertilizers, of course, used properly.

I: So the phosphate fertilizers?

R: Yes. The nitrates. We use those. I think we need to be careful with the nitrates. Nitrate levels are getting a little higher in our area in the water, I know that.

I: Do you worry about the availability of those fertilizers at all?

R: We have never not been able to get them; so I guess I don't.

I: Are you are worried about the health or availability of any natural resources in this area?

R: No. We are in a good area. Some other areas might have those problems; but our area we have availability of a lot of things.

I: Have you changed any of your farming practices or decisions in recent years, such as the type of crops you are growing, when you plant or harvest your crops, how you manage pests, or other major changes, and if so, why?

R: We have not.

I: Or even about like the markets?

R: Yes. The markets are volatile. Those are things we always worry about.

I: You haven't decided to change any of your practices due to that?

I: What are the biggest challenges you see to farming in southeastern Idaho?

R: Coming down the road, I worry about some of the government regulations that might come in.

I: What kind of regulations?

R: Especially like with our feed lot. I know that people are worried about the gases that come those and the water quality and the treatment of animals. We take that pretty seriously. We try to treat them as good as we can. And just the general public watching a little too close and maybe not ? the full story.

I: So that would be kind of the biggest challenges you would see going forward as some additional regulations coming down?

R: Yes, and maybe the expenses following with it.

I: Would those regulations be likely to come from the local or state or federal government?

R: For some reason, I feel like they may come from the federal government.

I: So that would be the sort of level of government you would be most concerned about?

R: Yes.

I: How are these challenges different from what they were in the past, if they are different?

R: I think they are about the same; but I just feel like they are on the front. Maybe somebody has got too much time, I guess. Wants to pursue something.

I: Have there been regulations in the last few decades since you have been working that have kind of come in and been really expensive or changed your practices?

R: Not yet. But I have seen some of the other industries that are having those kind of issues.

I: Around here?

R: Yeah. But it is just a matter of time before they get all of us is kind of what I think.

I: Do you have any idea what kind of things they would be out to regulate?

R: You know, I think maybe like OSHA or something like that.

I: Health and Safety, like for farm workers or for?

R: For safety and we don't have. We haven't had any claims that way, so I guess that's one aspect.

I: Do you employ quite a few people?

R: We have about five full times and then we have some part-time help, about that many more part-time help that helps us too.

I: What is your favorite thing about farming in southeastern Idaho?

R: Just get to do what I like to do. I have some nephews and nieces that help me and I love working with the kids.

I: So you like it. You just enjoy the job of farming or being out there?

R: Yes. Calling my own day.

I: Where do you go to get news about weather, regulations, or other farming-related information?

R: Usually the internet.

I: Are there any particular sites or magazines?

R: I use AOL quite a bit I guess for information and talking with folks too.

I: So for things like weather updates, are there specific sites you go to or is it like?

R: I just use my phone usually. I think everybody does it.

I: Which regulatory agencies, such as the USDA or other government agencies, have you been in contact with in the last few years?

R: FSA. I work with ? was there yesterday. That's the only agency that I have direct contact with.

I: How was that experience for you? For example, was it a positive or negative experience, and why?

R: It has been good, good people.

I: Haven't had any problems?

R: No.

I: Is there anything that the local, state, or federal government could do or provide for you to help you do your job?

R: No. I will think about that for a minute.

I: What about other people or organizations in this area, can you think of anything they could do to help you farm?

R: We are probably lucky in our area. We have good field men that are in touch. We have the university right over here for research. We have a lot of things right at our fingertips that are easy. I can make one or two phone calls and get all my answers covered pretty quickly. Just from my local coop that I work with or the university. If I need something from the FSA office I can check with those guys. Grain elevators for markets. That's where my info comes from.

I: By need something, do you mean like get some information from them, or do they provide any kind of other services. What would they be?

R: Just information, farm programs or just the new stuff.

I: Are there quite a few people who work at the University of Idaho station out here?

R: Yes. Have you been by?

I: I've seen it; but I have not been actually in there. I am not exactly sure what they're.

R: They study wheat breeds and potatoes and corn, crops that will work in this area.

I: Just a lot of agriculture research on which strains?

R: Yes. They are nationally known.

I: I've heard that University of Idaho does a lot of work in this area. I don't think I have met any of the researchers that are out there.

I: Are you using aerial drones or unmanned aircraft systems at all for your farming operations?

R: No. We are not.

I: Are you interested in using drones in the future and if so, how do you think they will be of benefit?

R: Slightly interested in them.

I: There is a geoscience professor at ISU, who has been out here. She has been testing out some of a project she is working on with farmers out in this area I know. I know that there are various systems out there for sale and everything. She is kind of curious if people are interested in them or not.

I: Any specific benefits you can think of?

R: I was just thinking my house is about a half a mile from my feedlot and I could just fly over and make sure everybody is still in, or fly across the field, you know, to see if you have some ? or whatever, any concerns or water. You can tell if water is ponding. Just an aerial view of it.

I: So you might be interested in something like that in the future?

R: Yes, down the road.

I: What would be the biggest consideration would it be, like price or what the technology could do?

R: Yes. How much it is and if the price is worth the value that I get back out of it.

I: Okay, before we finish here, I would just like to ask you a couple of brief demographic questions. Including yourself, how many people live in your household?

R: My wife and I.

I: In the simplest terms, how would you describe your political views?

R: Republican. I am probably a little conservative.

I: And what is your age?

R: Fifty-four.

I: Finally, is there anything else you would like to share with us about farming in southeastern Idaho that we have missed?

R: I just think that sometimes, like I said before, sometimes people are a little misinformed and sometimes take some of the things and maybe blow them out of proportion a little bit too far before they know all the facts. I think the public probably is not totally informed on a lot of things that go on in ag. They don't. Well, we are going to the grocery store and get a gallon of milk, not sure where that comes from and what it takes to get it there, whatever it might be.

I: What issues would you worry about most that the public is uninformed about that would affect you?

R: That comes back negatively like maybe GMO things or pesticides. I think most growers are watching that very closely. They don't want to, most of us don't want to hurt the ecosystem or contaminate groundwater or allow weeds to go, those kind of things. There are a handful out there that ruin it for everybody, no matter what industry you are in.

I: That is kind of the stuff that you feel like people don't understand? We have heard from quite a few people that it's like if people understood or if families had more of a voice, you know. I am kind of, what would you like to tell, say to the public, or even like a politician, that you feel that they are not understanding about your experience and your job and your position.

R: Well, you know, agriculture ? food and whatnot. Sometimes the regulations or if we don't use technology to improve crops. If you're not improving all the time, you're stagnant, you're not going anywhere. If those things are taken away from you, then how do you provide the food for everybody and quality food. I think everybody wants good quality that is not damaging to anybody or the hormones that go in cattle. I think those are things people worry about and they probably should be. I just think they need to know the why and how it happens.

I: Is that something you're worried about?

R: A little worried about that, yes.

I: Just in terms of how it affects human health?

R: Yes. Sometimes these things don't show for a lot of years, things we do and don't know.

I: How is the best way to figure that out? Is it just like studying it or?

R: I don't know. That's the problem. We are all so busy that that's sometimes the last thing on your list, to read material.

I: Definitely for farmers themselves, that would be a lot to expect to be knowledge about all of those things. It would take actually a lot of time to study and understand completely. Yeah, it is kind of like what would be the best method or strategy for figuring that stuff out?

R: Everybody is involved in the internet. That's the information highway, I think, for everybody. Or having some of these researchers out here doing studies or figuring out whatever they need to.

I: Anything else you can think of?

R: As far as the local government doing more for me, or the state government, we probably get more support in our state than probably other states because we are such a highly ag state. I think we are probably taken care of here better than maybe some of the others are.

I: So you feel generally happy with the level of state support?

R: I think so. I think so.

I: Because of that, you can't think of anything additional that the state.

R: That they ought to be doing? There's probably something.

I: I mean it is kind of just a kind of open-ended question. I don't have any idea specifically what farmers would say about that.

R: I don't know what the other guys have told you; but I can't think of anything. I think about it too much and say something stupid, ha, ha.

I: There's no right or wrong answers here so it's kind of not possible. Anything else?

R: I don't think so.