

Ecosystem Services and Idaho's Farmers

Interview Eighteen

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: Well, I always wanted to be a farmer. My dad passed away in 1949 and that left me and my brother to run the farm.

I: How long have you or your immediate family been farming in this area?

R: My dad started farming here in about 1919 or 1920.

I: He was the first member of your sort of family to come to this area?

R: Yes.

I: What do you grow?

R: Right now, I lease most of the ground out; but we have 23 acres of trees.

I: And how many acres do you farm?

R: All told, there is 160 here; but, like I said, 23 acres is trees.

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

R: I don't know of anything.

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

R: Well, I lease all but 23 acres right now. No. I'm not going to sell.

I: Do you lease that to another local farmer in the area?

R: Yes.

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

R: My sons will take over. When I bought the farm from my mother, she wanted us more or less to keep on going like my dad was.

I: Keep it in the family?

R: Yes. The kids, I doubt they'll farm it; but they might. They'll probably just keep leasing it out.

I: Would they live here on the farm?

R: I've got one son that lives over here about a mile and a half; but he has got a house over there. I doubt that he will be on the farm itself. I've got four sons. Three of them are in agriculture.

I: In this area?

R: No.

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

R: Very important.

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

R: Not very much, no.

I: Any changes? Anything to conserve water or anything like that?

R: No.

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

R: Pesticides? We spray for spider mite and scale in the trees. That's mainly it, what we use.

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

R: We go by the label to kill spider mite and scale and start spraying around the 15th of June and as needed.

I: Following the instructions?

R: Yes.

I: You don't use any outside consultants?

R: No.

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: No. They haven't.

I: You don't farm any GE crops or anything like that.

R: No.

I: Do you have an opinion about them one way or the other, whether or not they are good or bad?

R: Well, I think they must be good; because they are affecting the yields and everything.

I: So would you say your opinion about them is generally positive?

R: Yes.

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: No. We keep getting new varieties of weed in here; but don't know how we're going to stop that.

I: What is new and how long ago did it?

R: Well, the last three years we've had quite a bit of purslane and groundsel. As far as the Canadian thistles and quack grass, we are able to keep it down pretty well. It's pretty hard to kill morning glory; but we work on it.

I: Do you have any idea what is causing those changes, those new weeds to come?

R: Well, I think a lot of it is coming down the canal system, going out through the sprinkler pipes.

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: We have been having longer growing seasons the last few years. We haven't had as much snow or as much winter by any means like we used to have.

I: So that is a change that you have been able to observe and sort of notice?

R: Yes.

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

R: Oh yes, definitely. When I was young, you was never in the field after about the 25th of October you was pushing it. Now you are up into November. In the spring, we are getting into the fields earlier in the spring. We don't have near the snowfall we've had years ago.

I: What do you think is causing those changes?

R: Well, the environmentalists would say it is climate change. And it is a climate change; but I don't think the pollution putting in the air is making it by any means.

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: Last fall, we got more rain than usual; which was very good for us. We've had a pretty dry spring as a whole this year. When I was young, up until the 1970s or 1980s, always in the spring, when was cutting spuds and planting spuds, we'd be out of the field for at least a week, ten days on account of rain. But now, it don't seem to bother us much at all.

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

R: By all means.

I: Where do you think the competition for that water is coming from?

R: Some of it is coming from having to send more water down the river for the salmon. Some years we really need it bad; but the environmentalists have got it bottled up to where we gotta give it to the salmon.

I: Where and how do you receive your water?

R: I receive it out of the canal company, and it is stored in Jackson Hole and Palisades. Our company has water rights in American Falls reservoir; but it is already past. It all goes down the country.

I: So you have water rights, but you are not able to get the water out of there?

R: Yes.

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

R: Some years we use it all, but generally not. They put us on storage. They will generally take us off storage before it's over with. Some years we are allocated about 2,800 inches to take us through the season when they go on storage. This year I think I've got a little over 4,000 inches. Which when they gave us the water rights years ago, you always had 4,000 inches.

I: So it has changed from the past?

R: Yes, it has changed. We have had some years that were drought and had to shut everything off way, way early.

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

R: We don't anymore. Years ago, when we raised alfalfa seed, we used leaf cutter bees all the time.

I: If so, have you noticed any changes in bee populations around here recently?

R: We don't have the leaf cutter bees that we used to; but there is not really what they like here so much anymore.

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

R: Very concerned; but I don't know what we can do about it.

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

R: Very little do I think it is caused by humans. Everything has got to have some effect from the humans; but I don't think that our climate change is coming from humans much.

I: You said you are very concerned. What do you think is causing the climate change?

R: Well, I think the earth goes through changes off and on. We was in an Ice Age at one time. We went to another age. I've heard people say we are going to go back to the Ice Age; but I don't think so.

I: But you still would consider yourself pretty concerned about possible changes in the climate?

R: Oh, yes.

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

R: The equipment we use really. We used to dig two rows of spuds at a time, years ago one row and then two rows. Now it is twelve rows. We used to have 8 foot headers on grain combines. Now they've got up to around 40 foot headers. So it makes quite a difference in how much more ground we can farm now than we used to could. Sprinkler systems has helped a lot. They conserve water to an extent over flood irrigating.

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

R: State that one one more time.

I: Are you worried about the availability of any other natural resources other than water in this area? Anything else you rely on to do your farming?

R: If gasoline got so high that can't, you know fuel, that we can't afford to run our tractors and combines and everything, that could be a big detriment to us.

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 start watering a little earlier every year and we cut off our water on grain and stuff. Most of our crops are a little sooner than we used to. That makes quite a bit of difference.

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

R: I would say weeds. They are getting a lot of chemicals out now that will take care of weeds a lot better. They've got Roundup Ready beets and alfalfa hay and other crops like that; which helps us keep the weeds down.

I: So weeds are one of the biggest challenges to farming?

R: It was until we got this Roundup Ready for beets. They used to spend several hundred dollars an acre for weeding with hand crews in beets. Now you can drive by a beet field and you hardly see a weed. It is more expensive for the seed and it is quite expensive to spray; but it is still cheaper than putting all that money out for hand labor.

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

R: Yes.

I: How are they different?

R: They are getting more different varieties of seeds that you can spray stuff on to keep the weeds down; and weeds is always a challenge. No matter who the farmer is, they are a challenge.

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

R: Being outside.

I: That's the part you like the most?

R: Yes.

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

R: Off of TV.

I: The local news mostly?

R: Yes.

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

R: None.

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

R: Just once. We had somebody that wanted to shut our well down up there. They thought it was pumping out of the ground and we're not. We're pumping out of the canal. He couldn't see where we was getting from the canal. He wanted to shut us down right now.

I: Where was he from? What agency was he with?

R: I don't know, probably the Bureau of Reclamation.

I: That was a while ago, a few years ago?

R: That has been about ten years ago.

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. It's more or less up to each individual what they take away from us.

I: There's nothing that you think they could do to help you out or should do to help you out?

R: Well, they're not going to because the environmentalists have such a big hold on the politicians that they don't dare.

I: To do something? What would they do that would help out here?

R: They've taken chemicals away that did us a lot of good for pesticides. They really have.

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

R: No I don't think anybody's interested in farmers.

I: If they were, would there be something they could do to help?

R: Well, they've done quite a bit to help eradicate, not eradicate, slow the population of mosquitoes down. The year that everybody had West Nile, they come out about once a week and sprayed along the road. They will back into your yard and will add a bunch of spray; which helps quite a bit. I know, because I was one that had the West Nile Virus. I would never want another person to have it.

I: You were pretty sick from it, huh. Rough one. Do you spray in among your trees too?

R: No. They don't go out in your field and spray. When we are spraying for spider mite and scale, we put up in also to kill mosquitoes.

I: So you said you don't think people are generally interested in what farmers are doing or thinking?

R: No. They are not. They are not.

I: Is that in this area, or do you feel like that is a state level or federal government level?

R: Federal. The whole.

I: You feel like farmers don't really have a voice.

R: No, we don't have a voice. We plant a crop and we are everybody else's mercy; but we take the loss.

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

R: No, drones, no.

I: Are you interested or see that they could have a benefit for farming operation?

R: They'd definitely have a benefit. I've got a son up in Washington and they use them constantly. He works on a big farm. They've got, I don't know, tens of thousands of acres of farming that they've got.

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: Well, I sure couldn't be a democrat right now. Let's put it that way.

I: So you would say conservative or Republican?

R: I'd say Republican. I have voted Democrat; but the last years I couldn't.

I: And what is your age?

R: Seventy-eight.

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

R: Not that I can think of.

I: Cause you were kind of talking about farmers not having a voice. Like if you could have the ear of a federal politician, what would you tell them?

R: To lay off taking chemicals and stuff away from us that does do us a lot of good. Take DDT, they took it. They can't sell it in the United States; but it saves more lives in a lot of these poorer countries than any other chemical that they've got.

I: How does it help poorer countries?

R: They use it. All the other countries use it. United States is one of the few that don't use it; and we make it here. You know if we could use 2,4-D we could keep all these pests pretty well under control. 2,4-D did hurt bees. There's no two ways about it. When we were raising alfalfa seed, you sprayed real, real early in the morning and it didn't hurt the bees. It would still take care of your aphid and stuff like that, weevil. They say 2,4-D is bad for you. I'm here to say that it isn't so bad for you. I was around 2,4-D for years on years and years. I know that I worked with a fellow over here that had sheep. We put 2,4-D on all the sheep. There was solid dust. You had more on your mouth by the time the day was over with that the law would allow by far. It didn't hurt the sheep; but it kept the ticks and stuff like that down. They say that the peregrine falcon about went instinct on it. I say that's a bunch of hogwash. Then, that's my opinion. They said it made the egg shells weaker or something. That's down where they wasn't doing 2,4-D much, where the peregrine falcon were.

I: Do you have very many birds in your tree farm?

R: We have got so many birds. We've got robins and not many quail. We've got pheasant, quite a few pheasants. They like the trees, nothing to bother them. Rabbits love the trees, nothing to bother them. They are sure hard on our drip system. They chew our drip system all the time.

I: Do you have gophers and voles?

R: We have some gophers. We have voles in the spring. I pretty well keep this area trapped out of gophers. I don't want them coming in on my place. I trap for about three square miles here.

I: Do you have pretty good luck with that?

R: Yes. I get over 100 every year. Most of my neighbors will not take the time to trap. I'm the only one here that traps them in these two square miles here.

I: Anything else you can think of?

R: No.

I: All right, thank you very much. We really appreciate the time you have taken to participate in this research. It helps us understand what issues you are facing and how steps could be taken to help you do your work, which is work we know benefits this community and others.