

Ecosystem Services and Idaho's Farmers

Interview Eleven

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 was just born into it. My dad, granddad homesteaded in the country and my dad was farming here. After I graduated out of high school, I just started working on the farm, been farming ever since.

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

R: Since 1910.

I: What do you grow?

R: Sugar beets, main crop is wheat, alfalfa. We had potatoes on the farm; but now we don't raise potatoes ourselves. It is rented. It is rented out to other farmers raising the potatoes. Then we have a few calves on pasture right now.

I: And how many acres do you farm?

R: It ain't very much this year. It is normally around 1,500; but this year I rented a bunch of ground out. Just a ballpark figure, it is around 700; 400 acres of wheat, 150 acres sugar beets, 70 acres hay, and about 20 acres of pasture. That is where we are at.

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

R: It has not affected me at all, really.

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

R: Oh, yes. We will lease it all out eventually. When I desire to retire fully, we will more than likely lease it all out.

I: Who will you lease it to or do you have an idea about?

R: Just neighborhood farmers. I don't have anybody in particular at the time.

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

R: Hundred percent. I don't look forward in this area to change from agricultural. I don't see any other use for it myself.

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

R: You mean as far as shelter belts and stuff?

I: Yes, anything you have done to conserve natural resources of any kind.

R: We lease ground from Fish and Game on some ground out here, 400 acres of ground out there that we have. Since the mid 1970s we have planted trees and shelter belts out there. That is a big project, and just cooperation with Fish and Game basically the reason for it.

I: What are those shelter belts designed to conserve? How do they help your farming operation?

R: How does it help my farming operation? It is just a source to pay the rent on the farm ground we use of the Fish and Game. That particular farm there. There are three landowners out there. There is Reclamation, Fish and Game, and BLM ground. They have turned it all over to the management of the Fish and Game ground. Fish and Game, so we just pay our rent by putting in shelter belts or food plots. That's how we pay the rent on use of their land.

I: How has your experience been with Fish and Game?

R: Pretty good. Good.

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

R: Pesticides? I haven't used any this year other than seed-treat on the sugar beets. I have spread no pesticides on the alfalfa, no pesticides on the wheat. It just depends on the situation and year. When we raised potatoes, we always had an insecticide for the potato beetle. I am sure as landlord, I know they do. The people I rent my land to raise potatoes use insecticide on their potatoes to control potato beetles basically.

I: So you haven't needed any to farm the other crops this year?

R: No, not yet.

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

R: When it is prevalent that the pests need to be taken care of. The sugar beet seed comes inoculated with what they call Poncho Beta, and that controls a lot of pests and whatever. That runs out about this time of the year. So, if there are more pests that come on in late July/August, we will have to apply some kind of insecticide.

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: GMO seeds? Made life a lot better. Especially on the sugar beets.

I: Any other crops you are using GMO seeds from?

R: Alfalfa.

I: How has it made life better?

R: The use of Roundup on the sugar beets controls the weeds. You can just spray them. I can just spray this whole field in one day; where it used to take a crew of 20-30 Mexicans a week to weed it. It is just a no-brainer. It works a lot better?

I: Have you had any problems finding markets to sell those crops in?

R: No. Absolutely none.

I: What is your opinion of genetically engineered crops?

R: They are great. I think the world is going to starve to death if we don't use them.

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, other than weather. This spring was warmer than normal and came on earlier than normal. Why? I don't know. I got no idea.

I: So you have noticed some changes in climate patterns in general?

R: This year.

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: No. They are the same.

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

R: It has been low, the snowfall in the wintertime. Locally, it has been lower than normal.

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: Well, last year in August of 2014, we had an unusual amount of rain in August. That was a real unusual. That has happened before. It happened once back in the 1960s, and then this spring the unusual amount of rain in May. We don't usually get that.

I: So different times of the year that all of the rain fell?

R: And like today. It is trying to rain/sprinkle out there. That is unusual for July. We don't usually get this kind of weather in July. For some reason, we are this year.

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

R: I am not worried about maintaining water rights. We only have so much water, yeah. I worry about. That's an issue.

I: Where and how do you receive your water?

R: Some deep wells, a few deep wells. Most of it comes out of Aberdeen/Springfield canal system; which comes from the Snake River.

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

R: Last year we had water leftover and this year I predict we will have water leftover a little bit. Cause we do have a pretty good water supply this year. There have been years I have used it all.

I: Have you been following the drought in California? Does that make you worried at all?

R: Somewhat.

I: Do you rely on bees to pollinate any of your crops? If so, have you noticed any changes in bee populations around here recently?

R: No. No.

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

R: Not much. Not concerned about that at all. I think the Good Lord will take care of that. I don't think we can do much to change it one way or another.

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

R: It would take somebody smarter than me to answer that question. I don't know. I don't know, got no idea.

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

R: Just water and the land, dirt. Water and dirt.

I: So the soil, healthy soil?

R: Yes.

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

R: No.

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: No. I can't say as I have changed anything really.

I: So, you are growing about the same crops that you were before?

R: Yeah. We rotate. We pretty well stay with the three to four year rotation; so that's there's. Trying not to deplete the soil anymore.

I: When did you start using the GMO seeds? When did they become available?

R: About 2006-2007, somewhere in there.

I: So a little less than ten years maybe?

R: Yes.

I: Did you adopt them right when they became available?

R: Yes. They were available back in the 1990s; but we never could use them.

I: Why not?

R: Because of the environmental, was worried about the GMO deal. They would never let us plant 'em.

I: Which organizations were those? Was it a specific organization or group in this area?

R: National. That was a national deal. That was not just local area at all.

I: Do you know what happened to change their mind?

R: They couldn't prove anything wrong with them. They couldn't prove nothing wrong with them; so the government finally allowed us to plant them, to use them.

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

R: What are the biggest challenges? That is a good question. I think the biggest challenge for a young farmer wanting to start out is the cost of the real estate. The real estate has gone so terrifically out of whack. For a young farmer, unless he has got somebody to turn over the farm over to him, he can't hardly afford to get into the farming situation. It is really tough for a young farmer to try to get to be a farm because of the land values. I don't know really how to answer that other than. For a young farmer, that's the biggest deal to get into farming. He can't justify farming buying real estate. It just won't work. You can't stay in business with the way it is unless somebody is helping them out.

I: Are there are a lot of young farmers in this area?

R: No. Big farmers are getting bigger. Small farmers are disappearing.

I: For the ones, the young farmers that are around, how do they get their land?

R: From their dad. It is inherited. Young kid coming out college wants to start a farm, he ain't gonna do it.

I: So you are saying some of those smaller farms are disappearing. Are they being bought up by some of the larger farming operations?

R: Yes, absolutely. Any piece of property that comes up for sale is bought up by the neighbor, bigger farmers. A young farmer coming out of college in the ag industry, if he wants to farm, his best opportunity would just to be a 5-10 acre farmer and be what they call a truck farmer. You raise a handful of raspberries or whatever and take them to a Farmer's Market and sell 'em. I think that is his only opportunity to get started. He may make it; but it would be a long, hard pull to do it.

I: How do you see farming in this area changing in the next few decades with those trends? Do you think there will just be fewer farmers?

R: Yes, there will be fewer farmers. Oh, yeah. The bigger farmers will get bigger. Smaller farms will disappear.

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

R: Self-employment. I don't have nobody telling me what to do.

I: That's a good feature for a job.

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

R: The TV and the coffee shop. It is readily available. The Amalgamated Sugar Coop sends you information all the time. The Potato Growers sends you information. They Hay Producers send you information, market report. Grain elevators. All you gotta do is get on the phone and call the elevator and know what the market is. If you're smart enough, you can get on the computer and check your market, most anything, anytime.

I: Is that how you learn about any new regulations that might be coming down from the State?

R: Or there is somebody coming round to tell you about new regulations. SCS office, they are a good one for.

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

R: USDA.

I: Just the USDA?

R: Mm, hm.

I: How was that experience for you? Was it positive or negative?

R: Oh, they're okay. They're fine. Their kind of complicated, the new farm programs and stuff, a little complicated. There's getting less and less benefits from it all the time.

I: You generally have not had any problems with regulatory agencies?

R: No. You just gotta make sure and keep up to date with them or check in with them.

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

R: Well, really only thing the government can do is not mess with our markets. You know, like, let supply and demand kind of take care of itself. It seems like every time the government has a problem with Russia or whatever they cut the farm. You know, they quit exporting to the Middle East or Russia or whatever; which actually just takes dollars out of the farm economy. I don't like that; but then. The government always uses the farm/ag, food to, you know, take.

I: As part of their foreign policy?

R: Yes, foreign policy deal, yeah.

I: Anything the local or state government could do to help?

R: I think Butch does a pretty fair job, you know. He goes to China, whatever, and he sells a lot of stuff for Idaho. Butch, I kind of like him as a governor. In fact, I really I like him as a

governor. Cause he is a farmer or he knows the farm issues. Yeah, I think he has done us quite a bit of good. Selling apples to potatoes and everything else over to China or whatever. That's what we need.

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

R: No. Not really. I don't really. This local area, you know, one of the things we really needed last year during the grain harvest was a better way to get our wheat to town. This year that has all come out. We have got three different elevators being started up in the area; which will make a huge benefit to getting the grain harvest.

I: So is that just a grain pile they are going to put there, or is it actually going to be a tall building?

R: As far as I know, this year will be just a pile covered. They got it set up so they will pile and cover it. They got one there and one in Pleasant Valley and one down in American Falls; which will definitely help the harvest here, the grain harvest. It should help a lot.

I: The sugar beets, they have quite a bit of an infrastructure going on for the sugar beet transportation everything.

R: Yes, the biggest thing that would help us up here especially in this country, the sugar beet industry, would be to get the weight limits changed on the roads from 105 to 129; so we can get more beets per truck from here to Paul. As far as I know, the beets that are up in the Rockford area, they will go on train again this year though; which helps us a lot in the area.

I: I noticed this highway 39; it seems they've got lots of little turnoffs for the beet trucks to go to their dumps.

R: Yes. This highway between here and American Falls, even from Rockford to American Falls, there is lots of truck traffic. Alfalfa for one thing. There is a lot of hay and ? and sugar beets. There's just a lot of truck traffic. I think it would help us tremendously to get that weight limit up there to where we could haul more product with one truck.

I: Were you part of the pulling together the sugar beet coop?

R: No, I wasn't on the board at the particular time. I have been on a coop board since then, yes. I was much in favor of it.

I: You have seen effort of farmers kind of pulling together to just create a system that works a little bit better?

R: Actually, I think that saved the industry in this country here. I don't think we'd have a beet industry locally here if we hadn't done that. Has been a good deal. Been a real good deal really to get into. When we started the coop every farmer had to pay \$400 per share; which entitled

you to raise one acre of beets. It wasn't only entitled you. You were mandated to raise that acre of beets. You didn't have a choice. You had to deliver. Where you bought that share you had to deliver. That share now today is worth around \$2000. So that has been a real good. It has been a good crop.

I: Because of the success of the business of Amalgamated Sugar, that's why the value of those, of your?

R: Yes. They have done a pretty good job of managing the coop and it has just been a more stable crop. Sugar don't fluctuate quite like a potato crop will. So it is a little more stable. So farmers like it. Especially in this area. Western Idaho it's a little different because they have a lot more crops that they can raise than we can. We are kind of tied to sugar beets and potatoes and alfalfa. In Western Idaho, they got sweet corn, a hundred and some different crops, a lot of seed crops and stuff; which we don't have the opportunity to grow here. So sugar beets are very important to us.

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

R: No.

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

R: No. My farm is not big enough that I'd be doing that. I think if you want to know what's out there you need to walk out there and look.

I: I know that there is a pilot project with a few farmers seeing whether or not it can benefit them.

R: It can. There are several farmers around here that are farming from American Falls to Rockford. They can send their drone over there and take a picture of the field and come back. I can see that benefiting them. I am just local here. My furthest field is three miles away.

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: Just me and my wife.

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

R: Like what do you want to know?

I: Would you consider yourself conservative or liberal in terms of political ideology?

R: Conservative. I'd probably vote Republican; but I kind of vote for the man. I voted for Bush and I didn't vote for Obama.

I: And what is your age?

R: Seventy-two, seventy three next month.

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

R: I don't know what it would be other than I'm glad to be a farmer.

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.

R: It ain't gonna go away. There's a lot of people that like to eat.