

Ecosystem Services and Idaho's Farmers

Interview Five

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 born into it.

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

R: 1906, so a little over a hundred years.

I: What do you grow?

R: Right now just wheat and grass hay, and then we rent out potato and beet ground.

I: And how many acres do you farm?

R: Personally, I have 207. Then I work on a farm that has more, my dad and uncles.

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

R: We have been able to sell some land for housing.

I: So it has been beneficial, not detrimental to your farming business?

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

R: We lease it every year some of it, depending on rotation and for the good of the soil. We want to introduce other crops and keep disease at a minimum.

I: Do you have any plans to decrease or increase the amount that you lease?

R: No.

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

R: No idea.

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

R: Important.

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

R: Probably some that are natural to farming, trying to keep residue on top to stop soil erosion, try not to over-irrigate. We try not to allow our renters to fall bed on fields that are going to wash out in the spring runoff and stop soil erosion that way. Doesn't always make 'em happy; but I think for the good of the farm we do that. We make an effort every year to clean the junk up along the side of the roads that people are kind enough to throw out their windows, the aluminum cans and plastic bottles. We go over every road on our place every year and clean it up.

I: You specifically mentioned something about water conservation. Is there a technique that you use or is it just a matter of monitoring how much water goes on.

R: Monitoring the needs of the crop, not just doing it cause it's the right time of the year or anything. Make sure that what you are doing is needed.

I: Do you have soil measurements or do you just kind of go on.

R: Shovel and probe.

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

R: On the wheat, we use herbicides. The only pesticide that we use currently would be the seed treatment that is on the seed itself.

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

R: Whatever is needed. What sounds like it is effective we will use.

I: How do you get information or decide what is needed? Is it a matter of consulting with somebody else or just looking at your.

R: Consulting. Seeing what the field men recommend; because they know what is working.

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: A number of years ago, we planted genetically modified potato seeds that would repel Colorado Potato Beetles. They didn't like the taste of them. They were terrific potatoes; but then the media got on top of it and panicked people. We felt fortunate to get the crop marketed and we never planted 'em again. I think it is a good technology. I think it is going to be necessary to feed the world in the future. I think it is safe as long as it is monitored.

I: Other than that first crop that you were worried about finding a market for, have you found any other problems with growing that kind of crop?

R: That is our only experience with it.

I: Was there specific countries or places that were not going to buy them, or did you just kind of get the sense that there was a risk?

R: Here in America. That has been probably twenty years ago. New Earth potatoes, they were called. It was pretty new at the time. People were pretty nervous about what they don't understand.

I: Are you currently using any genetically engineered seeds?

R: No.

I: What is your opinion of genetically engineered crops?

R: I think they are beneficial to the society. It think if we take them away, the poorest people in the world are the ones that are going to suffer. Because of lack of supplies, they will be the last people to be able to buy and eat. It is easy for us to get on our high horse and say we're not going to have any when we know we are going to be fed and not be concerned about people in the world that won't be.

I: Do you feel like they definitely increase the amount of food that you can grow and the ease of the food growing?

R: I would say we do have genetically modified seeds on our place when we rent them out, the sugar beets. In what I've seen since the genetically modified sugar beets came on the place is a lot less chemical use. They would spray some pretty harsh chemicals three, four times sometimes, and still have weeds. Then there would be workers out tromping through the fields. The situation for the workers was not always sanitary. Things would be left in the fields, and that wasn't very nice to have around. Since the Roundup Ready sugar beets have come on, the very little chemical use compared to what it has been, and the fields are spotless. It has been a beneficial thing.

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: What year are you talking about? I think there are highs and I think there are lows. We get excited about the average; but there is no such thing as an average year. It is made up of the extremes. I think as a rule we have been in a warmer cycle when compared to when I think back to the 1970s the winters we would have. But the question is is that our fault or is this a natural cycle.

I: We are thinking more of long term trends rather than obviously from year to year it's not going to rain on the same day each year. There's not going to be the exact same weather.

R: I think we are either in a warmer cycle or it has been affected, which, I don't know.

I: What do you think is causing these changes?

R: I think there are a lot of things that could affect it, volcanoes around the world. When you look back over history and, what is it, in the 1,500's there was a summer, a year without a summer almost, it was so cold. I think there are some natural cycles that we go through. We like to get in a panic and worry about things. I like to think that God is in control and gave us a pretty good world that will work. That's not to say that we shouldn't take measures that are obvious. But I do fear politics get involved in it a little bit.

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: Definitely. Once again, is it a natural cycle or is it human caused event?

I: How much has it been changing that you've noticed?

R: I can remember times when the potato crop would get froze down in August. We've had a potato crop finished off on the 20th of August. In the recent years, I have seen. I think we have made it into October before the first killing frost. Although it seemed like when I was raising potatoes it would come a little earlier. Ha, ha.

I: Did you keep track of when those first and last frost dates were over time?

R: No.

I: Just kind of remembering?

R: Yes.

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

R: I can remember an open winter probably in the 1980s when we never had any snow. It was just rain. It was a nice mild winter and probably a little warmer than even last year. I don't know if it is much different. We have not had 35 below like we had in the 1970s for a while. I don't miss that. On the other hand, we have gone several years until just recently without hitting 100. We used to hit 100 and so our extreme temperatures the last two or three years haven't been bad.

I: What about pests and voles and stuff like that, have you noticed any changes in rodents or pest problems?

R: I picked 52 voles off my lawn this week that either died from some poisoned wheat seed or the dog got one or the other. Yes, this year there is a huge influx of voles. They have impacted our wheat crop significantly. I don't know if it is. I am sure it has to do with last year's warm

winter; but I think too there is, we don't see any skunks anymore. So you see cycles in the animal population.

I: Skunks usually control those pests and eat them?

R: Yes, there are not many skunks around. I think as over-populated as the voles are I think disease will come in and hit them and something else will.

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: Some years yes, but recently we have had decent precipitation.

I: About what you are kind of used to having come naturally versus irrigated?

R: You know, I think there are places in Idaho that have suffered worse. We are probably in one of the best areas. So for me to say that it is worse than average, I couldn't say that because we have adequate water supply and we have had some timely rains.

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

R: Oh yes, that is a constant battle. There is always someone that wants your water.

I: Where do you think the challenges would come from or who are you in competition or conflict with?

R: Right now the people that rely on the springs which are basically the overflow of the aquifer are making huge demands on the water users. In order for those springs to run, the aquifer has to be overflowing, so that poses a challenge. We have older water rights, so we are not as vulnerable as some people are. I think there will be constant pressure from municipalities to get more and more of our water.

I: Those overflowing springs, are they upstream or downstream from here?

R: Downstream, Twin Falls, Buhl area. I've heard it explained that the aquifer is like a bathtub. When it is running over, that is when the springs flow. As soon as it gets down below the top, then those springs start to dry up.

I: If those springs dry up and the people down there can't get that type of water, do they then start tapping into the aquifer more?

R: Yes, but instead they want the underground users up here to furnish them with water or buy them out at greatly inflated prices.

I: So I see. Then it would have to be reallocated, the aquifer type water.

R: Yes, and Idaho has first-in-time first-in-line laws. Their water rights are some of the oldest; so the question is how do you protect it and still manage the aquifer at a reasonable level. Meanwhile, the state continues to issue drilling permits out on the high desert; which exasperates the problem. Things happening with people transferring water out onto the new land and people with double rights who could only use one right at a time will transfer it so both rights are being used. So I think the state has done a poor job of overseeing some of this.

I: Do you have any sense of what would be a better sort of or fairer process to allocate those water rights?

R: Well, if there is not enough, they need to stop allocating.

I: New rights or new?

R: New ground opening up. I think if new ground opens up something else needs to be idled as long as there is not enough water to go around, can't keep lowering the aquifer and then expecting everybody else to help you make it up.

I: Where and how do you receive your water?

R: All of mine is surface water through the canal system. I have shares in the canal company.

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

R: Depends on the year. This year most of my farm is in cash crop so I will probably use a pretty good percentage of it. Probably not quite all of it because we had a good natural flow year. Once the natural flow was over, when the snow melt quits running at a certain level, then you have to go into storage use. And that's what we are in now.

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. I haven't been stung lately. I probably don't have an opportunity to really realize the decrease in population. I read about it. But in our operation we don't utilize bees. We don't have crops like alfalfa that bring them in naturally when it's blooming. So I really don't see the bee population even when it is healthy. I do ride by a set of hives on the four-wheeler and occasionally catch em in the face.

I: They seem to still be in there though.

R: Yes.

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

R: Inasmuch as I have to deal with whatever comes along, I am concerned on a yearly basis. How much of it is really our fault I am not concerned about; because I think the earth will take care of itself. I think we will see dry spots of the earth one year and wet spots, and I think these cycles will move themselves around.

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

R: I would imagine that some are, but probably not to the extent that some people say is happening.

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

R: Water and sunshine are it. Those are the natural resources you need.

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

R: At this point, I am not terribly worried.

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: Only from an economic standpoint. We changed the crops that we raise and reduced our risk.

I: What did you change and what was the economic consideration?

R: We quit raising potatoes. It seemed like there was one profitable year and then two years that were unprofitable, and we got tired of playing that game because the stakes are so high on it. So we decided to rent out for cash rent; which is a stable income. The potential to make it big is not there; but the potential to lose the farm greatly goes down as well.

I: What is it about potatoes that makes them more risky or variable in terms of the money you would get?

R: There are no controls over what people plant for one thing. They are a perishable crop so you can only store them so long. In a bad market year, you can't carry them over.

I: There are regulations on other crops like how many acres can be planted?

R: There used to be. I am not sure that was the answer either. It just is one of the things that make raising potatoes risky.

I: Was that originally designed so that there wouldn't be an oversupply of one thing and an undersupply of another or what was the purpose.

R: I think the government tried to protect the supply of wheat. Basically, they kept it oversupplied with the acreage they did. The market seems to be a better way to govern that.

I: This is a question that just popped into my head. We haven't been asking this in the interviews. We have been hearing a lot about people going gluten free and not eating wheat. You said you grow wheat, right. Does that concern you at all for the future, or do you think that's.

R: No. I think a lot of people eat too much highly refined wheat. I think that's part of our obesity problem. I also think it feeds a lot of people around the world.

I: So it's not like that is going to have a big effect on the market probably?

R: Right. My wife worked in a wheat lab where she had to mill wheat on a regular basis and she nearly starved to death. We thought, the doctor's thought she was gluten intolerant. She had to go gluten free and recovered from it and got a different job. Turns out she is not gluten intolerant but she is gluten sensitive. She just has to be careful with it. So it is a real thing.

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

R: High expenses and low incomes. That's always the challenge for a farmer. The continued water debate is going to be one of the big challenges, how that is solved.

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

R: Well, it was kind of a free for all water-wise in the years past, more so than it is now.

I: When did water start getting, I mean cause water rights were being allocated quite a while ago. So when did it start getting regulated to the extent that it is now?

R: I believe it was back in the late 1980s when they started. The state tried to settle the issue of which water rights were going to be senior and have precedence.

I: So that was like at one point in time rather than kind of a gradual erosion of water rights or?

R: I imagine there was some stuff that led up to that; but that's when the state started trying to deal with it.

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

R: I think it is a beautiful place to live. When the weather is nice, it's nice. When the weather's bad, you wish you were somewhere else. I am sure that would follow you anywhere you went. I just like being outside and working the earth.

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

R: I have a non-data phone, so. Farm publications and the internet.

I: Which farm publications would you be thinking of?

R: I get a lot of them. I get Successful Farming. I get Progressive Farmer. My dad gets The Furrow from John Deere, which is a good magazine. I subscribe to the Capital Press occasionally. I will get Farm Journal. I still get potato magazines sent to me all the time. There is a lot of information in them. On line, I will get onto agweb.com, agriculture.com, and a few sites like that.

I: Are most of those publications dealing with local or state issues or global farming issues or a mix?

R: A mix I'd say. On the internet, it is more either nationwide or geared more toward the Midwest. For us locally, you need more like the Potato Grower magazines or the Capital Press.

I: You kind of read a little bit from both of those sources.

R: Yeah. Most of the big publications focus to a large extent on corn and soy beans.

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

R: I guess the USDA with the farm program. That's basically it.

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

R: It has been negative because of the turnover of help in there and the uncertainty of the farm programs. No one really knew what was going to happen. There has been a lot of turnover of the help. You go in and it is not quite like it used to be in there. New people don't know you and don't know your operation. That's a little frustrating.

I: What kind of regulations or things are they trying to manage?

R: I don't know that they are trying to manage. They do work on soil conservation quite a bit.

I: It is one of their main missions or something like that?

R: Yes. You gotta be in compliance with highly erodible lands.

I: They have new people all the time that aren't giving you consistent information?

R: Yes, I think it has been a learning process the last year or two in there. That's due to a large extent the government trying to come up with a program.

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

R: I wish they would do more to preserve the small farms. I think that is a resource we are sorely going to miss. It is kind of the Walmartization of the family farm. I think our government programs, they put the caps on how much help you can get. So some of the big guys will have multiple entities, where they are double, triple, and quadruple dipping. I think that regulations could be tightened on that kind of stuff.

I: Or like oversight cause it sounds like they have regulations but some people are getting around it.

R: Yes. As they get bigger, they have more abilities to gobble up their neighbors. If it is tight margins, it is tough for the small guy to get going. When you see some of these guys getting \$750,000 a year in subsidies, who can compete with that. The crop insurance is another area where I think better regulations could be implemented to prevent people from farming the policy or.

I: Why do you think it is important to maintain the health of those small farms in your opinion?

R: I think that we are setting up for a famine. If you have a small number of farmers and times get really tough and they can't make it go, I think it's going to make a huge impact on our food supply. Whereas, if you had a lot of farmers and some of them had struggles they'd help each other out and find ways of getting by. When you have somebody with 20,000 acres throw their hands up one year and say I'm not going to farm, it is going to be a big impact. Plus, if there is no small farms, there's no new farmers. It is difficult for the next generation to get into farming.

I: What about the sort of community impacts, do you think there is community impacts of having an area that has more small farmers versus more ag businesses?

R: Definitely. When this church was founded over 100 years ago, 40 acres would feed a family. Everyone came in and they had 40 acres. There was a time which that didn't support a family and they needed 80 acres and then 160 acres. The farmers got bigger and bigger and fewer and fewer, to the point where now we are basically out of young people because they have gone off and gotten educated.

I: Why was that that 40 acres could feed a family for a while and then they needed 80 acres?

R: Economics, tighter margins. With the cost of equipment now, tractors being \$300,000 and \$400,000, harvesters up to \$500,000, you can't have a farm of even 1,000 acres and invest in machinery anymore. It is all geared toward the corporate farm. Most of those are leased rather than purchased anyway. Some of our environmental laws have caused this as well with the tier 4 emissions on our tractors, I read in Successful Farming that when the last phase is implemented tractors will have to be air cleaners. Their exhaust will have to be cleaner than the air they are taking in. Which all sounds really good and everything, but it tripled the cost of an engine in a

tractor. So those regulations all sound real good and it's good to have the air cleaned up; but nobody ever analyzes the cost of what we are doing. They could have went a good percentage of where they went with it and probably had it cost a reasonable amount. But as far as they took it it became very expensive. I'm not sure about the wisdom of pushing that hard that fast.

I: A little earlier you said the small farmers would help each other out if there were problems. Do you think that is still true in this area, where the small farmers are considering themselves more part of a community of people who help each other out or more in competition with each other.

R: I think the small farmers still work together; when there is sickness or other problems they still work together. Some of the big farmers are very helpful to their neighbors as well. It's not all bad.

I: So it feels more cooperative than competitive in terms of?

R: When you see the competitive nature is when the big guys are fighting over land to rent. Suddenly friends become enemies. As far as what they are growing and stuff, I don't think it is that competitive. It probably is more competitive than it feels to them; because one guy raising lots more acres does impact the others. On the small farms, I don't think that's an issue.

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

R: I don't know what it would be, something I haven't thought about.

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

R: No.

I: They are available. Are you interested at all in using drones in the future and if so can you imagine what benefits they might have?

R: On our operation, I'm not sure what good it would do us. On some of the bigger crops it would be more beneficial. It might be fun, but that would be about 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: Two.

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

R: Conservative.

I: And what is your age?

R: Fifty-Five.

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

R: One of my concerns is the immigration battle. I think that it is going to impact this area to a large extent. I think a free-for-all drop-the-border and let-em-poor-in will send most of them to the better jobs that compete with our workers. Yet I think totally tightening up and keeping them totally out will also impact the farms. The way it has been, they have been happy to come and work and do the jobs that we can't get help for. When they come, they are considerate and hard working. You can count on them being there tomorrow. They are not off to their cousins wedding this week and their aunts the next week. It is an important part of the farm community in this area, having that seasonal worker that can come through. I think the immigration issue is something that is going to really change the face of agriculture.

I: You might be one of the only people right now who are saying immigration is good the way it is right now, we don't need to change the policy. Is that what you are saying?

R: I would say tighten it up to the extent of keeping the drugs out; but I would be happy with a sensible guest worker program. It seems like when the government gets involved, they break something that was cracked. I know somebody who got involved in the H2 program and spent a fortune getting the house good; which was nice. They deserve a good place to live when they are here. His workers arrived in July. The wheat was basically finished irrigating at that point. The potatoes were well on their way. We don't need workers halfway through the season. Regulations can get in the way of a process.

I: Of being able to allow the workers to get here basically, you are saying?

R: Yes.

I: It seems like you always hear one side of the debate as closing the borders more or opening them more, rather than the balance.

I: Actually, we were just talking about this outside about the community here and the possible effect the Latino community, some of the immigrants up here, have. How do you think they are integrated into the community here?

R: I think they have come a long ways. I think we see more of it in the schools. It seems like there is less of a wall between the students. You see it in the athletics. The Spanish kids are starting to take more of a role in the athletic program. I think as they have been here longer and the kids get a better grasp of the language they will do better academically.

I: So you think the relations are improving between some of the communities, the sort of newer Latino communities?

R: I think so. I think it has been cordial.

I: Is there anything else you would like to share with us that we may have missed?

R: Probably shared too much already, ha-ha.

I: No such thing as too much when we are trying to interview you about your thoughts and opinions.

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.