Ecosystem Services and Idaho's Farmers

Interview Thirty

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: Uh well, my dad bought a farm in 1955, and we lived on a farm. Lived on a farm all my life.

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

R: In this area?

I: Yeah

R: Since 1973. I was raised down in Utah is where I first started, so 1973 is when I. I was student going to a regional university working on a degree in animal science, and the folks that owned this farm were absentee owners. My advisor said you should go sign up for these jobs to practice interviewing for when you graduate. So anyway, I went to an interview with these guys. They offered me a job, so I came here the summer of '73. Went back and finished my senior year in college. Graduated in '74 then I came her in '74 and been here ever since. So that was before you were born.

I: Do you still work for that company?

R: No, I don't. I worked for them until the year 2000. The father died in '85 and the kid sold the company in 2000. Then I, I have my own farm. When the sold the farm, I went to work at the ISU College of Technology teaching farm management classes. Then that program changed, so I went to work for the University of Idaho over here at the research extension working in a potato and grain doing fertility trials. Then I retired there in June 1st of this year. Now I just run my farm plus my other businesses. Is that more than you wanted to know?

I: No, that's perfect.

I: What do you grow?

R: I just raise alfalfa, occasionally some grain. Every few years I rent it out to somebody to raise potatoes and/or sugar beets.

I: And how many acres do you farm?

R: About 150 acres on my farm.

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

R: Well, I don't know if they. Urban sprawl? I mean probably the biggest thing with the urban sprawl that affects me indirectly is that there demand for water, and the people moving in and wanting to do a variety of things that doesn't always fit the farming community. You know here in Aberdeen, we are a very rural area, very into agriculture. Agriculture pretty much rules, right? We even let school out so farmers can get there potatoes out. I would say urban sprawl's been a lot here locally, but here in the state of Idaho, we have the EPA making all sorts of different rules; the government and different things. Probably 9/11 affected us a lot. I don't raise potatoes, but back when I did and more certainly now, we had to take samples of our water from the Springfield canal. We would have to take samples and send them off, make sure no one's contaminated them and do all these things. We just have to keep a lot more records. If you are selling stuff that's going to go directly to human consumption like potatoes do, there is quite a bit more record keeping about what you put on your crops and that they don't have any hazardous stuff in them.

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

R: Yeah, I have one field here that has been in alfalfa for about nine years, and I'm getting ready to put in grain next year. I will probably raise the grain myself. Then I will lease it to someone to raise potatoes, and probably the following year sugar beets then I will put it back to hay.

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

R: When I die?

I: Whenever you stop farming.

R: You know, my plan is for it to be passed onto my children. Honestly, I have quite a few children, so yeah I will just pass it onto my children.

I: Do they work on the farm now with you?

R: You know I have one son that works quite a bit with me. We have a fencing business also.

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

R: Well, to me it's quite important, but you know, we're capitalists. I don't want to sell my ground. Farming is a very good hedge against, farm ground is a very good hedge against inflation. If you wanted to invest some money somewhere, I think farm ground is a very good place to put it.

I: I guess they aren't making any more of it, huh?

R: No, and it's very expensive, it's very hard for somebody to go buy ground. You know, I think ground is selling from somewhere between eight to ten thousand bucks an acre. If you are quick with the math, you can tell pretty quick that it's pretty hard to make the payments on

that. So, you have to have some ground paid for. You can kind of average the two together and make it work.

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

R: You know, my farm is a little bit sandy, so sometimes the wind blows and we have wind erosion. I try to be very careful that I don't leave my land open when the wind can blow on it. So, I would say from some of those things I tried very hard. The people that I rent to, it's pretty hard when they grow sugar beets on your ground to have time to plant winter wheat in the fall to have time for it to get tall enough to help with wind erosion. We'll go down and till the field so that it's rough, there's not too many smooth surfaces. The thing I found is that if you leave it in hay for quite a while, the first year it doesn't hardly blow at all, the second year it gets a little more sandy and broke up a little bit so you have to be a little more careful. Keeping it in hay, it really doesn't blow. If it blows you're in trouble. I mean you either have a poor hay crop, or the wind is blowing like 300 miles per hour. Hay is a very good conservative, and it fills the land. It doesn't take the nutrients out of the soil like sugar beets, and particularly potatoes too. You know its real common now, but when I first came here all this land, or my land particularly, was all gravity irrigated. So, when you go from gravity irrigated to sprinklers it conserves quite a bit. It takes a lot less water. It's a more uniform distribution of water.

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

R: You know the last couple years we've had quite a problem with bugs. I usually have a field man, John from Simplot Grower Solutions, and I don't know the brand name of the stuff they put on. I will say, hey I've got these out there, and he will say we are using this product this year. He will take the stuff down to the airplane guy. So, that's what we do. We have quite a problem with gophers around, and there's not many products that are legal to kill the gophers, so we trap them. You know if you catch them they are obviously dead, but yeah.

I: I heard you can get some decent money from doing that.

R: Yeah, well I think the county pays two or three dollars apiece.

I: Have you caught very many?

R: You know my kids have. I'm guessing they've probably caught close to fifty this year. You can't even tell. And, this last winter we had a real problem with voles. I think Prozap is the product name that we put on there, the full label rate to try to kill them, and it's fairly effective. There's voles or mice all over.

I: You mentioned bus. What types of bugs have you had issues with?

R: Oh, the aphids, just little leaf hoppers. I'm not real good at scientific names.

I: Oh, I'm not either. That is just fine.

R: I will tell you this much, when you go out and look at your field and you have holes in the leaves, you know there's some bugs. If you just take your hat or your hand or something, and just kind of rake it through the like that, they'll be on your hand. You know, there's a threshold when you decide when to spray and when you shouldn't. I don't like to spray, but you have to sometimes to protect your crop. Here's my house. I got two neighbors right here and another over there, and when you are spraying with an airplane it's pretty hard to keep everything where you want it to be. If you have a machine drive through your field, then it trumps out all your crop.

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

R: I usually confer with the field man, Simplot Growers Solutions I guess is what they're called now. He will tell me what they're using, what they have and what's available. Down in the research extension here, they have a guy down there and he's had some traps and different things out in my field, so I do a little with them. They seem to be more into potatoes and grain than alfalfa research.

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: The GMOs?

I: Uh huh.

R: Well, you know I think the GMOs is more the buzzword that people like to pick on and do things. Down in the experiment station where I was working with potato varieties, of course there were these breeders down there, Simplot had some potato breeders and we would do some research for them. To me it's not that big a deal. You know when I was a kid, I remember when they first started to come out with hybrid corn where they would breed two different varieties together and then there was the synergistic effect of both of them so they would do better. I don't worry too much about it, but yeah there is effect because there are certain foreign countries, and America produces too much food for what we can consume so we have to ship it abroad. I'm a hay grower, and we produce a lot more hay here than can be used so they cube quite a bit of hay and send it to Saudi Arabia, China, wherever. I think for those guys at the moment, if they're not taking GMO hay. A lot of us raise alfalfa that you can spray Roundup on and it will kill all the weeds and not the alfalfa. That's been a great benefit for farmers because weds are a problem. Again, some countries don't like it, some places don't like it, so we have to play a fine tune there. But, you get increased productivity. The hay does well. The new varieties of hay, the GMOs grow well, they produce well, and Roundup is a product that you can go out and spray. It kills a wide variety of weeds but it doesn't kill your hay.

I: So do you use the Roundup Ready alfalfa?

R: I have some, yes.

I: What is your opinion of genetically engineered crops?

R: You know I think you need to have a little bit of oversight. You've got to have some people watching over them, but for the most part I think had not we had some people working on better varieties and more productivity we would be a very hungry people. When I was a kid if you got 60 or 70 bushels per acre of grain you were doing well. You know potatoes you used to only get two or three hundred sacks per acre. Nowadays, the yields have not always doubled but some of them have in particular areas, the grain particularly has. I don't know that it's as nutritionally good for you, but we would be pretty hungry if we were still using the same farming methods they had back in the fifties and the sixties.

I: So, do you think the new seeds is the largest factor in the increased yields?
R: I think the new varieties that they've come out with are much more productive. Yeah, like I said, when I was working down there we had several varieties of potatoes that they brought to the program. It could take about ten to fifteen years from when they were bred or produced to when they would get accepted to the market. They have varieties down there that use less water and considerable less nitrogen, and you know they grow and they do pretty well.

I: So, I have heard from another farmer about their concern with using Roundup Ready alfalfa involving the inability to get rid of it when they want to rotate crops. Has this been an issue for you?

R: I don't think it's an issue around here yet. I think that Roundup Ready seed is still fairly new. So, I planted some and I plan on it being there for seven to eight years, so I've got six, seven years to go. But, I don't think it is. Well, you can go out and kill the alfalfa with 24D. I'm not a scientific person that knows all the chemistry of that, but I don't see it as being a problem. I don't hear of it being a problem.

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 know. Well the EPA, they've changed some things after 9/11 some things were changed. I think sometimes. You know, you have to be pretty politically correct to survive in a farming community. Sometimes they put this acid on the grain stubble, and sometimes I think you are smart to get in your car and drive away. I think it vaporizes quite a bit and if it is a hot day or kind of overcast, I don't know what all of the conditions are, but I think the fumes don't go away like they should. I'm sure what they do is legal. I don't think there's anyone around here foolish enough to put something on that's against the label or illegal unless they make a mistake. Nonetheless, that acid personally bothers me, and I wish they would control that a little more. You know, it might. Quite a few of these chemicals they put on the fields these days besides the acid, they will post and say do not enter because there's a hazardous product out there for 24 hours or 36 hours. The only one comment I would make is that some of these

farmers that put on the acid, I think they should have to come and tell the people within say a 1 or 2 mile radius the day before and say we're spraying this field with acid tomorrow and we want you to know that.

I: So, they can choose to make other plans?

R: Right. You might say, I'm going to go to Pocatello that day or go to Jackson Hole and spend the night or whatever depending on how close it is to you. It also depends on the weather. If the winds blowing its usually fine. I don't think it's going to hurt me at all, but it's not real comfortable.

I: You can smell it for quite a ways.

R: Yeah, you can smell it. It's almost like you can taste it, but I don't know if it causes any problems other than just discomfort.

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

R: You know, I think yeah. There are some years that are different than others. This year is a hot year, hotter than normal. You know crops take a certain amount of heat units. Potatoes grow, there are quite a few crops around here that grow, maybe they take 90 days under hot weather. If it's cool weather maybe they take a hundred or a hundred and ten. This year, I'm a hay grower and it's been hot and it's hard to grow real quality hay when it's this hot. You either got to cut it every thirty to thirty-five days if you want high quality hay, or if you don't you're going to have feeder hay and there's a ton of feeder hay around here. Hay is a very hard product to sell this year because you can't get the very high quality hay. If you could, you could get really good money for it because there's so many of us that raise hay, and because of the heat, and because of the rain. Our quality of hay is quite poor, so the people that buy high quality hay are using other alternatives, like barley and corn and things, less hay. The heat makes a difference. As far as the seasons changing, I don't know that that's changed a lot, but I do know that there're some years definitely warmer than others. This happens to be one of them.

I: Have you noticed any changes in first and last frost dates?

R: NO, I don't keep track of that.

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

R: You know, this is my theory about this area. Where I raised was a higher altitude operation. Every ten years you're going to get 2 or 3 years when you get a lot of snow, it's going to be really wet, then you're going to get 2 or 3 years when it's going to be about average, you're going to get two or three years when it's really dry. So, that's 9 years. To me, I don't see a lot of

changes, but I've only been here forty years. I suppose maybe the seasons are getting a little. You know, when you used to have a year and you raised three crops that was doing pretty good. I have been able to get four crops, and I think that's more to do with the heat units and the new variety of plants that we have that they're more productive. But to say it's hotter or warmer, I don't know. I think Pocatello last year was the warmest it's been in a long time, just like one or two degrees warmer. One or two degrees to me seems pretty nominal. That's not enough to make a difference.

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: I think the last couple of years we get more rain in the summer time than we normally get. You know, last year at this time it was raining quite a bit. It destroyed the quality of a lot of grain. It was really a financial loss to a lot of farmers. We're in the desert and it's usually pretty dry, but this year it's been more rain. I don't know if the total amount has been more, but we get. You know, like people putting up hay. It doesn't seem to matter when you cut your hay everybody gets rained on, right? I have three sources I look to for weather information, and I try to get a ten day forecast; that's about how long it takes to put your hay up. Very seldom do you see ten days, and I know ten days is kind of out there, but you don't see ten days when they don't predict any rain. Quite often, like today, last night when I went to bed there's supposed to be a forty percent chance of rain today, and this morning there's only a twenty percent chance. The rains have been more troublesome because they come at inopportune times. Particularly for grain and hay growers.

I: There has been some pretty intense rains recently.

R: Yeah. You know, there's some areas around here that I guess get hammered. Last year Blackfoot got, about this time people were trying to cut their grain and they got a lot of rain. This spring, or quite early, we got a lot of rain.

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

R: I don't worry about maintaining my water rights. I'm one of the few farmers around here that use totally canal water. I don't' have a big farm. These people that have well rights, the state of Idaho has a lot of concern. There're some areas down in the Hagerman area that are not getting their spring flows, and they have a very early right. So, they are telling the state of Idaho you gotta turn off your junior rights until our spring flows come back. So, the last several years they have these groups that get together, and they buy what they call mitigation water and they try to do recharge and different things like that. So, you know that's made quite a difference. Supposedly, next year the state of Idaho, the water people, have told the farmers in the Snake River Plain that they will probably have to cut 10 to 15 percent of their irrigated ground from wells. That's quite a bit. I don't think it'll happen. I think they'll work out some sort of compromise, but you know, it's just like your bank account. If you're taking out a hundred dollars for every sixty you put in, pretty soon it's going to be pretty empty, right? So, back to my

water rights, I'm with the local canal company. It's a surface right from back in the 1890's, uh I'm not too worried about that. The other thing is, you could always talk to the old timers. They tell me there's never been a crop failure due to water shortage. We've had frost, we've had hale, we've had bugs and different things. As far as crop failure, the Snake River Plain is a very good place for water.

I: So, you just have surface water, right?

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: On a year like this year, I'll probably use ninety, a hundred percent. Some years I've probably, I buy water from other people. So, you know, on an average I probably use eighty-five to ninety percent of my water right.

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

R: Other than what just happens naturally? I don't raise bees or anything.

I: Have you noticed any changes in the local bee population from just being outside and in your field?

R: You know, bees don't come around my field a lot, but obviously there's some. I don't really like bees too well. I mean, I think you know what bee if you're going to die when you sting me than why don't you go over there and live. I'm pretty respectful of all animals. I believe God created all these animals to be on this earth for a purpose. I don't have a lot of regard for bugs that like to eat up my crop and destroy, but you know for the most part I don't. And you know that's another thing, when you spray pesticides to kill these bugs you have to think, you know is this going to kill the lady bugs? What's it going to do to the bees and different things? To me, I'm probably a little too conservative there, and it has probably cost me some money. I probably should have been more aggressive.

I: Have you ever had any bee boxes on your property?

R: You know, when I was at _____ Farms, we had bee boxes. The bee companies would come and put them on, yes.

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

R: You know, I'm not as concerned as President Obama is. I don't think man has a lot to do with it. There's no way we can make a difference. Um, I think we need to be careful. I think we need to do a lot of things. But, it depends on where you live too. I spent some time over in London,

England, for two years over there, and you could tell when winter came and people started to use their little stoves and burned coal and things. You can around here too. If that smell's offensive to you, you wouldn't like it. You know places like Salt Lake on the Wasatch front, they have a pollution problem. Up here we don't. It depends, you know if I lived in Salt Lake I would be much more concerned. Up here I don't worry too much.

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

R: I don't know how significant is it. Uh, I think it affects people with their sinuses and different things. Whether it changes the amount of rain or snow you get or whatever. I think the warming and the cooling of the ocean, the El Niño affects that more than whether I blow smoke out of my diesel pick-up or not.

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

R: Sunlight. You know I've had my best crops when it's hot and dry and sunny because like I mentioned earlier, you need heat units to make things grow, and if we have sufficient water in the canal systems to water our crops. Say from the first of May to about the first of October, I like it warm and dry because sunlight makes things grow.

I: What about soil health?

R: Well, that's a very important thing. Man has some control over that, but we don't have a lot of control over the rain and stuff like that. But yea, I think I'm a pretty conservative person there. I see these people come around with these different products, you know we refer to them as snake oil. They say, if you put this product on it will cut your fertilizer by this much. I don't think too many of them are as great as they think they are. At the experiment station we were a non-biased group so it seemed like every year someone would come with their products and say, hey put this on your soil and it's just going to do all these wonderful things. Most of them, not all of them, but most of them were duds.

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

R: Well, not really. I think farmers are pretty good stewards of the ground. If they aren't, they do raise crops. I think people get too close of a rotation and raise too many potatoes. Potatoes are something that really mines the nutrients out of your ground, but that's up to them. You know I think it's pretty well proven scientifically that if you raise 500 sacks of potatoes per acre, it's going to take a certain amount of nitrogen, phosphate, iron, magnesium and all these things. So, if you're going to take these things out, some of the micro-nutrients and stuff, there's a surplus of them in the soil and others there isn't. So, you have to put fertilizers back on I think, or your soils are going to get pretty worn down. When I worked for _____ Farms, we took over several farms for a variety of reasons that he owned, and I would say some of the people didn't have very good farming practices. They didn't control the quack grass, they didn't

put down fertilizer, they were mostly just there for what they could get, and it took us two or three years after we took over those farms to get the weeds gone and the fertility built back up. So, you have to manage your soils well, especially with potatoes and sugar beets and grain.

I: Yeah, they are harder on the soil.

R: Yeah, I mean if you want to raise good crops. Whenever you take a soil sample and you send it in there and they say what's your yield goal? If you want six tons of alfalfa to the acre, the sample will come back and say you've got this much nutrients in your soil, if you want six tons it's going to take this much. So, you add on to come up enough to reach your goal. So, yeah it's pretty scientific. It's probably eight to ninety percent accurate.

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 would say my changes are more driven by economics. You know, obviously I told you that I'm a capitalist. I try to make money and conserve my soils, but my farm is one of the few ones around here that hasn't had a lot of potatoes in it because hay has been good, and I've been able to make a sufficient, I don't know about sufficient, but good income raising hay. So I would say for me and from my perspective, my farm isn't spudded to death. So, those are just a few of the things I do. So when it does come to be time to put potatoes in here, I usually have several people that are pretty aggressively saying they want to rent my farm, wanting to know how much I want. I don't always go with the highest guy because sometimes other guys have, I like to go with the guy that is easy to get along with, pays the rent, and uh, is not too hot tempered. Farming is a very tense deal, and farmers have a lot of money out there. They know if you make many mistakes during your growing season, it's not going to work. So, they pay very close attention to detail.

I: So, you mentioned economically driven changes. Could you tell us a little bit more about that?

R: Well, the price you get for your produce obviously. I think I, you know hay has been really good. Hay has been good to me, and I've done real well. This year's a real bummer of a year, but you know it happens. Part of the reason is climate, and you have to realize that I'm a very small farmer and I don't really fit in the picture with a lot that goes on around here, but I have one field out here that's been in hay for quite a while. I'm probably going to change, but since hay is such a low return, I'm going to take it out of hay this year and it will probably be two or three years before I put it back in. Hopefully this load of hay will be gone.

I: Have you changed when you plant or harvest your crops?

R: No. Once again, like with hay, I either do three or four crops a year, and that's ninety percent driven on economics. If you raise real good quality hay, you get more money for it. If everybody's got a bunch of feeder hay, I try hard to get dairy hay and I don't always make it

because I get rained on or something. But, for me and raising my hay, it's more done by heat units and what the lord gives us.

I: What about how you manage pests? Has that changed?

R: I probably have been a little more aggressive. I was a little more conservative and it cost me some money. So, I try to be a little more aggressive in watching out for them and spraying or cutting my hay in a more timely manner. The bugs will suck the juices out of it, so you hay won't be as good a quality. It seems like when you cut it, it dies and the bugs go away. So, you say I was going to cut it four days from now but now I'll cut it two days earlier, maybe a week earlier and then put a pesticide on. Then you have to wait a certain amount of time before you can bale it and all that stuff.

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

R: Well, for the majority water rights is a big deal. There's a lot of farmers around here that have water rights for the surface water, but they've drilled wells and different things, so they are using well water instead of canal water. If a lot of these people go back to using surface water that can't use their wells, we only have so much surface water. Instead of dividing that up amongst forty thousand acres, maybe we will have to divide it up between fifty-five or sixty thousand acres. On a wet year, it doesn't matter. On a dry year, it does. Being as how maybe fifteen to twenty percent of this ground around here has gone to wells, the canals and stuff aren't as big. I think if everybody went back to using canal water, we would have to really enlarge some of our canals quite a bit. I think we would be a little short of water. You wouldn't have quite as much freedom. Back in the middle seventies when I was here, some years they would put you on a percentage because they just couldn't get water down. So, if you normally use a hundred inches of water, you might only get seventy-five inches. You had to make that work. It would usually last for a two or three week period at a time at the highest demand. So, that was a bit of a challenge, but there's so many wells now that it hasn't been quite the same.

I: But it could be?

R: Yeah, it could be. If the state of Idaho forces these guys that have been using wells to go back to canal water, it will be a dramatic effect.

I: Any other challenges?

R: Well, there's always an economic challenge. The inputs are expensive. It costs a lot of money to live. You two live in the real world don't ya? And, everybody's. I mean what's a luxury for some folks is different than others. You know I have a large family, and everybody has their problems. Some of my kids have health issues and different things. So, maybe that's not directly related to farming. I would have those challenges regardless if I am farming or not, but I see them as challenges.

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

R: It is a very productive area. It has a good water right. This area, you know the resources from fertilizer to water to people to machinery that is here for production, it is a very productive area. You know, the synergistic effect of everything. You used to go down to the research extension place and get a lot of information, but that's kind of dried up a little bit but It's coming back. We have excellent field men that are very knowledgeable and very helpful. There's just every resource you need about farming, it's pretty productive around here. I think you would have a hard time finding a more productive area from Burley to Rexburg.

I: What do you like about the lifestyle of farming?

R: I don't know anything different mostly. You go out and work and at the end of the year you raise a crop, and to me that's quite fulfilling. When I was working for another local farm, I used to figure that I raised enough food with them to feed everybody in my home town. To me that is quite fulfilling. Working down at the experiment station if I found that snake oil didn't work, well big deal. That's the thing I didn't like about down there. The things I like or was involved in, at the end of the year, what did you really accomplish? So, I think I figured out one time that with the amount of hay I raise on my farm, would feed a certain amount of people for thirty days. I think it was all the people in Idaho or something.

I: After the process the process of feeding other animals?

R: Yeah. What I did was, I figured a cow needs ten pounds of hay a day. If 200 cows eat the hay for 30 days and produce so much milk. You know, it was kind of fun.

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

R: Well, you know there's obviously a variety of sources. Internet, weather I told you earlier, I have like three sources that I look at. I really try to study the weather. The internet, mouth-to-mouth, just talking to different people. The internet, associating with people, I read trade magazines quite a bit like Potato Growers of Idaho. I certainly don't read every word, but I go through every page and stuff that is interesting to me I look at quite a bit.

I: What about regulations?

R: You know I get a lot of that through the canal company. I'm on the board of directors down there, so we have to kind of be up on things making sure that the canal company is doing the right things and not messing up anyone's water. And, you know magazines. Like I said, we're quite a agricultural-oriented place. So, there's a farming and ranching magazine out of Idaho Falls, an excellent one. Farm Bureau puts out a pretty good magazine, and you know, it's real agricultural-oriented.

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

R: Me personally? Probably not too many because I don't raise crops that are eaten directly by people. When I was raising potatoes we had to fill out these reports like if you sold your potatoes to Simplot or whatever. You have to fill out these reports on what you put on your potatoes, the rates and different things like that.

I: Do you have to deal with the USDA now?

R: Um, I don't think so. You know for farmers probably the Farm Service Agency, which is a branch of the government up there. You have all these government programs. Hay growers don't have much opportunity. They are mostly for hay growers. They have quite a few different programs they can use to subsidize you in case the price of grain goes too low. You can get a certain amount of money, but other than doing my crop reports and stuff with the Farm Service Agency, I don't have too much contact with them. I am not anti-government, but I think government should stay out of it a little more. We certainly need a certain amount of government oversight there because there're too many crooks in the world. Percentage-wise there's not very many, but it's just enough that. A brief example, here probably twenty years ago we had to put on chemigation valves. What that means is, particularly for wells, people would put the pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers into their sprinkler systems to put out with the water. Let's say that for some reason your well quit or something that stuff you were pumping in could go into your well and go back down into the ground and contaminate the aquifer. So, the government came out and told these people, you have to put on these anti-syphon valves, which I thought was a good deal. I don't want to drink pesticides. One of my friends out here said, the government doesn't have the right to tell me what I can do with my water. I said, do you know what? That water is underneath Idaho for a big area, from the Snake River to Burley and you may own that little piece out there. He was really ticked, and he didn't want to put them on, and the only reason they made us put them on is because they've had problems where this stuff got down into the aquifer. You can really mess with things. Who wants to drink a pesticide or a herbicide?

I: Right.

R: I think he's either naïve or bull-headed. It's just like a big tub down there and that water. The water don't stay just on your farm. It affects a big area, so I think we need some government oversight. He wouldn't have changed.

I: How has your personal experience been with government agencies?

R: You know, I've gotten along pretty well with them, but I'm pretty easy. We're very legal and all of that. I didn't like having to put the chemigation valves on because they cost like two hundred and fifty bucks, but I think it was right. I think it's a good thing, and I think as our society becomes more densely populated we have to have more rules to protect us from each other. There are some people out there that will do a few things that aren't completely for the benefit of man.

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

R: (laugh). Well, I'm sure there are a lot of things, but I don't know that they should be doing them. I think we need to have some oversight. I would like to see a little more oversight in some stuff that's going on, but you know I have a business besides my farming and I get frustrated with all the stuff we have to do. All the checks we have to write to those guys for taxes, and for this and that. Oh my gosh. But, how else are you going to fund the government, and that's always the age old thing. I don't mind paying my taxes if the government don't waste the money. I think they waste quite a bit of money, but what are you gonna do?

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

R: You know I think the information's out there. If you do a little bit of addressing, you find out what you want to find out. I don't think the government should come around to your house every day and say here's this and this and that. I think for the most part information is available. You just have to take the initiative and go do it.

I: Are you a member of any sort of farming related organizations?

R: Uh, you know they collect fees and stuff out of my check, so yeah for different things. But, I'm not a member of the Hay Growers of Idaho, or whatever they call themselves. I'm a really small grower, pretty insignificant.

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

R: I personally am not, but I had some real problems with my fields and Simplot brought me some maps. I don't know if they use drones or planes high in the sky, but they brought me some maps that showed me some different things that were going on in my field. I personally don't have any drones. I think they would be a fun thing to have, but they have their problems.

I: How do you think they might help you?

R: You know I think, they have infrared and different ways of looking at crops, and I think they might be able to tell more efficiently, maybe before you would, if your field's short on nitrogen or that you got a bug population or. Let's say that I'm not watching my pivot real close, and there's a couple of nozzles that are plugged up. I may not see that until I'm out there harvesting, but that infrared thing would be able to see like if a pivot goes around in circle, so if there's areas that are quite a bit drier than others.

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: Well, for the most part just me and my wife. I had one son that still goes to school at ISU and he usually comes home for the summer.

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

R: I would say I'm a Republican definitely, but I try to be a little liberal compared to some. That's a good question. I don't know the correct answer to that. Sometimes I think there's only one person in Aberdeen more conservative than me, but I'm probably a little liberal. I watch FOX News, so maybe that means I'm pretty conservative. I don't agree with everything they say, but I like their perspective.

I: And what is your age?

R: 65

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

R: No, I thing farming's a good deal. I think it's like other good things, it doesn't work for everybody. The majority of the poor farmers that weren't doing well got weeded out about fifteen years ago, and the vast majority of people that are still farming today are very knowledgeable, very bright and aggressive, hard-workers, good people.

I: Alright, anything else?

R: I don't think so.

I: Okay, well thank you very much.