

Ecosystem Services and Idaho's Farmers

Interview Three

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: Born into it. Left for a while, came back.

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

R: A couple hundred years probably. My grandfather did this. My dad did this. His dad did this.

I: Has your family always been in this area?

R: Mainly this area. They came up from Utah, my grandpa did.

I: About how long ago was that?

R: 120-130 years here or longer

I: What do you grow?

R: We grow alfalfa and corn.

I: How many acres do you farm?

R: Over 200

I: Have you changed any practices in recent years?

R: Probably just the way we work the ground, less deep tilling, so you do not lose your topsoil.

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

R: Not here. There are some places that get corners taken out, people building houses and stuff; but it is not that much. It is usually someone's son. It is not urban creep here yet. You see it everywhere else.

I: Does that concern you in the future?

R: A little bit. I recently went to California and you can watch it flying over Arizona, the sand blowing in and the houses sprawling out. So farm ground is just going away.

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

R: Not sell. If I can lease I will, maybe trade acreage. Like this hay field will come out and I will let a spud guy come in. He will run this place and I will run his place and put hay on his place.

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

R: No. I have not thought that far, no plans to quit. We have got a lot of family here. It will probably stay in the family, even if it is cousins or nephews or whoever.

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

R: It is preferred.

I: In recent years have you noticed any environmental changes?

R: Not really, other than vermin, voles, mice, gophers. Those are getting worse. Other than that, no.

I: Have you noticed any other pests?

R: Just the normal ones that come and go, they are going to come and go. It is just a cycle. The voles and mice and gophers, they seem to be a little rampant right now.

I: What do you think might be causing issues with things like that.

R: I don't know. Maybe not quite as hard of winters is all. You know, does not kill as many.

I: What would you say is the most valuable resource needed in farming?

R: Water, big fight here over water, big issue.

I: In recent years water is becoming more of a concern. We are hearing about the droughts throughout the Western United States. What concerns do you have as far as water availability?

R: Our state selling ours off because of the aquifer that is underneath. If you guys want to take this to another realm of what we do, go talk to a well driller. They are just as much involved in this as we are. They drill our wells. There is an old boy. He is passed away now. It was not that many years ago that he said he dropped a pit down one of his pipes and he went down to get it and he said the aquifer that is underneath us right now that we use. If you had a cup of water, we use that much. I am showing a half inch of that cup. That is what we use. And that is the rest of that water. That is what is underneath us and everybody is fighting over it; because they are out of water down-country. Water flows downhill, and our state in the past has sold our water off, and then it shorts us. Then they say we are in a drought when we are sitting on this abundant aquifer that is underneath us that we do need to take care. But it is here and it is here for us. But our state sells it off. So it is kind of crap. They go, oh, we need the money. They are paying us well. I don't care. You are going to run everybody here out of business.

I: Where do you get your water?

R: Most of ours comes from the canal. We used to have a deep well. We sold that one to a cousin and so all of our pumps right now are in the canal system.

I: As far as water rights, how would you describe water rights?

R: We have them. We have ours. There is a fight, where is it, someplace in California right now where people have old water rights and the state is taking their water away. Illegal as hell. If it happens too much around here and on a regular basis, people will get shot over it. Mark my word. I don't want to see it happen; but they will. They will get shot. You will get to see people fighting over water to the point where they will be shot. It is the important thing. You can have all the dirt you want in the world; but if you have not water you've got nothing. All you've got is dirt.

I: How much of your water allocation do you say that you use?

R: We use the majority of it. Some fields take less, some fields we use it all.

I: What does that depend on?

R: The year, how long the fall is, how soon we start, how soon we quit. It just depends whether or not we have a long summer or a short summer. This year it rained the entire month of May. We had the pumps on for two weeks in April and kept them off. We did not even water in May. But if we go long September/October, we will use it up then. If it starts snowing the end of September, we won't. It makes a difference.

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

R: No, not really.

I: Do you rely on bees for pollinators?

R: The corn, they will pollinate the corn. They say bees are going away; but we have a lot of bees. There are a lot of bees in the area. There are a lot of people that put hives out and then there are just a lot of natural bees here.

I: You haven't noticed any reduction in the bee population?

R: No, not really.

Have you implemented any conservation practices into your farming operation?

R: Such as, what do you mean?

Change watering practices maybe, or you mentioned not tilling quite so deeply?

R: Yes. We do. There is not much reason to water heavy in the daytime when it is 100 degrees. It is going to go away. When it turns off like that, if we are watered up, well, we will try to do most of ours at night so that it actually stays where it is supposed to go.

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: They have enhanced us. People don't understand. They don't understand actually where they come from and what they do. They just get on, oh, genetically modified it's a bad thing, you're screwing up our kids and blah, blah, blah...which is crap. Because the first GMO stuff was the Indians. Seven strains of grass made corn. You gotta mix 'em. That's genetically modified. If you can genetically modify something to produce a heavier crop with less viruses and using less pesticides it is a good crop. It is very arrogant for a first world country that supplies the world with food to tell other countries we are going to go all organic, no GMO, no pesticides, no nothing. Instead of growing crops to feed our country and part of the rest of the world, if not the rest of the world, we can't even feed our own country, very arrogant. I mean the little kid over in Africa is going I want a sandwich. I don't really care where it came from. I just want to eat. We

can supply him with food and it is healthy food. It is not loaded up with a bunch of crap that's going to kill him down the road. It is healthy food and safe food. We supply it, and they are trying to take that away from us to make us not produce what we can produce maximum. I think it is a good thing. They can go too far with it if they aren't put in check. It is like any other organization. They need to keep in check just like everybody does. As it stands right now, like the beet crops right over here. This is Round-Up Ready Beets. They plant 'em. They spray 'em. There are not weeds in that beet field. The beets get to grow. They use the water instead of the weeds. They grow bigger because there is no competition with the weeds. So they can produce more tons because of GMO. They modified the beet seed to not die with Roundup. Roundup kills weeds. It is not going to kill anything else. It is not going to hurt anybody. It is not in the product when it is finished. They have tested it and tested it and tested it. It is not there. It is strictly to keep the noxious weeds down, which take water, take part of your crop.

I: Do you use genetically engineered seeds?

R: We do on our corn. We don't on our hay; just because hay is hard enough to kill when you switch crops. If you have Roundup-Ready hay, you can't kill it to get it out of here to plant something else. So we deal with the weeds. If they start coming up and they are too heavy, we will cut and kill them when we cut, and then they won't come back on the next crop. They can't do that with beets or spuds or grain. They can't do that because when they cut it, it is dead. Hay keeps coming back; so we can do that ourselves on hay. Our corn is Roundup-Ready corn.

I: What pesticides or herbicides do you use on your farm?

R: We will use Roundup on the corn and that is about it. We don't use anything else as a general rule. A couple years ago we had a spider that was a microbe spider. They came into the corn and we had to spray for it; but they sprayed specifically for that spider to kill that spider, so whatever that crap was sprayed. I don't know what it was; but it was specific to that spider.

I: Do you spray for aphids sometimes?

R: You know I have in the past; but I don't get much results from it. I can cut and kill them just as easy as I can spray and kill them. They don't come on until we are fixing to cut anyway.

I: Do you consider aphids to be a big deal?

R: They can be a problem if they really go crazy; but if we see them and we are close to cutting, I will cut, cause it will kill them.

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

R: Mainly the political side of things, the legislation trying to regulate, overregulate what we do. We are pretty good at regulating ourselves; because if we screw our stuff up, we are not here next year. It is like the guys who have grazing rights on BLM. If they go out and they overgraze BLM, they are not going out next year. It is a desert. You have to manage it. BLM does a fair job; but... The guys who graze it know when to come off or else they are not going back next year. Most of those guys all have the same plots every year. They go back to the same areas every year so they take care of it. There was one year they needed to go out. They couldn't get out because the snow was too deep. They waited as long as they could. They took bulldozers and they made trails through the snow to get their cows out of there. The snow came off and within a week after the snow came off they pulled the cows because their time was up. They had grass up to their bellies and it stayed out there because they pulled the cows off. It got hot and the desert burned. They don't take into consideration the weather patterns that we have. The dairyman down in Jerome (I work with a lot of dairymen), they came and they implemented regulations on themselves, gave it to the State. It was twice what the state had already regulated. The state came back and said well if you're going to do this then you can do this, this, and this; which is just crap. I mean, they are willing to regulate themselves for their practices for everything that they do environmentally, to be good neighbors, whatever it is, for not contaminating the groundwater and everything else. The State will always come back and constantly put on something, so it makes you not want to implement. The dairymen got together. There are a lot of dairymen down there. They all got together and they said this is what we need to do to make what we do safe, right, and to keep the government off our back, keep the legislation off our back. We can do this ourselves. Then when they did, the government came back with well if you're going to do all of that then do this too; which is stupid. They covered 110% of everything that people were concerned with. Then they still came back with minute, stupid, nit-pick stuff that was just ridiculous.

I: Do you think this has changed in recent years?

R: Yes, within the last ten.

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

R: Lifestyle. I get to do what I want. I do. I do what I want. You have to do what you have to do when you do it. For us, it is like moving this hay. I don't mind moving this hay. I get this hay moved I can go fish if I want. My lifestyle, doing this. Your farm kind of dictates when you have to do certain things. Most people that do this regardless of what they raise, they like raising what they are raising. So it is not really work for them. It is just our lifestyle.

I: How concerned are you about climate change?

R: I am not. It is changing but I am sure the people that went through the last Ice Age. It is a cycle. You are going to have them. It is just Nature's way of cycling in, cycling out. Yes, we can add to it. We can make it come a little quicker. But as far as the practices that we do affecting it greatly, it is going to cycle in and cycle out.

I: As far as farming information, regulations, farm-related news, what sources do you use?

R: We get some magazines, some cattle magazines. Then the farm market report on the television.

I: You have mentioned regulatory agencies a little bit. Which ones have you been in contact with over the past five years?

R: USDA comes out every now and again and wants us to fill out what we have growing and how we work the ground. I am not very cooperative with them, just so you know.

I: How would you say that experience is? Positive or negative?

R: For me it is neither. I am kind of neutral on it. If the guy wants to come out and drive around and see what we are growing, fine. Go do it. I am not going to sit and waste my time telling. I have done it in the past. I have sat down with these guys and it is a half a day deal to answer the same three questions. I don't know why. But it is. The last time he came out I told him, I said, there it is go look. He goes well can't you just tell me what it is. I go no I don't have time. Go look. Well, how do you work your ground? I said the ground-working equipment is right over there. You can go write down what it is. That's what we use. So I make him do it himself. If he's the one getting paid to come out here and do this, he can go do it himself. There is no sense in me taking him by the hand and going half a day out of my day just to answer three questions over and over. They are very redundant as well. I mean it's ridiculous. It's not hard to come out here and go. Even in the fall you can come out here after that field is done and go they had beets in that last year. It is pretty obvious. They had beets in that. They had spuds in this. They had corn in that. They had whatever in that. They might come and say what do you plan to rotate next year and you can tell 'em. That's not a big deal. But we tell them every year what we have. Every year it's the same thing. Every year it's a half a day out of your, so I just go you know where the ground is go do it.

I: Have you had experience with any other regulation agencies?

R: No.

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. Me and my wife...and my daughter (she does not live there but she is there a lot).

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

R: I am conservative; but I am not conservative to the point I am all the way on the right. I think there are too many people that are hard right/hard left. Nobody gets nothing done. My way or no way. It is never my way or no way. Even here. I run this place. But the two guys that were just here that just left, they technically work for me; but they don't work for me. They work with me. They have good ideas. It is not just my way. You have to listen to them too. If the left does not listen to the right or vice versa, they never get anything done. It always has to be my way. I am conservative; but there are some left sides that I agree with. There are some right sides that I just think are stupid. Just because the right only wants to piss off the left. That's where I stand.

I: And what is your age?

R: 55

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

R: No. We are good.