

Ecosystem Services and Idaho's Farmers

Interview Twenty-Eight

I: All right, let's begin with a little bit of background information. Please tell us a little bit about how you got into the farming business.

R: Well, I grew up on a farm, so I have been around farming all my life. Then I attended what was then a local college, and went through that Ag program there. I got an Associate's in that, and uh, after that I took some Ag classes down in Provo. Then we got married and came back here. I farmed. I've been farming since, and I have attended. They had some Ag business classes at local university several years ago that I took. And that got me going a little better on computers you could say.

I: Keep you up on things?

R: Yeah

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

R: Well, I have been farming all my life, and then basically all my married years, 31 years.

I: And was your father the first generation here?

R: On this place, yes.

I: What do you grow?

R: Okay, well we grew potatoes, wheat and barley, our first probably 20 years. Then we switched over to growing alfalfa mostly, and grain, then renting out for the potatoes and beets.

I: And how many acres do you farm?

R: We own almost 1,000 acres, and we uh rent out probably 200 to 250 acres a year for potatoes and beets.

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

R: I don't think it's uh, there hasn't been any encroachment on us at all, really. I mean I have been, I have had people ask me if I have a corner or something that I would like to sell. So, I have had a little bit of interest I guess, and I did sell one 5 acre parcel to an individual for a house. So, it has taken a little bit, but I think it is making the ground more valuable. The area around here, the acres really haven't changed any, but when you get closer to the cities, I think it is creating a little more of a demand for farm ground.

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

R: Well, I will probably lease part of it, yeah. I am doing that now. We are incorporating that into our operation now, so, but there's no plans to sell.

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

R: Well, yeah we might pass it on to somebody, but right now it's just me, so, but I wouldn't sell it, but I might rent the whole thing out when I retire.

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

R: Um, you know it is fairly important. Yeah, I would like to see it, you know I developed it, so.

I: Right, when you started out some of the fields were not even in agriculture.

R: Right

I: So, it was quite an accomplishment then.

R: Yeah

I: So, I have no desire to change.

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

R: Well, I would say yes. We have gone to all center pivots which use a little bit less water than the wheel lines do. And uh, so I feel we have done that. We grow a lot of hay and that naturally reduces wind erosion because you leave the hay in for several years and you aren't working it out, so.

I: So, that helps keep the soil there?

R: Right, yeah

I: What about the corners? Do you do anything with the corners with your center pivots?

R: No, not too much. I mean we farm a few of them, but not all of them.

I: So, that's almost like a tiny habitat?

R: Yeah, something else ya know.

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

R: Um, we use zinc phosphate to control the mice. I am just trying to think of the commercial name for that, I can't think of it right now. We use Roundup on some fields. One of the fields we use Roundup Ready hay, so we use Roundup to control the weeds. Uh, that's about it I guess.

I: Is that working on your mice.

R: Um, it's helped.

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

R: Consult with a local representative of the fertilizer companies and see what is available. I do get strychnine from Pocatello for the gophers, but that's a restricted use pesticide, so.

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: Yeah, I mean like I say I grow Roundup Ready hay on one field, so uh. I think it is great technology they have, but there's a lot of misconceptions about it. Like they think that the Roundup Ready crops, uh, that we are putting a lot more chemical on. That's, the media makes it sound like you are dumping all of this Roundup on there, well, before there was Roundup Ready sugar beets, they sprayed them 4 or 5 times with twice as much chemical to control the weeds than they do with Roundup. With Roundup it is maybe twice. And it's, Roundup degrades very fast. It just takes a little bit of dirt on them, and it decomposes, so I mean. But the misconception that the media out and the whackos put out, it's uh, pretty misleading. There's a lot to say for, I mean you got to be careful about what you use, I mean if everybody used Roundup Ready stuff all the time, pretty soon the weeds would become Roundup resistant because, I mean that's how they developed the seed is that they sprayed it on a bunch, and the ones that survived the picked out the seeds from those. So, that's what you would do with the weeds eventually, but with technology, they will keep engineering more and more chemicals and stuff that will get the weeds. But I mean, you gotta stay ahead of the game.

I: Does using your Roundup Ready alfalfa change your farming very much?

R: No, it doesn't change it much.

I: Are you hoping for more years on the same yield?

R: Yeah, it might give us one more year on the stand of hay if it stays clean. It's hard to say, but right now it's almost a minus to have it because the public has got such a misconception about it that now they don't want to use Roundup Ready hay, you know. And, I have only sprayed mine every other year because you clean it up so good. All the weeds are just cleaned up so good that you don't have to treat it again. Otherwise, I might be treating every year. I'm using less chemical, and yet, the misconception is, ya know, it's not good for you, but uh, it's a big misconception. Basically, all it is is that they sped up, you might say, the natural process of plant selection. By doing the genetically modified things, they sped up, say ten years by doing that. Yeah it'll, it's safe. I mean there's no problem with it at all. It's a lot better.

I: Do you have concerns about being able to sell your hay that is Roundup Ready?

R: Oh uh, a little bit, but not too much. You just really got to let them know that. There are certain people that might not want it, but most of them, as long as you let them know what you got, then they work, you work with a broker and he sends the right person, so.

I: So, you are willing to tell the customers what you are selling them?

R: Oh yeah. Yeah, I mean you have to. And they test it, and they can tell sometimes if they have had the GMO, the (inaudible), sometime I guess, you know.

I: Have you used any other GMO seeds?

R: Um, well I grow wheat, and all of the new varieties, they are making them resistant to rust and all the diseases around so you don't have to use as many chemicals. But, kind of the same story. I mean, they are worried about some genetically modified things, and they got potatoes, I don't grow potatoes anymore, but they got potatoes that are resistant to the potato beetle, and you know there's some pretty powerful chemical that they put in the ground when they plant the spuds to kill the potato beetle. If they made the plant naturally to be poisonous to those bugs, I mean what, what do you say? Um, you know, the technology's great, but people are, there's a lot of misconceptions out there.

I: So, what is your overall opinion about GMO seeds?

R: Oh, it's a good thing, it is just trying to convince the, to keep the public aware of what is really getting bad for ya.

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: Um, not really. I mean there are good years and bad years. I remember as a kid being really cold, ya know, 30 below at the time, but we haven't had any winters like that, but I don't know. It felt like we had an early spring here, but then we got about a week of really cold weather after it warmed up again, so. It all comes back around, so.

I: Have you noticed any persistent changes in the first and last frost dates of the year?

R: Um, maybe just in, not much.

I: Any changes in precipitation?

R: Um, about the same. I mean we have had a few dry winters, but then we've gotten more rain in the spring the last few winters, so. The total moisture has been about the same.

I: So, do you see that as kind of a cycle?

R: Yeah, I mean you might get 2 or 3 years like dry, and then you get some wet, so I'm not. I haven't seen any definite changes or anything, so no.

I: So, is this something you are worried about?

R: No.

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, we are in kind of a drought. It has been fairly persistent, but we have had enough water every year, ya know, with the drought. So, how bad do you say the drought is? How bad can it be?

I: At least in this area, right?

R: Yeah

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

R: Yeah. Well, they uh, they threatened the 15% cutback in the spring if we didn't get enough moisture, so yeah there's definite concern. Uh, but it's not about water, it's just about money, so that's all.

I: If there was a 15 percent cut would that be across the board? Would everyone have to cut back by 15 percent? How does that work?

R: Well, I think we would have to cut the acres 15 percent. They did say to prove to you because the whole thing they are trying to do. I put in center pivots, they are probably saving 20 percent, but yet they would still want me to cut back 15 percent?

I: So, it would be everybody across the board?

R: They keep trying to cut the acres down. So, it is all about the money. I mean, these lawyers are all going on both ends of this big fight. The lawyers that are building the cabins up in Island Park talk about. I hate to tell you that, but it isn't about water anymore, it's just about money.

I: Where and how do you receive your water?

R: I get it from the deep wells here. It's ground, it's all ground water.

I: You don't have any canal water?

R: No, I don't have any canal.

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

R: Now, probably two-thirds, three-quarters. Like I said now I have wen to center pivots, I don't use near as much. My dad got the water rights in the fifties and sixties, and he was flood irrigating and that used a lot of water. So, we had to have a lot of water so we could irrigate. According to the water rights, I think the 15th of November, and I never irrigate that late, so I

mean, but the spring they were worried about people turning it on just a week or two early. They were like, no we can't have you turn it on early, so yeah.

I: So, is it easier for them to cut you off in November than?

R: Yeah, yeah, they should say, well, if you are going to start then we can move the stop date. I mean, there should have been a little bit of compromise, and some common sense used, but yeah.

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

R: No

I: Have you noticed any changes in bee populations around here recently?

R: No, I've got bees on the place, so they are just on the. They give us honey every year, so.

I: They put some hives on your farm?

R: Yeah. Yup, I've got a couple different hives, so.

I: Do they give you a little honey in exchange?

R: Yeah, I get two cases of honey every year, so.

I: Two cases?

R: Yeah, they like that hay. Well, we aren't growing seed, and they aren't the right kind of bees for pollinating hay anyway. They need the bees for alfalfa, but uh, I don't have fruit trees. They couldn't pollinate them anyway, so yeah. I've heard that the bee numbers are going down, and I don't know if that's just rumor or speculation or what.

I: Yeah, that is something being studied. So, we thought we should ask the farmers.

R: Yeah, most of the bees go to California to help pollinate the nut trees I believe, and they actually pay the people to bring the bees there. But here, around here, they just try to make honey, and they will ask you for permission to put them. They just ask me permission, and then give me honey every year.

I: Have you ever been stung?

R: No. Once maybe. I was just driving down on the four wheeler and had one hit me.

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

R: Um, I'm not concerned, no.

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

R: No. I mean you've got localized climate change you might say like right by a city, all the concrete, you've got some extra heat there. But, look at all this ground out here where we farm. Every time you drive by a pivot or a wheel line, you feel that cool air coming from that, and the crops growing, turning the carbon dioxide into oxygen. And where it was desert ground before, we're keeping it cooler than it was before.

I: So, you feel like your farm is contributing?

R: Yeah

I: Air conditioning?

R: Yeah, I mean this is all thinner ground, or uh, you can look at a corn field even back in the Midwest. Well, corn grows every day, and it is growing because of the fertilizer, but because it is growing so fast, it is turning that carbon dioxide into oxygen that much faster than it would just being, if it was just some grass out there or whatever ya know. Cause they got, everything is balanced out I mean. Yeah, there is more being put out by people and cars these days, but there is a lot more farm ground than there are cities in the United States, so.

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

R: Um, my kids I guess.

I: Do they add to your farm?

R: Yep, they help out quite a bit. So, uh, sunlight I guess. The sun is a natural resource. The biggest thing is water, and the second thing is the heat from the sun. I do worry about, you know, fertilizers and stuff, their availability ya know? The environmental idiots get, make it so they can't mine sulfur