

Ecosystem Services and Idaho's Farmers

Interview Twenty-Three

I: All right, let's begin with a little bit of background information. How you got into the farming business?

R: I guess I was born into it. My grandpa started. My dad farms, and so do I. I have lived here my whole life.

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

R: Probably close to sixty years, I think.

I: What do you grow?

R: Potatoes and grain

I: And how many acres do you farm?

R: About 1700, irrigated.

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

R: The only thing I can say that is affecting us is that there's new ground being developed, and there's a shortage of water. So, that's about it. There's kind of a water situation that might affect us if we don't get some snow, but that's not really urban expansion. It's just more agriculture, ya know, if new ground is being developed.

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

R: Not at this time, no.

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

R: Well, that's a question for my grandpa. It's up to him. It all depends on what his will says, and what he wants. So, I'm down the line from that decision making process, so we'll see what happens.

I: So, your grandfather is still farming?

R: Yeah, he's 86 years old. He was here a few minutes ago. You just missed him.

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

R: Very important.

I: Is that because it is part of your heritage?

R: Well, not only financial reasons but umm, when you do one thing your whole life you get an identity, and it kind of gets stuck in a rut. It's like anything else. If you're a football player that you're a football player. If you're a farmer you're a farmer, you know. A doctor's a doctor. Everybody has their place, and this is kind of our place.

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

R: Well, we did a conservation project a few years ago; we planted a row of trees, and uh, as far as conservation we try to leave soil loose so that it takes water to minimize run off. We try not to burn stubble anymore. We used to do that a lot, and it kind of caused us a little bit of problem. But as far as that goes, we rip, you know that machine over there opens up the ground pretty deep in the fall to take moisture in to eliminate spring runoff. As far as any other conservation, not really. Nothing I can think of off the top of my head.

I: So, conserving water has been the main focus?

R: Well, that not only conserves water, but around here, if we get a heavy snowfall it looks kind of flat, but you do get runoff from the desert which causes big washes. It'll flood out roads. Put trenches in your field. Things like that, so we try to minimize things like that as best we can.

I: So, you're preserving your soil too?

R: Yeah, we don't want the soil to move, and yeah. Exactly.

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

R: Umm, the only pesticides we really use are, I don't even remember the name anymore, but it's some kind of a treat on the potatoes that actually goes on the potato seed. We used to use one called Thymid that you used to put in the ground when you were planting. We don't use that anymore. All of our seed comes pretreated with a pesticide from the seed grower, and I don't think we apply any topical pesticides, you know, above ground unless we have a real problem with like potato beetles or aphids. Then we will spray some on with an airplane, and then which chemical that is depends on which bug you have. As far as herbicides, we used one called Discover for a while for wild oats. We use one called Colt for broadleaf weeds. And on the potatoes, we use like a Prow and a Sincore, which are on top. Those are both herbicides, and that's about, well we use another insecticide at grain harvest time called Strerocide. You mix it in with the grain as you put it in the bin to keep bugs out of your grain in storage. That's about the extent of it, as far as, herbicides and pesticides. We use a lot of Roundup, but other than that.

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: Well, since the crops around here that would be considered GMO are the sugar beets and the alfalfa because they are Roundup Ready, and I guess some corn, but we don't grow any of that. And uh, so I guess it hasn't, personally affected us other than all the bad press and the media about genetically modified wheat or corn or whatever, causes some people not to want to eat it. So, of course, if people aren't eating these products, the price goes down. So, other than that, I can't say that it has affected us too much. You know it is affecting us as much as it is affecting anybody else on a big scale. Like the global market, or the national market, where wheat, corn, things like that.

I: So, I know that Simplot is developing a new potato, and before that Monsanto had a GMO potato that was on the market. Have you ever used any GMO potato seed? Or might you use them in the future?

R: No, we have not. We don't grow potatoes for Simplot. We grow fresh pack Russet Burbanks, and that is all we have ever grown, and probably all we are ever going to grow, so we don't plan on growing any of those.

I: Okay, so what is your opinion of genetically engineered crops?

R: To be honest with you, if you were a farmer and if you understood what it takes to grow the amount of food that it takes to feed the world, you would understand that some genetically modified things are necessary. Like if you grow all organic and no GMOs, you are not going to be able to produce the food to feed people. I don't think you would; there would be a shortage. The reason these things have been modified is to benefit people, not to hurt people, but to be able to grow more food that is less, that is bug resistant, that is weed resistant, you know like the Roundup Ready sugar beets. That has saved so much hand labor in this area it is unbelievable. I'm not a scientist. I don't know if genetically modified foods actually hurt people, and maybe if you think about it, I understand that making a sugar beet Roundup Ready is much more genetically modified than breeding wheat together to produce a different type of wheat. But if you think about it, every single type of plant we eat and grow has been altered, so whether you consider that GMO or not, I don't know. But you have to breed plants to suit the needs of human beings. So, that's my opinion on it. Whether I think it's bad or good, I can't say.

I: Okay, so 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: Not really. I know people try a little bit harder to practice good farming practices to kind of conserve water, to conserve runoff and top soil because the wind blows here a lot. If you ever noticed, you see a cloud of dirt out here in the spring time. There are things you can do to minimize that, and people try. The weather has a lot to do with the environmental problems, like the dirt blowing and that, but as far as a massive change, probably not other than we are getting a little short on water, but who knows what the problem is there.

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: It varies all the time. We've had killing frosts in July, and then ya know, we have had frosts that will kill wheat in May. This May we didn't have any frost. We planted really early, and we were kind of worried about frost because it is critical when the frost comes on a wheat crop. We got through there, ya know, it was nice and rainy, no frost. It varies, it is always different, and never the same.

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

R: Yeah, when I was a kid there seemed to be a lot more snowfall, and I hear stories from my grandfather and my dad of the winters they had when they were young. You know, just massive winters. We really haven't had much winter quite a while here, yeah, so I would say there is less snowfall. Yeah.

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: No, uh, other than winter snowpack. That's the biggest problem. Of course we had a super wet May, and we had a super wet summer I think in 2008, but sometimes that happens. We had a lot of rainfall last fall that ruined a lot of grain, but uh, you know, I don't know if that's significant change or anything. I think it just happens. So, but that's what I have noticed.

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

R: Absolutely. That is a huge issue, in fact they are going through some litigation right now. There was a big meeting here awhile back, some growers down the valley, you know they run a little short and now it is a big issue. Yeah, we worry about that a lot.

I: Where and how do you receive your water?

R: Most of our water is ground-pumped. We have 240 acres that's right here behind this shop, that above ground, out of the canal system. So, other than that, it is all ground water.

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

R: I know that we own more ground for surface water rights than we use because we have taken some off of the canal. So, as far as, deep-water well, I don't know if we use as much as we can or not. I can't answer that. I know that we don't use all of the surface water that we could use.

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

R: Um, I don't know I think the earth has cycles, but I wouldn't say I am alarmed at climate change quite yet. No.

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 say that humans definitely have an impact on the environment, but whether or not I am going to blame it all on human activity, no I wouldn't say that.

I: So, would you say both human activity and the natural cycle?

R: Yeah, maybe a little bit of both.

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

R: I guess the most valuable natural resources is dirt and water, you know, and sunshine. Other than that, you know, we put our, the fertilizer is manmade, and I don't know what else would be a natural resource other than the dirt, the sun and the water.

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

R: Yeah, there's always that concern because you get some new nematode that has taken up a bunch of the soil over there by Blackfoot to where you can't raise potatoes anymore. I forget the name of it. It's a bad deal though, so yeah. New pests, new things like that, hell yeah they can really ruin your soil. Some guys up there, their soil is you know, you can't put potatoes in it anymore, and potatoes are a big crop.

I: So, and with your grain, are there any concerns?

R: Yeah, there is always new stuff. You know we have been battling striped rust for a few years, and that is kind depends on the weather. If you have hot dry weather, you don't seem to get that. Cool wet weather you get some of that, you know, where things could blow around in the air. You know late blight in potatoes, wet, cool weather brings that. Hot weather keeps it away, so there is always something that you have to control. Yeah.

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: Nope. We do everything on a rotation basis. So with, some fields are larger than others, so every year the amount of potatoes or the amount of wheat varies just depending on which field it lands on.

I: Okay, has pest management changed in recent years?

R: No. You know, we fumigate for ground bugs in the fall in potato ground, and then we treat for above ground bugs on seed pieces. It has been the same for quite some time. Nothing really different is going on.

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

R: Making money. It's uh, that's the problem is that sometimes you, it's a gamble. You put everything you got out there and sometimes you don't get anything back. So other than shortage of water, being able to have a decent market is the biggest problem. It fluctuates so much. For example, I think it was 2008, record high grain prices. I know some guys who sold grain for \$23 a bushel. Right now it's like \$5 a bushel. Spuds go from \$17 a bag to \$5, \$4 a bag. So you can see the big problem there. You know, you are losing money at \$4 wheat and \$5 potatoes.

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

R: No, they aren't new. This has been going on forever.

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

R: Well, if you look around, I'm the only guy here. There's nobody else here bothering me. You know, I do my work, I don't wait in line for anything. I don't wait in traffic, and that's kind of nice.

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

R: Umm, farm specific news? Basically, work of mouth. You know, I don't really uh look at any websites or watch any channels that are farming specific. You know, so farming news is just kind of what floats around.

I: Alright, what about regulations?

R: Usually when there's new regulations, it usually has to do with water or chemical application, or they rebrand chemicals, and so representatives from fertilizer companies, guys we buy from- we call them field men, they keep us up to date on all that stuff. So, you know, we have meetings every year in the winter time. The fertilizer companies and grain companies, you go to these meetings and hash out new things, you know, new products, new regulations. So, that is kind of how we learn about those things.

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? None. You know that would be something that goes to the head honcho, and he deals with that. So I don't personally, no. I have no contact with those guys.

I: Have you heard about your family having to deal with these agencies?

R: Yeah, he complains about it once in a while. There's a lot of surveys, a lot of information gathering that goes on, and basically there's just a fear of more regulation that will, kind of, that's expensive, and it kind of impedes your progress a little bit.

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

R: No, there isn't. Leave us alone mostly, you know, because there's a way to do it. We know how to do it. If you, if a farmer goes out to plant his crop, he isn't trying to do a crappy job. He's trying to do the best job he can, and he knows how to do that. Basically, when you impose new regulations and all this other stuff that makes, you know it's expensive and a farmer has to abide by stuff that isn't necessarily what he wants to do for his benefit. You know, when you're working for yourself, you are doing the best you can do. And when you know, you are being forced to do things that you wouldn't normally do, it's more of a hindrance. So, basically, I understand you have to protect the environment, but you know, a farmer isn't going to wreck the environment. The environment is what he needs to grow his crops. So, we aren't going to damage our soil. We aren't going to damage things on purpose. You know, we are going to do the best we can every day. So, mostly stay out of our way and we will be fine.

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

R: Yeah, particularly for cattle ranchers, there's a lot of problems with, let's just say. Have you ever heard of Weston watersheds trying to keep cattle off of range land, you know. That's a problem. You know, environmental causes, but you know there's a lot of people that don't like GMOs. People hate GMOs. People don't like pesticides. People don't like cattle on range land or sheep on range land, and yeah, that's a problem because cattle need a place to graze if you want to eat a hamburger you better have a place for cattle to fatten up. So, I guess that is my answer to that.

I: Are there any local organization that you feel could help you?

R: Not really. No. They formed one called United Potato Growers of Idaho, it's been probably 10 years ago at least. And that was to try to limit the acreage. All the farmers got together, and tried to limit the amount of potatoes grown, and it might have worked for a little while, but it sure isn't working now.

I: So, was that in an effort for higher potato prices?

R: Yeah, and prices are down, so somethings not working out.

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

R: Absolutely not.

I: Okay, would you ever be interested in using drones?

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: 3 more people

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

R: I would say I am an Independent. I think both sides have good ideas. For instance, I will listen to Rush Limbaugh on the radio, but every Friday night I watch Bill Maher. So, does that tell you anything? I listen to both sides. I think it is ridiculous though, politicians are out of control. They need to be reined in a little bit. They are a bad example if you ask me.

I: And what is your age?

R: 36

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

Umm, not really other than it is an honest, you know most farmers are pretty honest. They are doing their best. People need to appreciate farmers a little bit more I think. You know, it is pretty easy to go down to the restaurant and get what you want without really understanding the amount of raw energy and effort it takes to produce what you are eating. You know, if you take a simple Big Mac, do you understand how long it takes to fatten that steer, where you are getting that beef, and the amount of diesel and horsepower and energy it takes to produce the wheat and the vegetables that all go into that. It's really amazing actually. There's a lot, a tremendous amount of effort to produce the crops, and people need to realize that it's not easy.

I: Yeah, it all has to come from somewhere.

R: Yeah, it does. I mean if everybody had to spend about a month raising some of these crops in the middle of the summer, they would understand. They would appreciate it a little more. Other than that, you know, it's just like anything else, you kind of take it for granted, but when you see where it really comes from it's pretty impressive.

I: Okay, is there anything else?

R: No, that's all.

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.