

Ecosystem Services and Idaho's Farmers

Interview Twenty

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: It's just one thing that I. I have a partner in it, so it's not just me, and we both have full time jobs. And uh, we have lots of little kids that we thought we could, that would need things to do. And so, we decided to go into farming because that's something they could do at a young age, and hopefully earn some money that way. So, that's the main reason. That's how I got started.

I: Putting them to work?

R: Yep, putting them to work.

I: Did you grow up on a farm?

R: A small one. My dad was a hobby farmer. We had a pretty large garden, but every day after school that's what we did. We went out and worked outside, and here in Aberdeen. Live in town and it's small, I think 1/8th of an acre lot, and there's not a lot for my kids to do, and this gives them the opportunity to learn how to work.

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

R: We have been going for about five years now.

I: What do you grow?

R: Um, right now we grow hay. Last year it was wheat, and then the two years before that we rented it out, and then the year before that we had wheat and then hay. So, I guess this is our sixth operating cycle.

I: And how many acres do you farm?

R: Uh, this year we are renting 65 additional acres, so that would be about 110 total.

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

R: Well the only one is, is that I did well an acre to my partner so that he could build a house. So, that's really the only urban expansion we've felt, but that was self-imposed. So, we are okay with that one.

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

R: No. We might rent it out in a couple years, five or six years, but just as part of the crop rotation. But to sell it, no.

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

R: Uh, I'm hoping for retirement. We will rent it out, and have farmers pay us to pay for ground, for rent.

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

R: For us, I think it would be important. Very important, but I guess at the same time, you know I am a banker, so if I were able to sell it you know for development of houses and get quite a bit of money, I wouldn't say no to it. But I don't see that happening here.

I: Yeah

R: But if the offer came to where I could make some good money I would do it.

I: Do you think your kids will want to pick up the farm one day?

R: Um maybe. There's a couple that have shown a little bit of interest, but they are all still kind of young. They haven't really done the work on it. Um, but I think eventually there'll be one or two. And I mean right now there are 15 kids between the two families, so hopefully one of them will pick it up.

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

R: Um, I guess the only thing is that we have a big ditch that goes through our property, and we've put in an underground mainline. So, there's not the leakage and things like that.

I: Okay, anything else?

R: Um, no that's about it.

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

R: I know uh, well actually, herbicides we've used Milestone to kill the thistle. We've used Roundup because we have Roundup Ready hay, and that's been very beneficial. Uh pesticides, we really haven't done any yet. Thankfully we haven't needed to.

I: You haven't had a problem with?

R: Not yet, but they are telling us that in the hay we are going to have a problem with aphids. So, I'm hoping they're wrong.

I: Good hope.

R: Yeah, exactly.

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

R: A lot of it is, is we consult with other farmers, just to see what they're doing, or with our fertilizer rep. Um, Simplot issues what we use. Just kind of, if there's a need then we are going to use them if something is damaging the crop.

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, I know for us we had hay before. It had been in there for a long time and it wasn't Roundup Ready. And so, I mean the cost of it and everything was pretty expensive. Now with the Roundup Ready it's been nice. You can just spray the Roundup. It kills everything except the alfalfa, and it makes a lot cleaner product.

I: How was it expensive before? Without the Roundup Ready?

R: Well, we didn't use a whole lot of stuff before. Um but, I know of other people that have. Like there's certain, different herbicides you would have to use at different times, and now with Roundup it's easy. You just spray Roundup and it kills everything except the hay. I mean it's been nice, and Roundup is fairly cheap right now.

I: Did you have a problem with weeds before?

R: Thistle, we had problem with thistles spreading, and of course we get all of it through the canal. So, there's a whole bunch of seeds that go in there, and around our pond right now there's a whole bunch of thistle around. So, when they seed out it goes into our water that goes right into our pump. So that's the biggest problem that we've had is thistle, a lot of thistle. We've got probably three different varieties of thistle on our property. So, it's been a pest.

I: Thistles are awful.

R: Yeah, I hate them. I hate 'em. Thankfully, we've been able to clean it up a lot this year.

I: Overall, do you think the GE seeds give you a better bottom line?

R: I think so. I mean, I think so. I don't know of any health risks that it causes. The only side that I see is that it has been very positive.

I: What is your opinion of genetically engineered crops?

R: Well, I think it's uh, I think it's positive you know. As a banker I've, I give loans to a lot of farmers. They talk to me, you know, about like the Roundup Ready beets. You know there's no way they could go back to conventional farming. It's just too expensive, too labor intensive. Um, so it really has made farming more efficient and also more cost effective. So, I think it's a good thing.

I: Turning now to the subject of environmental change, have you noticed any changes in the environmental conditions in your area that seem beyond normal variation from year to year?

R: Um, no. Nothing I can think of.

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: Well, I mean this year is an unusual year. I mean we didn't get as much snow as we normally do so growth came fairly early in March. End of February is when we got started. Um but, I think it's an unusual year. Um so, if anything it's gotten, it's about the same. Our experience has been about the same.

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

R: Well, you still get the coldness. I mean it's still really cold and freezing, but uh for some reason last year we didn't get the snowpack. When was it? Maybe four years before that, we didn't get much snowpack either but we got rain, a lot of rain. And then uh, you know. I mean it depend on who you talk to. If you talk to the old timers, they will tell you about the days when snow was up to the telephone poles and you would have to dig tunnels. So, I mean from then it looks like it has changed. Um but what's the cause, I don't know.

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 any, well I mean I haven't looked at the history of precipitation every year in this area, but it seems like it's been more. Um like last year, we got two weeks full of rain right there in grain harvest, which didn't make anybody happy. Uh and this year, we had a wetter. When did it rain? Uh, May, beginning of June it rained. So I mean, is that abnormal? I don't know. I mean we've only been doing it for 4 or 5 years, so I don't think so.

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

R: I think our rights our pretty good because it is through the canal company, and so their water rights go pretty far back. Um, but I mean that's always a concern. I mean if we don't have water, we can't grow anything. And uh, you know if we don't get the snowpack, we don't get water. So there's some concern, but I wouldn't say I stress over it or are worried about it.

I: So, do you use all surface water?

R: Yeah

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

R: Uh, it varies from year to year. When we first started farming we didn't use all of it. Um, when was it? 2012 I think is when we were allocated less, and we used more. We had it rented out then. This year, we will probably use it all.

I: Do you have to pay extra if you use more?

R: Uh we had it rented to John Doe, so we did have to pay him to use it, but he's the one who was maintaining our ground, so.

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

R: We don't place bees on our property to do it, but I mean bees do pollinate so we do want them around.

I: Has anyone else put hives on your property?

R: No

I: Yeah, I know that some people have had honey farmers put hives on their property.

R: Hey, if someone is willing I wouldn't mind them putting it on. I'll take honey. Honey's good.

I: If so, have you noticed any changes in bee populations around here recently?

R: No. I mean I haven't watched or observed, but not really.

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

R: I'm not. 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 don't think so, no.

I: Do you think it is part of some natural cycle?

R: I just think it's a course. I mean there's a natural flow of things. I mean everything changes, so it's just a natural change.

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

R: Natural resource? Well, I would say you have to have good dirt. That would be the next most important thing after water I would say.

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

R: I wouldn't say that's a major concern. You do the crop rotations. You put fertilizers on to help improve the quality of the soil. Um, you know, so I'm not too concerned.

I: Are there any other resources you can think of that contribute to your farm?

R: Um, natural? Rocks. No, I don't think so.

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? You mentioned the crop rotation. Is that something you planned on?

R: Yeah, it's something we planned on. The alfalfa had been in for about 9 years. The people before us didn't work it very much, and so it was time for a change. So, then we rent it out for potatoes and beets. Um, we had a big gopher problem, so potatoes and beets kind of help clear that up. Um, and then we always intended on going back to alfalfa. It's just we had to go through the rotation.

I: How does the rotation help with the gophers?

R: Well, thee, from what I understand, the potato farmers, you know it plow it up so the gophers don't have anything to eat during the winter. So, that's a big plus. The other thing too is from what I understand, potato farmers when they plant potatoes they put fumigants and stuff like that in. That will actually kill gophers. And so, that helped out quite a bit. And then of course, they plowed it up again in preparation for beets, and then after beets it was plowed up again for wheat. So, where the alfalfa was kept in for nine year, it was a breeding ground for gophers because they always have food.

I: Yeah, and the tunnels aren't interrupted.

R: Exactly, yeah. That's exactly right.

I: Alright, what about when you plant or harvest your crops? Has that changed at all?

R: No

I: Have you changed how you manage pests?

R: Not really. Not really, I mean we just, right now we used traps, and that's mainly what we're using now and crop rotation.

I: Have you had any problems with mice?

R: This year thankfully we haven't. I mean we didn't have alfalfa, well we did have. We planted our new seeding last fall. Um but we, our fields have been pretty good. Thankfully.

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

R: Um well right now just based on where I am farming, it is the equipment. Working equipment, my swather has broke down a couple times. So, that's the one on my mind. That has been frustrating.

I: And expensive?

R: Yeah, and expensive. The other one is uh, making sure we have constant water flow. Our ditch runs through where some cows graze, and so they break down the ditch and the water leaks over. So, that's caused some problems because water has been short, a couple times. So, those are probably the ones that come to mind.

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

R: Uh, no I don't think so. Again, it's only a five-year period so it's about the same.

I: So, you said you put a pipe in to use instead of some of the ditch area?

R: Yeah, this is ours. The one I was talking about, and once we did that I mean it made a huge improvement because we had gophers breaking down our ditches and they were leaking. It actually flooded our neighbor's septic tanks so we had to pay for it to get fixed. Um, and then of course it just reduces the water that goes through. But now that we've put that in it's so much better. We don't have the leakage problems, but the one I was talking about now is the ground we're renting. Um, that's where the cows are walking across. So, it's the guy's property and we can't tell him don't put your cows there.

I: Right, and whereas you are renting, you probably don't want to invest a bunch of money?

R: Exactly. Exactly. We have talked to the owner about doing it and he said as long as you're renting it, I'm not going to.

I: So, you don't want to pay for it, right?

R: Yeah, exactly. It's not my ground.

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

R: The favorite thing I like is just being outside, working. I mean I have a desk job, and I use my brain a lot so by the time I'm done with work I'm done. And so it's nice to just get out and work and it's kind of therapeutic to be outside. I mean for the most part the temperatures not too hot. It's not very humid. So it's just enjoyable to get out.

I: To work with the land a little bit?

R: Uh huh. Oh yeah.

I: And you are probably out there pretty late in the evenings.

R: Yeah, in the evenings so we don't get the afternoon heat, so.

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

R: A lot of it is just from other farmers. And also like I said, the representatives we have helping use, like the fertilizer people. Um, that's where the majority of information comes from, and also I'm a loan officer, so I visit with other farmers in the area. So, it's basically just word of mouth. Weather, I mean I do have a couple apps on my phone to kind of give me a forecast of where the weather is, but that's just about it.

I: What about regulations?

R: Regulations, um mainly I would say the fertilizer company knows which chemicals we can and can't use. And um, word of mouth-farmers. If there's a regulation that comes down that could affect all of us, than usually there are some that have delved into it a lot more than others. So, we just hope that they share the right information.

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

R: We've used FSA a couple times, just to, mainly for the CRP.

I: What is the CRP?

R: Crop Rotation Program. Something like that. It's where you can't, you don't plant a crop in certain acres and the pay you not to do it. So, that kind of thing.

I: Okay, any other agencies?

R: Um, I mean the USDA is affiliated with them pretty tightly so the USDA probably. That's about it. Regulatory anyway.

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

R: Uh, Okay. I mean they're government so they are always slow. You know they have their own time-table, and uh, sometimes depending on who you talk to, the information is different depending on who you talk to. So, I mean it hasn't been bad, it's just, it's expected. If you're working with the government just expect it to take three times as long.

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

R: Well, grants are always nice. I mean there's subsidies, but I know that they kind of changed the farm plan, The Farm Bill. So, the subsidies and the payments are different than what they were before, and so I guess the information about that would be handy to have. First, it is the small guys that don't have people looking out for their welfare as much because we don't have the acres, but that would probably be the biggest thing.

I: Just some more communication?

R: Uh huh.

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

R: Um, I know every once in a while they have special, like last year they had the Disaster Recovery Grant or loan or something like that. You know it would be nice to have more information when they do have those special events, I guess you could say. Um, clarify the purpose and kind of the terms and how you get it. That would be helpful. More reach out from them rather than us having to go to them all the time.

I: What about local coops or other various organizations?

R: Um, we don't use them very much. So, I don't know. I don't know what they would be able to do.

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

R: Nope. I can't afford those things.

I: Would you be interested in using them in the future?

R: I guess if they're not as expensive. If it is cost effective to do it, yeah.

I: Maybe as the technology, you know the longer it's out, the cheaper it gets.

R: Yeah, that's exactly right. Yes.

I: How do you think they would benefit your practices?

R: Um, well a lot of it, a lot of things I've heard coming up is aerial application. Rather than having pilots fly, they have drones that could actually apply the fertilizer. Also uh, more efficiency in water usage. Different soils soak in the water differently and retain it differently, and so you could use the drones to kind of identify areas that need watering and those that don't. Um you know those sort of things.

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: There is eight of us.

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

R: Conservative

I: And what is your age?

R: I am thirty-four.

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

R: Somehow get rid of the mosquitoes would be nice.

I: I think we all would have to agree with that.

R: Way too many mosquitoes.

I: Maybe that's something that the state or local government could deal with.

R: The local could do. Yeah, they used to go around spraying. I haven't seen any this year.

I: They've been in my yard like twice this week.

R: Really?

I: My next door neighbor calls them.

R: So that's what we need to do. We need to call and bug and pester 'em.

I: Yeah if you give them permission to go on your place they will do it.

R: Yeah we get, right around eight o'clock if we are moving lines or whatever, man we're just swarmed with them. It's nasty. So, yeah that would be a big plus if they could come out and remove, maybe swamp beds or something like that. That would be nice. It would make farming a lot more enjoyable.

I: Is there anything else?

R: I don't think so.