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DTN / Progressive Farmer

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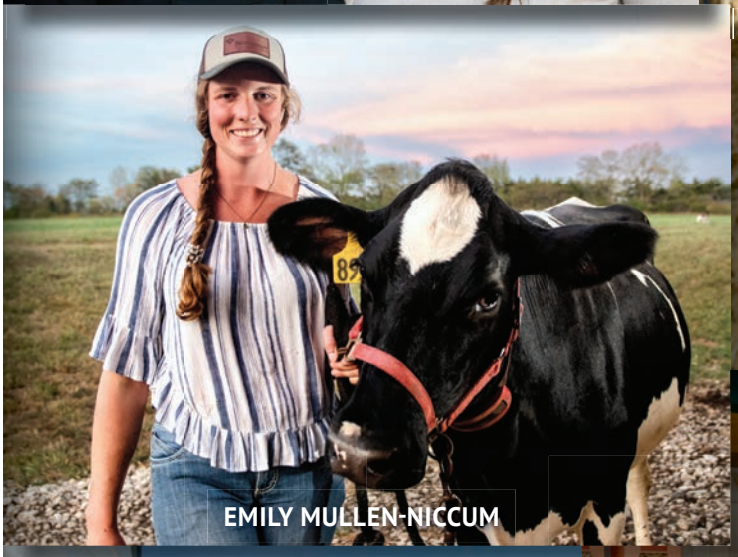
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TANNER HENTO


GRACE LUNSKI
ANNIE GORDER
MOLLIE FICOCELLO

JOEL REICHENBERGER

JANUARY 2025

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ON THE COVER

Ben Neale is building a better community through his volunteer and nonprofit efforts, as well as Light Hill Meats.

Congratulations to the 15th class of America's Best Young Farmers and Ranchers.

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2025 AMERICA'S BEST YOUNG FARMERS AND RANCHERS

IN EVERY ISSUE

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WE'D LIKE TO MENTION

Gregg Hillyer
Editor In Chief

Email Gregg Hillyer, **gregg.hillyer@dtn.com**

Next-Generation Salute

This issue congratulates and profiles our newest class of America's Best Young Farmers and Ranchers (ABYFR). Now in its 15th year, the program recognizes exceptional under-40-year-olds who have chosen agriculture as their career and way of life. Nominations are judged on the operations' overall business plan as well as the farmers' involvement in the community and the ag industry.

In November, we brought together the honorees in San Antonio, Texas, at the historic Menger Hotel, a few steps away from The Alamo. There, they met each other for the first time and participated in a workshop led by Family Business Matters columnist Lance Woodbury. It focused on multiple topics such as managing strategic performance, guiding principles of a family business, dealing with conflict, peer networks and more. They also heard from 2014 ABYFR alum Jeremy Jack on the lessons he's learned over the past 10 years as CEO/COO of the Silent Shade Planting Co., in Belzoni, Mississippi. And, the group learned the latest commodity markets outlook from DTN Lead Analyst Rhett Montgomery.

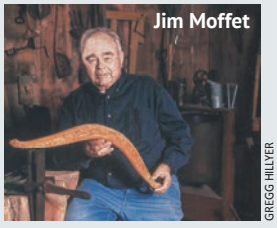
I'm always amazed at how quickly everyone begins to feel comfortable around one another as they share their farming experiences, challenges and personal lives. They arrive as strangers and, two days later, leave as lifelong friends.

One thing honorees persistently have in common is a passion for farming and family, and an entrepreneurial spirit to drive profitability and long-term success. Each may take a different path, but all desire to leave a legacy for the generations that follow. You'll learn what paths the 2025 ABYFR class is taking starting on page 16.

We're already seeking nominations for our 2026 class. If you know someone (you can nominate yourself or family member) or would like more information, contact Senior Editor Dan Miller at **dan.miller@dtn.com**. ///

REMEMBERING THE TOOL MAN

When Jim Moffet opened the door to the building where he and his wife, Phyllis, kept their collection, I was as giddy as a young boy who had been given the keys to the candy shop. Inside was a lifetime of antique country store items, kitchen collectibles and farm tools gathered over the years at swap meets, antique stores, junk piles, farm auctions, flea markets and who knows where else.


Jim Moffet
GREGG HILLYER

Like most collectors, the Moffets accumulated a little bit of everything that provided a glimpse of country life at the turn of the 20th century. Each item is an ingenious piece of simplicity, ingenuity and engineering—necessary everyday tools and devices designed to make farm life just a bit easier and the workload a little lighter.

Jim immediately started quizzing me as I scanned the meticulously grouped and displayed pieces. With a twinkle in his eye and a slight grin, he would pick up an item and ask, "Do you know what this is?" I come from a family of antique lovers and have spent time looking at odd contraptions and doohickeys, but I was no match for someone with Jim's knowledge.

From that first encounter on their Modesto, Illinois, farm nearly 20 years ago, the Moffets have been sharing their love and expertise of old tools. Wanting no credit or fanfare, you have unknowingly been enjoying their collection in *Progressive Farmer*'s "Tools From the Past." Jim also was the one who identified many of the "mystery tools" from photos readers would send to us for identification.

Sadly, Jim passed away in October at the age of 95. Fortunately, we still have more of the couple's collection to share. Nothing would please Jim more. We extend our deepest sympathies to Phyllis and her family.

Gregg Hillyer
EDITOR IN CHIEF

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MODERN AG ALLIANCE

Choose the Right Entity For Your Farm Operation

With all the succession planning and farm transfers going on before the expiration of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 on Dec. 31, 2025, one of the most common questions is this: What type of entity should I be?

One factor to consider is that there are entity restrictions on Farm Service Agency (FSA) payments. The House and Senate draft versions of the farm bill both ease these restrictions. I'm hopeful the final version of the farm bill—which hadn't been passed at the time of this writing—will either eliminate or ease the entity restrictions. This would allow farms to use LLCs and/or S corporations without fear of losing FSA payments.

There are many entity types, but the most common in agriculture are sole proprietor, single-member LLC (SMLLC), multimember LLC (LLC), general partnership (GP), S corp and C corp. So, what is the right type for you?

➤ **Sole Proprietor/SMLLC.** Sole proprietors and SMLLCs report income and expense on the taxpayer's Schedule F (Form 1040). They allow a great deal of flexibility while letting the taxpayer add complexity later. I prefer SMLLCs, but if taxpayers understand the risks and have sufficient liability insurance, they can go with sole proprietor.

➤ **Multimember LLCs.** Many agricultural businesses, such as input suppliers, ethanol plants and processors, use the LLC structure because of its flexibility. On the producer side, we typically see LLCs for land holding and farm operations. When used to hold land, it provides a couple of benefits: asset protections and bolstering the self-rental agreement. Looking at the operations side, the LLC provides liability protection while opening up a few succession options. I've previously written about profit interests, an option with the LLC. For both land and operations, the LLC allows discounted valuation for purchasing or gifting. I will caution readers that you do have to manage the LLC more closely. Basis limitations and negative capital account issues can creep up in LLCs if you are not careful.

➤ **General Partnership.** GPs are informal partnerships and are currently used due to FSA payment limitations. One of the biggest issues with GPs is that there are no liability protections. That is why most people own the GP through SMLLCs. However, this adds unneeded complexity.

➤ **S Corporation.** People typically set up S corps to limit self-employment tax (SE tax). An owner of the S corp must get paid reasonable wages. Thereafter, S corp pass-through income is not subject to SE tax. This can provide great savings to the owners. Another tax benefit is when the S corp interest is sold, the owners get capital gain treatment. However, the tax savings come at a hefty price. Distributions from the S corp must be proportional, and you can't distribute assets out of an S corp without incurring tax. The reason I shy away from the S corp is that with a little planning, the LLC can accomplish most of the same benefits while providing much more flexibility.

➤ **C Corporation.** Earlier this year, the IRS gave agricultural C corps the death blow. C corps are not allowed to take advantage of 199A. As a result, almost all my producer clients have switched to an S corp.

This is a very brief look at entities. My advice is to speak with a CPA/attorney who understands your situation. Start off basic and work your way into complexity. ///

Rod Mauszycki

DTN Tax Columnist Rod Mauszycki, J.D., MBT, is a tax principal with CLA (CliftonLarsonAllen) in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

➤ Read Rod's "Ask the Taxman" column at **ABOUT.DTNPF.COM/TAX**

➤ You may email Rod at **taxman@dtn.com**

TOOLS FROM THE PAST

There's something fishy about this tool. ***What is it?***

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➤ *A recent episode explores trends in farmland prices with Senior Farm Business Editor Katie Dehlinger. While some states are still seeing strong prices, other areas are seeing bids below preauction expectations. The podcast explains what's behind it and why today's land market differs from the 1980s.*

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UPCOMING WEBINARS

Jan. 10: WASDE Report: Join DTN Lead Analyst Rhett Montgomery as he provides insights and commentary on the latest world supply and demand estimates and what the numbers mean for commodity prices.

BLOGS & COLUMNS

SORT & CULL

Cattle industry insights and market viewpoints

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Livestock Analyst
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PRODUCTION BLOG

Agronomic information to optimize yield and profits

➤ **Pamela Smith**
Senior Crops Editor
@PamSmithDTN

TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

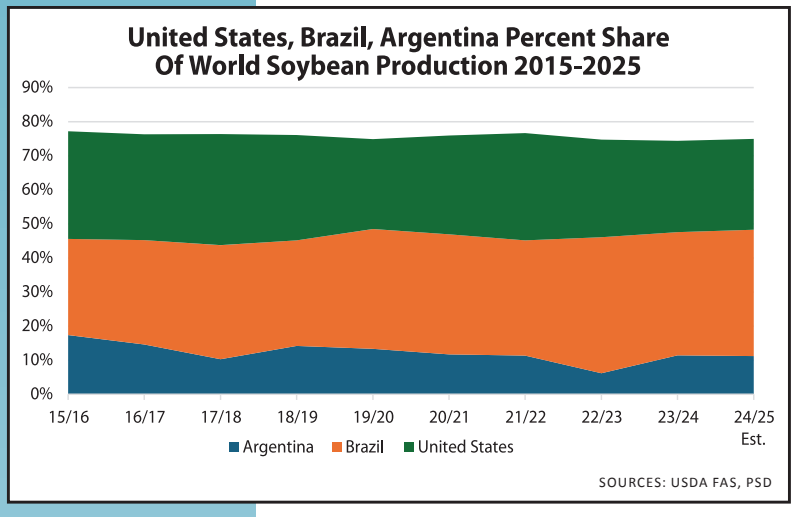
In-depth commodity market analysis and perspective

➤ **Rhett Montgomery**
Lead Analyst
@R_D_Montgomery

FIRST LOOK
INSIDE THE MARKET

Market Turns Attention From U.S. To South American Production

First, season's greetings from DTN. I hope all our readers had a wonderful and hopefully relatively restful holiday season. I say restful because for those tuned in to the ag markets, the dance card is full for the next few months as we roll into 2025. At the time of writing this, U.S. harvest is complete and currently estimated as the third-largest corn crop on record and the second-largest soybean crop. Much speculation has now gone into whether USDA has printed the highs on production estimates. And, right on queue, the "World Agricultural Supply and Demand Estimates" (WASDE) report will arrive from USDA on Jan. 10 to give traders a huge insight into 2024 production and to set the stage for 2025.



USDA does not adjust U.S. production estimates in the December WASDE, so traders and analysts alike have had to wait since the November release for updated information from USDA on 2024 production for corn and soybeans. The January issue also stands as the final time USDA will update the 2024 yield estimates. But, keep in mind the government can and will continue to update final production for 2024, so the "final" label on this report tends to be misleading. Looking back through the past 20 years of January WASDEs, the results are split 50/50 on whether production was increased or decreased in the New Year estimate. The adage of "small crops get smaller" is not necessarily accurate when one digs into the data, at least in the past 20 years. In fact, isolating years where USDA cut production in November, subsequent revisions in the January figures are similarly split about 60/40 in favor of a further reduction. But, it is a far cry from a certainty one will occur. Even so, using averages of January adjustments for these years still left me with between the fourth- and second-largest corn crop on record and a top-three soybean crop.

So, U.S. production estimates for 2024 are likely accurate going into 2025. What is yet to be determined is South American crops, which will enter key growing periods in January and February, making weather an all-important factor, especially in regard to Brazilian soybeans. At the time of writing in mid-November, Brazilian corn is estimated at a record by both USDA and the Brazilian National Supply Co. (CONAB). Meanwhile, Brazilian corn is estimated as the second-largest production on record, and Argentinian corn is slated to increase 2% year over year from 2024 production. Directly tied to Brazilian production is the U.S. export program, which stands to gain or lose business March through August, depending on how Brazil production fares. The two countries are currently slated to supply 85% of total world soybean exports and 56% of total world corn exports. Add Argentina to the latter, and the share jumps to 75% between the three countries.

The balance of the 2025 crop year is likely to be a road full of interesting sights and sounds, some bumps and likely some twists and turns. Disregarding China, potentially 20% of world corn production and more than 50% of world soybean production will be determined by Brazil and Argentina largely over the next three to four months. With U.S. production figures at least partially in the rearview mirror, these supplies undoubtedly will serve as the road map for what to expect in the balance of 2025. ///

Rhett Montgomery
Lead Analyst
➤ Read Rhett's blog at **ABOUT.DTNPF.COM/MARKETS**

➤ You may email Rhett at **rhett.montgomery@dtn.com**

A Year To Remember But Not Repeat

GETTY IMAGES

Typically, I like to write something motivational and uplifting in my January column, but as I reflect on 2024, all I hear is a chorus from my childhood: "Ding-dong, the witch is dead! Which old witch? The wicked witch. Ding-dong the wicked witch is dead!"

I see myself celebrating the end of 2024 like a Munchkin from the land of Oz, when Dorothy's house landed on the Wicked Witch of the East. I want to sing and dance, and let the world know that 2024's oppressive reign is done.

Personally, 2024 will always represent a tough season of my life. After navigating the uncertainties of my husband's job hunt, my father spent nearly a month in the hospital following a major medical emergency.

Even though there's much to be grateful for, I never want to relive this year. I spent too much time with stress, anxiety and grief. Too many major elements of my life were outside of my control, and I absolutely hated it.

I'm sure there are many row-crop farmers who share my feelings about 2024.

USDA's Economic Research Service is forecasting net farm income at $140.7 billion, which is about $6 billion less than 2023. Overall, that's better than the agency forecast at the beginning of the growing season, but it largely reflects the benefits of improved prices paid for livestock and animal products.

Total crop receipts for the year are forecast to decline $25 billion from 2023, with corn receipts falling $16.6 billion and soybeans $6.9 billion. The kicker is that the total volume of sales was up. The decline was totally due to prices. It was completely out of farmers' control.

Carrie Litkowski, a senior economist at ERS, who oversees the farm income data series, says even though farm incomes are declining, the average farm balance sheet is strengthening, because farmland values continue to rise, lifting the value of farm assets at a faster rate than debt can expand.

USDA's data shows average working capital levels fell by nearly 7% year over year, so more farmers are likely to turn to loans in 2025.

"The balance sheet is long term," Litkowski cautions. "It reflects long-term expectations or conditions within the farm sector, while the income statement is more of a short-term, year-to-year outlook."

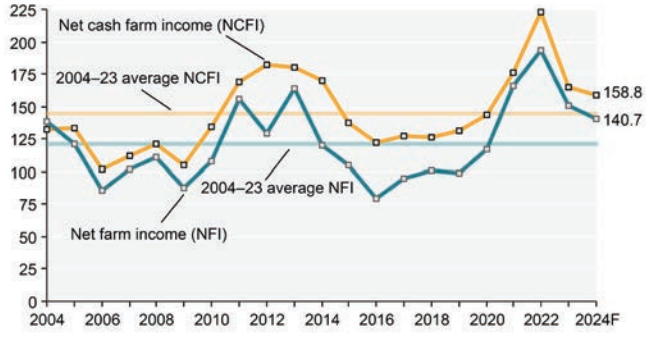
Row-crop producers know the year-to-year outlook doesn't get much better in this part of the cycle, and it's a matter of time until balance sheets start cracking under the pressure of low profitability. Grain surpluses are unlikely to change unless there's a big increase in demand, a challenge to supply or a mix of both. It's hard to see any of that in the tea leaves for 2025.

Hard seasons, in life or in business, are rarely followed by good ones. While I imagine some of that is perspective, it also takes a lot of time, energy and effort to return to your previous level or establish a new normal. In Dorothy's case, it took a perilous journey on a yellow brick road.

While my father's prognosis is excellent, I expect plenty of twists as we navigate this new phase of life. For farmers, I hope the market will offer at least a glimpse of profitability and perspective on how long this downcycle will persist.

Maybe we'll be as lucky as Dorothy, and Glinda the Good Witch will give us magical slippers that will help us walk into the year ahead with confidence. It's certainly not going to be an easy journey, but if we can just keep the flying monkeys away, chances are good we'll have a happier story to tell next year. ///

U.S. Net Farm Income and Net Cash Farm Income



SOURCE: USDA, ERS, FARM INCOME AND WEALTH STATISTICS

Katie Dehlinger
Senior Farm Business Editor
➤ Read Katie's business blog at
ABOUT.DTNPF.COM/BUSINESS

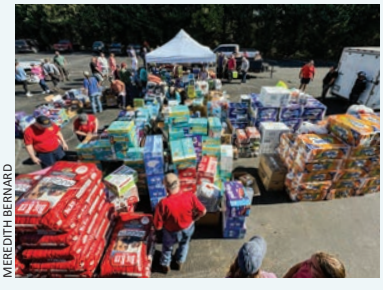
Hope in the Storm

BY *Meredith Bernard*

It's the time of year when we are inundated with everyone's "New Year, New Me" accolades. I get it, even if I tend not to follow suit. At my age, the years, wrinkles and rolls all feel well-earned, if not entirely well-worn, and I'm OK with that.

All the holiday hoopla is in the rearview, and a new year with its fresh promise is unrolling before us, making way for whatever change we're brave enough to seek or the courage to remain steadfast where we are. Either way, there is always hope in a new year. And, after a year like 2024, for many farms and families, it's one year we are happier than usual to be turning the page on.

Aside from a struggling economy, high input costs and low commodity prices, many Americans had to contend with wave after wave of natural disasters this past year. In September, Hurricane Helene changed the lives of many on the East Coast and the face of my home state of North Carolina.



MEREDITH BERNARD

In that, it also changed me. Living almost four hours away from our devastated mountains, I, like many of you, felt burdened to help. Joining my county Farm Bureau Women's Committee, we rallied to raise money and donations to take west.

And, did we ever.

I didn't know six years ago when I started my YouTube channel that God was secretly building an army for such a time as this. In the days and months since my initial plea for help, tens of thousands of dollars have been raised and have gone directly to relief efforts in western North Carolina, and they will continue as long as the funds exist.

My faith in humanity has been restored, and my faith in God is deeper than I ever knew it could be. I've always said it, but I have now lived it: We are truly better together. No matter what challenges this new year brings, I know there's hope in the storm. ///

Meredith Bernard felt called to help when disaster struck in North Carolina, where she tends a family and farm. Follow her on social media **@thisfarmwife** and visit **thisfarmwife.com** for more about her life.

The Dog Days of January

BY *Jennifer Campbell*

CHRIS CAMPBELL

January hits different when you're a dog living on a farm. To be clear, I don't have working farm dogs. What I have is a lazy beagle who firmly believes the couch is his birthright and a timid blue heeler who prefers belly rubs over herding cattle. I also run a doggy daycare for my middle daughter's hyper beagle and her rescued, sweet-as-cupcake beagle/Great Dane cross (aka mutt).

And, while not even one of them is a working farm dog, they do spend their days patrolling the yard and barn lot, watching the action and waiting for our quitting time.

But, when the hustle of planting and harvesting is a distant memory, and the buzz of tractors, trucks and semis in and out the barn lot fades, it's the kind of silence only winter can bring. January requires no clocking in for daily watch shifts or guarding the yard to keep tabs on the comings and goings. Instead of waiting for us to come in at night, their job most days becomes finding an inviting spot on the couch.

January brings deep, soul-restoring stretches of sleep and not just quick snoozes. The dogs soak up the extra time we spend at home, and I'm happy to indulge them in a cozy group nap. This month is their time to perfect their favorite skill. Whether sprawled on the furniture with noses tucked under paws or curled up beside me, they've truly mastered the art of relaxation.

And, honestly, couldn't we all learn something from their ability to gear down? The dogs remind me that life doesn't always have to be a relentless chase after productivity. We have already started preparing for next year's crop, and we aren't going to forget tax season. So, if Oliver, Harriett, Winston and Hank want me to take a nap this month, I'm not saying no. ///

Jennifer (Jent) Campbell tends a menagerie of critters and people on a seventh-generation Indiana family farm. She also writes a blog called Farm Wife Feeds (**farmwifefeeds.com**). Follow her on Twitter **@plowwife** and on her **@girlstalkag** podcast.

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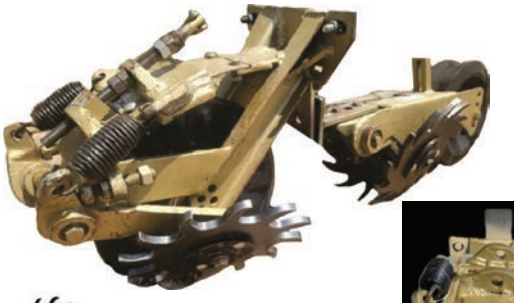
This is what makes the difference planting or plugging in wet conditions on 6 to 96 row planters.



Different sizes of tires can be easily changed to match the type of soil you are planting in. Whether dry or wet, clay, gumbo, sandy or sandy loam soil type you may be dealing with, being able to change out the tire or use no tire at all, and install the flex spring tooth soil mulching unit in minutes in addition to the curved tine system I designed and patented 30 years ago, for extremely wet conditions and continuing to plant is a huge plus! Remember 13 bearing using the same number in front & rear. The rubber wheels used are an added bonus in areas of seed emerging soil problems. The sides of the tires mark compressed leaving the center area lightly pressed. This center line often cracks when sunlight warms the soil & highly aids in seed emergence. In the rear the closing wheels are designed to be much wider at the top. This enables the teeth to close the seed trench from the sides for better seed trench sidewall destruction. When used with either size of tire, the seed area is unmatched by using previous methods. One bearing number is used in 13 separate locations! No bushings are used on any hinged part. The most notable aspect of the CMC row cleaner is the substantial fuel savings due to the reduction of power needed in the field to operate. This is due to it having anhedral angles (patent pending) on the independently pivoting of the swinging arms. This in turn allows function in the proper place of being in the center line of the coulter. Residue is first cut and then moved outward by the CMC tiger paw cleaning wheels rather than the traditional method of pulling the residue apart requiring more horse power, also imparting high stress loads on the planter frames of 24, 36 or 48 row planters.

Walter Carroll, Farmer/Owner Call 432-280-9593 for more! cmc-agri.com

Story and Photos By **Des Keller**

Reservations For 120

An extended menu of cover crops allows cattle to dine well into winter and cut forage costs.

Trinity Creek Ranch moves the herd frequently to take advantage of residue and cover crops.

In northwest Minnesota near Red Lake Falls, the Tabert and Miller families are trying to introduce as much fertility as possible into their sandy soils while coaxing more profitability from their Trinity Creek Ranch. A diverse menu of cover crops are key to allow cattle to graze at such a northern clime for as long as possible.

"We've started seeding rye after soybean harvest in October," says Mikayla Tabert, who returned to her family's farm in 2016 with husband, Benjamin. "There's not much season left after that, but the rye just needs enough time to germinate. You hope for the right conditions."

It is the rye, fescue or even peaola (peas and canola planted together) that, in most years, help their 120- to 150-head cow/calf operation continue to graze into January and beyond on cover crops and row-crop residue.

COVER CROP CHALLENGES

This system is not without hiccups. The families rely on continued experimentation with types of cover crops and the timing employed for planting, grazing and terminating them.

Benjamin and Mikayla Tabert with son Liam

For instance, some cover crops planted in 2021 overwintered really well, "too well in some cases," Benjamin Tabert says. "We weren't able to terminate them at the right time [in 2022] due to wet conditions. But, it was nice to have cereal rye for calving in the spring." The availability of that field for calving allowed time for their annual grass pastures to recover from the dry previous year.

Mikayla and Benjamin work with her parents, David and Peggy Miller, on a 1,400-acre operation. The young couple, who met while in school at North Dakota State University (NDSU), decided to return to the Miller farm in large part because of the cattle.

Mikayla liked cattle generally, but she also wanted them for the benefits they provide in an operation following regenerative agriculture principles. The diversified income is also necessary to support two families on Trinity Creek Ranch. They have taken small steps toward marketing their cattle direct to consumers to further capture more income.

Benjamin, who grew up farming in northeastern North Dakota, didn't have experience with cattle on his family's crop operation. Mikayla was adamant when they dated about where she wanted to be after graduation.

"Part of my decision to even ask Mikayla out meant I had come to the conclusion I might not be going back to my home farm," Benjamin says with a laugh. "I did feel OK about the decision knowing that my brother was going to farm there."

The two families grow corn, soybeans, wheat, alfalfa, tall fescue, sunflower and peaola, in addition to running the cattle herd and small feedlot. The idea is to use crop rotations and cover crops as much as possible while moving cattle to the food.

A FLEXIBLE SYSTEM

In practice, the system calls for flexibility. A hot, dry May/June last year dampened their spring wheat and fescue performance. By contrast, their no-till soybeans and no-till sunflowers did well. "I think soil moisture was maintained better than in conventional systems," Mikayla says.

Through summer, fall and even into mid-January this year, they were able to graze cattle on pasture, cover crops and crop residue. A mild December helped in that regard. They didn't have to start feeding hay bales until the latter half of January.

Mikayla had been persistent in asking researchers at NDSU about information into the use of intercropping—so much so that Marisol Berti, a noted cover crop expert there, suggested Mikayla do the research as part of a graduate program.

"She offered me a graduate position on the spot," Mikayla says. "I'd always wanted to do a master's [degree] but couldn't justify staying in school."

Now, she didn't have to. As part of the research, she planted sunflowers in 30-inch rows in mid- to late May. At the same time, using different implements and passes, they planted alfalfa (7.5-inch spacing) between the sunflower rows. Sunflowers were harvested in the fall.

There was a slight yield drag on sunflowers (up to 15%), Mikayla explains, even though the statistics showed no significant difference. The alfalfa was left in the field and, by spring, "functions more as a previously established alfalfa where we can get more cuttings and biomass yield than a newly seeded alfalfa," she says.

Even so, the field of alfalfa wasn't grazed since technically it was in its first year of production. "Sunflower-alfalfa intercropping allows a farmer to skip the low-yielding first year of alfalfa by raising a sunflower crop in the establishment year, with little impact to the alfalfa for the next full production year," Mikayla says.

It isn't like she and Benjamin came back to the farm and changed everything. Her parents were no strangers to conservation tillage and no-till. They switched to no-till nearly 30 years ago on wheat, peas, alfalfa and rye and, in 2021, began using 100% no-till. The children are merely helping take the practices to a new level.

"We're working for the highest profitability, not necessarily the highest yield," says David as he takes a break between passes cutting tall fescue, for which they produced seed on contract. "This has been a good crop in our rotation. The biggest surprise is how much grazing we get off it once we've harvested the seed."

The family can usually run 120 pairs of cattle or more on about 3 acres of fescue regrowth per day beginning in September. They've grazed fescue in December with around the same forage utilization as long as snow doesn't become too deep.

COST CONSCIOUS

The families operate frugally, with well-used equipment and a keen sense of their cost of operation. One of the first pieces of advice David Miller gave to his ➤

Some of the tall fescue is grown on contract to produce seed.

farming daughter was to use the University of Minnesota's farm business management programs, which allow producers to compare costs and incomes anonymously across the state.

In making those comparisons, the Taberts opted to try and graze cattle as long as possible rather than bale and put up more forage hay.

The idea is to expend less labor rotating cattle between pastures than they would cutting and baling forages. With up to 200 animals (counting calves) grazing, that's $300 per day in feed they are getting in the field.

"Every day we can graze in the winter is a plus," Mikayla says. "Those young cows come off winter pasture looking a little tough in the spring. But, we want cows that can deal with that—we're trying to make an efficient cow herd."

ROTATIONAL GRAZING

Generally, the cow herd is in one or two groups—cow/calf and heifers. Grazing paddocks are blocked off using a single, hot, Polywire at about the animals' chest height. Paddocks range from 4 to 20 acres but average about 8 acres, with wooded paddocks being larger.

More paddocks allow them to have a higher grazing intensity while extending rest and recovery time. Summer pastures are mostly native mix—whatever grows there—which can include orchardgrass, tall fescues, timothy, clovers and others.

"The cattle usually move very easily," Benjamin explains. "The cattle know they are getting more food." The family uses ATVs to move the herd, but quite often, the cattle will move on their own once the hot wire/gate is shifted.

In a nod to their life today, Mikayla says they'll try to use larger paddocks during busy planting and harvesting seasons so the cattle can be moved every two to three days rather than every day.

Mikayla and Benjamin Tabert work with her parents, David and Peggy (not pictured) Miller.

"I wouldn't say we want paddocks larger; we actually try to subdivide them if time allows," she continues. But, the reality is that the couple also feels the time crunch with two small children, Liam, 4, and Thea, 2½, with a third on the way.

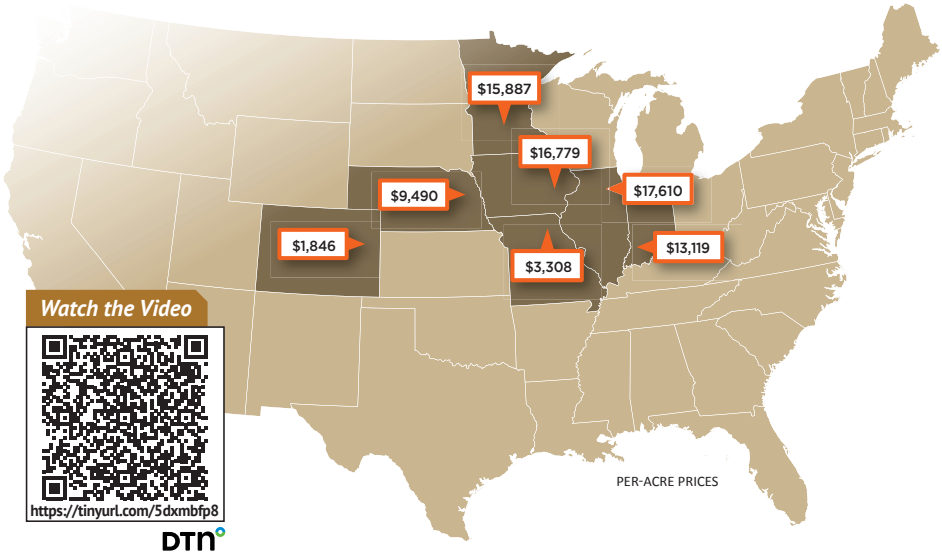
In the past year, they've added 100 acres of rented ground to the operation. "The landlord actually sought us out because they like no-till and cover crops," Mikayla says. "They also like to hunt and have noticed more wildlife on our land."

The Taberts don't have any illusions about how they may be perceived by others. In their fields, there are cover crop trials of Camelina, Kernza or even winter wheat, the cows are grazing in January or even February, and they do their work with well-maintained yet sufficiently aged equipment.

"I'm sure there are neighbors who think we're crazy," Mikayla says. "But, there is also curiosity." The healthy attendance at a handful of field days they hosted on their farm is evidence of that. ///

By **Katie Dehlinger**, @KatieD_DTN

Recent Farmland Sales



COLORADO, Kit Carson County. Four tracts of cropland encompassing 1,235 acres sold at hybrid auction for $2.28 million, or an average of $1,846 per acre. The first tract is a full section with one-third planted to wheat, another third in wheat stubble and the final third in cornstalks. The second and third tracts, at 145 and 150 acres respectively, are ready for spring planting, while the 320-acre fourth tract is split between wheat and wheat stubble. Buyers get all rights to the 2025 wheat crop. **Contact:** Darvin Meurisse, Farm and Ranch Realty Inc.; frr@frrmail.com, 719-342-2997
www.farmandranchrealty.com

ILLINOIS, DeKalb County. A 159-acre field sold for just shy of $2.8 million, or $17,610 per acre. The farm features a Productivity Index of 133.1, with its location adjacent to DeKalb city limits, adding development potential. An early listing shows an initial asking price of $19,250 per acre. **Contact:** Mark Mommsen, Martin, Goodrich and Waddell; mark.mommsen@mgw.us.com, 815-756-3606
mgw.us.com

INDIANA, Daviess and Knox Counties. A 1,090-acre farm sold at auction for $14.3 million, or an average of $13,119 per acre. The sale included 17 tracts of primarily tillable cropland. The first nine tracts appear to have sold to a single buyer for an average of $11,842 per acre, and most of those 646 acres were in two contiguous chunks. Four of the tracts were smaller than 20 acres. One of those included a 1-million-bushel grain bin setup, which sold for $2.65 million, and another included a shop built in 2015. **Contact:** Brad Horrall, Schrader Real Estate and Auction Co. Inc.; auctions@schraderauction.com, 800-451-2709
www.schraderauction.com

IOWA, Muscatine County. A 149-acre farm sold at auction for $2.5 million, or $16,779 per acre. The farm boasts a CSR2 score of 90, drainage tile and two 10,000-bushel grain bins that will be available next August. Over the past four corn-growing seasons, the silty clay loam soils have averaged 236 bushels per acre (bpa). Soybean yields have averaged 65.6 bpa over the past five soybean seasons. **Contact:** Patrick Gannon, Gannon Real Estate and Consulting; patrick@gannonre.com, 515-290-3427
gannonre.com

MINNESOTA, Nicollet County. The sealed-bid auction of a 248-acre farm brought $3.94 million, or an average of $15,887 per acre. The property's three tracts boast CPI scores of 90 to 91.7 and feature extensive tile work. A 72-acre parcel close to transmission lines sold for an average of $13,100 per acre, while a pair of contiguous 88-acre tracts sold for $17,000 per acre. **Contact:** Bryce Brunz, High Point Land Co.; sold@highpointlandcompany.com, 507-382-6669
www.highpointlandcompany.com

MISSOURI, Adair County. Prime pastureland totaling 665 acres sold at auction for $2.2 million, or $3,308 per acre. The previous owner grazed 180 to 225 cow/calf pairs between the three contiguous tracts. It produced 400 to 550 round bales of hay in years when it was cut. The property's ponds and timber provide excellent turkey and deer hunting, and several spots could be used for future building sites. **Contact:** Louie Zinn, Sullivan Auctioneers; sold@sullivanauctioneers.com, 319-795-2314
sullivanauctioneers.com

NEBRASKA, Stanton County. A single 157-acre field sold at hybrid auction for $1.49 million, or $9,490 per acre. Slightly more than 135 of the farm's acres are tillable Class II soils. The farm is close to several feedlots and competitive grain markets. **Contact:** Kurt Wittler, Farmers National Co.; DUnruh@FarmersNational.com, 620-482-0898
www.fncrealestate.com

These sales figures are provided by the sources and may not be exact because of rounding.

Submit recent land sales to **landwatch@dtn.com**

Find previous Landwatch listings at **www.dtnpf.com/agriculture/web/ag/magazine/your-land**

2025 AMERICA'S BEST YOUNG FARMERS & RANCHERS

BEN AND LAUREN NEALE
Light Hill Meats
Columbia, Tennessee

By **Dan Miller**, @DMillerPF
Photos By **Joel Reichenberger**, @JReichPF

RISK IN NOT TAKING RISK

This couple found retail opportunity in the grips of COVID.

It was a refrigerated lawn mower trailer parked near a bridge over a creek by Columbia, Tennessee, that changed Ben and Lauren Neale's lives forever.

COVID had come to the state, as it had the rest of the nation, and Lauren soon saw signs of stress among the other mothers she followed on Facebook. Grocery store meat cases had grown sparse, and the mothers voiced concern about feeding families on the 2 pounds of ground beef they were allowed to purchase at any one time.

Lauren went to Ben with an idea.

The Neales already managed a growing cow/calf herd. They also owned Light Hill Meats, a processing plant they had operated since 2017. Ben had an inventory of halves and wholes of beef—and could process more.

POP-UP ON THE BRIDGE

What about opening a pop-up to sell meat, Lauren wondered? No limits on sales.

Soon, truck and trailer were parked down by the bridge. And, people came. "We had lines," Lauren says. "We had lines when it was pouring rain. Lines when it was snowing and when it was blazing hot. They were there every Saturday for about a year."

Seeing an opportunity in COVID-era meat shortages and their own sales of beef from the back of a trailer to help fill the gap, Ben and Lauren Neale opened a butcher shop to serve a fast-growing community.

People brought large cooler bags. The Neales would run out of prime cuts and roasts. Customers made special requests and preordered large quantities. The Neales soon counted 1,000 steady customers, and Ben began to consider opening a butcher shop.

"Ben is a dreamer," Lauren says. "He takes considered risks with research and analysis."

"To me, it's more risky not to be doing something different," Ben says. "What some people consider risk I consider taking back control," he says.

So, let's back up. Who are Ben and Lauren Neale, of Columbia, Tennessee?

BACK TO THE BEGINNING

Ben is local. He grew up in Lynnville, population 300. Ben worked for neighboring farmers hauling hay, working tobacco and doing other farm jobs. "The farmers were my mentors," he says.

Ben attended The University of Tennessee-Martin, where he studied animal science. After graduation, he worked for two large seedstock operations. He eventually went back to school earning a pair of master's degrees—ag operations and business administration.

He began to build his own cow herd in 2011, purchasing his first cows from Texas. He was soon selling freezer meat.

Ben was serving as chairman of National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) Young Producers Council when he met a girl from Cedar Rapids, Iowa—Lauren Chase.

Lauren experienced agriculture briefly growing up. Her grandfather owned a farm but sold it when she was young.

STORIES OF THE WEST

Lauren studied journalism and anthropology at the University of Iowa. She found an internship one summer, a communications position with the Montana Stockgrowers Association (MSGA). It was a neat blend of anthropology and journalism, she recalls, a field study of the American West. She wrote and produced stories about the ranchers she met.

"I absolutely fell in love with agriculture," Lauren says. "I never knew cowboys actually existed." She went to brandings, trailed cattle, dealt with blizzards and fires. She sat with ranchers to hear their stories. Eventually, she produced a coffee table photo book of all she had seen and photographed.

Then, Lauren met Ben.

The two video-conferenced and played online games for a year. Lauren moved south in 2013, and they married in 2014. They are now the parents of four children: Corban, 9, Abigail, 6, Elizabeth, 5, and Sarah, 2.

After Sarah was born, Ben left his job as a loan officer at Farm Credit Mid-America to work full time on their growing butcher shop and "Gate to Plate" business. Lauren is a stay-at-home mom and communications director for the Tennessee Cattlemen's Association. She handles the social media work for Light Hill Meats.

Their farm operates on 1,800 acres. It is hilly and rocky with clay soils, and has large stands of timber. The land supports one cow/calf pair to every 3 acres. Spring and fall calving provide a year-round supply of beef.

BUILD A NEW BUSINESS

"[Ben's] true desire was to use his skill set to be an entrepreneur," Lauren says. Without a full-time corporate job, Ben had freedom to be at home with a growing family and help with Corban's special needs. Corban is diagnosed with nonverbal autism.

The Light Hill Meats Butcher Store opened its doors in late 2022 in Spring Hill. Last Christmas, the butcher shop filled orders for 242 standing rib roasts and dozens of other cuts of beef, poultry, pork and seafood, the last flown in fresh from the North Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico (lobster, shrimp and king salmon, among much more).

Their market opportunity is appealing. Eighty to 120 people move in per day along the I-65 corridor that runs near their farm and store, south of Nashville. The largest General Motors plant in North America, the quickly expanding auto battery manufacturer Ultium Cells and other manufacturers support a modern industrial base employing well-paid professionals from all across the United States—Chicago, New York, cities up and down the length of California. They value weekend gatherings around a good steak. Young families have an eye for minimally processed foods with clean ingredients— all qualities for which the Neales are establishing a reputation. ➤

BEN AND LAUREN NEALE
Light Hill Meats
Columbia, Tennessee

CONNECT CUSTOMERS AND FARM

"Seventy percent of our customer base are not born Tennesseans. We're trying to establish buying habits they have not yet developed," Ben says. "We want to connect the [customer] back to the people who are growing it."

And, to their palates. "We try to service their regional food choices," he adds. "If you want whole fennels in your Italian sausage, we'll make that. If you want ground fennel, we'll make that. We give them food choices."

Ben values good marketing, and his chief marketing officer sits down with him every night at the dinner table.

"Lauren is amazing," Ben says. "[Agriculture] makes great products, but we don't tell anyone about them. Lauren gives people that information."

She emphasizes people in her posts. "We can share pictures of steaks all day long, but people connect with Ben's face, our butcher's face, our kids. I give our posts the human touch."

Lauren has created a campaign called "Mention Us Monday." It's simple. Customers post photographs of their plated steak, for example. Maybe with a glass of wine. Dress it up a bit. They post the photos on their stories.

VALUE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

"I encourage them to tag us, and we'll reshare it into our network. They like that connection with us and [appreciate] the butcher shop sharing their post," she says. "Customers are our biggest advocates."

Ben also opens the farm to visitors. "I tell them they can come out, see everything we have. I sometimes joke with a customer. 'If you liked that steak, I thought about you three years ago.'"

"If you liked that steak, I thought about you three years ago," Ben Neale tells customers of the beef production process. Ben and Lauren (left), who does the marketing, with their kids, Corban, Elizabeth, Abigail and Sarah.

BUILD BETTER COMMUNITIES

The Neales are approaching another turn in their business and family life. Ben sees firsthand the increase in drug use and its impact on families in the area. He works with two sober living centers in the area and has decided to open his own nonprofit. It opens this month and is named Light Hills Living Stones Ministry.

"Right now, I'm the general manager [of the farm, processing plant and store]," Ben says. He is looking for general managers to handle the retail meat side of the business and the processing plant. "I want to be more of an overseer."

They also desire to have more time with their kids and connect with parents who also have autistic children.

The Neales use off hours in the butcher shop to sponsor sensory events of the type that accommodate Corban. "We've hosted sensory Easter Bunny and Santa Claus events," Lauren says. "Here, they can be themselves. The Easter Bunny and Santa know how to approach special needs kids. They don't overstimulate them."

The Neales also have donated 5,000 meals to a group home for autistic people in the area, and they sponsor a special needs baseball team that Ben coaches and on which Corban plays.

This is not a new idea for Ben and Lauren. Light Hill's vision statement has always been: "We help build better communities by bringing people together." Their philanthropic desire is not separate from management of the businesses. It has always been the reason for both. ///

Watch the Video
https://bcove.video/3YZyRRu
DTN

2025 AMERICA'S BEST YOUNG FARMERS & RANCHERS DTN/Progressive Farmer

ANDREW EDDIE
RNH Farms
Moses Lake, Washington

By **Dan Miller**, @DMillerPF
Photos By **Joel Reichenberger**, @JReichPF

LEAVE THE COMFORT ZONE

Andrew Eddie looks for value in real time. Telemetry data from his Hesston big square balers tell him that the last bale had 50 flakes in it. But, it should have been 40. That 3- x 4- x 8-foot bale weighed 1,100 pounds. It should have been 1,300. "If you pay attention to those numbers, you can make minor changes," he says. The harvest will run more efficiently, and in the end, the farm nets a better-quality product.

"That data gives me a way to be hands on all day long," Andrew says. "How efficient we are? What are the crops telling me? We go through each of these steps, and our buyers are going to want to buy our product year in and year out, because they know what they are getting. We've built this business on quality, with pride in consistency," he adds. "Consistency is good marketing."

Think of it as stress-testing the business. "You learn more when you take yourself out of your comfort zone. Make yourself think different," Andrew says. "Look at different areas of your operation. Try something new. Experiment a little. Diversify enough without taking too much risk. Try to run the business better today. Use the data. It's all a huge benefit to your operation."

Eddie, 31, from Moses Lake, Washington, is a forage grower and operations manager, working about 1,200 acres of rocky soils in the Columbia Basin. The basin is 250,000 square miles of arid lowland covering the south-central portion of Washington, eastern Oregon and a sliver of northern Nevada. Water is an abundant resource provided by the Columbia Basin Project, the largest water reclamation projection in the U.S. It supplies water to 670,000 acres in east-central Washington and to the center pivots of Andrew's and his father, Brian's, RNH Farms.

IT'S IN THE NAME

Along with the acreage, RNH Farms has a sizable custom-farming business focused on putting up alfalfa and bluegrass straw. It produces alfalfa (8 to 9 tons per acre, 4 cuttings per year), timothy (6.5 to 7 tons, 2 cuttings per year) and orchardgrass (6.5 tons, 3 cuttings per year). There is also a bit of corn, about 105 acres, Andrew says. The stalks are grazed by a neighbor's cattle. ➤

ANDREW EDDIE
RNH Farms
Moses Lake, Washington

Andrew Eddie's inspirations are the doers, those striving always to build better businesses. Below is Andrew and his father, Brian.

Funny story about RNH Farms. Andrew says it once stood for "Rocks 'n' Hay" because the ground is rocky. Amusing, but father and son soon found it communicated a notion that the farm was selling hay with rocks in it. The letters RNH, only, appear now to have resolved any apprehension about the quality of the farm's production.

Andrew is the second generation of an operation that traces its roots back to his grandfather, Jamie. He owned a couple hundred acres but also did time as a lumberjack, a fireman and quality control specialist. Farming never topped his résumé.

Andrew and his father see themselves in transition. Brian wants to transition out of the day-to-day farming operation, as much as a farmer can, and focus on "living off the land," more specifically, collecting income earned off land rent from the farming entity.

FROM RODENTS TO COWS

Most of RNH Farms forage and grass is compressed, containerized and delivered to end users in China, Japan, Saudi Arabia and South Korea to feed a Noah's Ark assortment of animals—gerbils, guinea pigs, rabbits, goats, camels and cows. "Most anything you can think of," Andrew says.

Alfalfa stands are productive for four to five years. Grass lasts three or four years, although one timothy field is now on year 15. Forage is gentle on the terrain. "We don't want to work the ground much. Work the dirt and pick the rocks," Andrew says.

He did not see farming as a career as he neared high school graduation. "Growing up on the farm, sometimes you get tired working with family, to be honest. The jobs can be hard. Working with family can be even harder."

Andrew told his dad he was leaving to do his own thing. His own thing earned him a journalism and advertising degree from the University of Oregon to do—what? The job field wasn't screaming for warm bodies.

There was the farm, and Andrew soon reconsidered his original decision. "Why did I leave?" he remembers asking himself. "Yeah, you work every day. But, you see progress every day. You cut it. You bale it. And, it's growing again. Every year, you get chances. You get a second [cutting] or a third chance, fourth chance. First crop did not grow well. But, I have a second crop or third crop. By the end of the year, you're hoping the fourth crop goes well. This was a challenge that looped me back in."

FIND THE DOERS

That was 2014, and Andrew quickly connected to the forage community. He has been an eight-year member of the Washington State Hay Growers Association and today is its president. He also is involved in the National Alfalfa and Forage Alliance.

Andrew has built a community of confidants. "My inspirations are the doers," he says. "Those in the industry that are constantly striving to be better and better, day in and day out. These individuals test the

status quo and are constantly improving to build better and more economically sound businesses."

Andrew has found one stream of self-improvement by his investment in TEPAP (The Executive Program for Agricultural Producers), operated by Texas A&M University. "This program is one of the best in the nation to attend with hundreds of top-level ag producers from a variety of businesses," he says. "It is giving us a financial analysis of our operation—financial trend analysis looks at the functioning of the business overall and makes me a more well-rounded manager."

Andrew explains: "We've started to pay more attention to our breakevens, to our input [costs] down to the dime. Here's what we have. Here's what we need to get out of the crop. Let's figure out how to get there," he says. "We are getting down-to-the-minute details. If we limit how many passes we make in the field, how many miles we drive down the road, how much fuel we are burning, how much more efficient we are, then how much more profitable we are."

BOSS FOR A DAY

Employee management is evolving, as well. Andrew pushes responsibilities down to his employees. For example, "boss for a day."

Andrew's RNH Farms produces alfalfa and grass for export markets. Highly trained employees and data are his key tools.

"A crew member is boss for a day. Making decisions—bale, rake or cut? They become more confident in what they are doing." It's a management approach giving the crew skin in the game. "It's a mentality. How do we improve our business every day? In our operations, practices [like boss for a day] pay huge dividends as employees begin to understand the decisions being made, both from a financial and operational standpoint," Andrew says.

Visitors to RNH Farms often quiz him about the future. So, Andrew, what about it?

"I hope to still have a job in 10 years," he says, sarcasm noted. "I don't think the robots will completely take over. If I see Will Smith from 'I, Robot,' we might have a problem, though.

"But, we've evolved," he continues. "We've upgraded our equipment. We are more business savvy and more well-rounded. We have the production part and agronomy part [worked out]. Overall, we are more proficient in what we are doing in the office and out in the field, combining those two—understanding data, better communication, production efficiencies, logistics, all of that. If we can just keep moving forward progressively, that's going to be the biggest thing." ///

ADVERTORIAL

CROPLAN SEED YIELDS TOP PERFORMANCE

GENETIC PLATFORMS, DATA-BACKED INSIGHTS, RESEARCH AND PRESCRIPTION PROGRAMS DRIVE AGRONOMIC EXCELLENCE.

With every harvest comes a time to reexamine performance of a crop, a field and the other factors that contributed to the final yield.

Companies love to tout plot winners when seeking a seed order for 2025. But how many companies give you the hybrid or variety backstories that led to the wins? How many discuss ROI and the role of different agronomic practices on the right acres?

"When your board of directors is comprised of farmers and ag retailers that thrive on independent research targeted at seed development, your products offer a uniqueness in the industry," says Robert Cossar, seed marketing manager for CROPLAN seed.

"We have access to all the major traits and genetic platforms. This uniqueness allows our seed product managers to develop regional hybrids and varieties that deliver performance consistency and return per acre," he says. "Combine that with yield and agronomic practice trials across nationwide Answer Plot locations, and we're able to provide farmers with solid, data-driven success stories," Cossar says.

Robert Cossar

PERFORMANCE AND ROI

Cossar says there are several reasons why CROPLAN seed continues to push performance higher.

Consistent Performance. CROPLAN has a long history of selecting the best genetics and traits for the right acre. "We have a team of seed product managers across the U.S. who select the best hybrids for their region," Cossar says.

For example, CROPLAN has hybrids with high plot-win rates across many locations, weather events and agronomic practices. "In 2024, we have hybrids like CROPLAN CP5682 Trecepta with an 89% win rate, CP3715 SmartStax Pro (61%), CP4839 Powercore Enlist (82%), or CP5497VT2P VT Double Pro (84%)," he says.

Best Combination Of Industry Traits And Genetics. "What's unique about these four hybrid examples is their success across all trait platforms and multiple genetic lines. We truly focus beyond win rates to deliver consistent performance and optimal return per acre. But the customer conversation starts with management goals by field to place the right hybrids and varieties," Cossar says.

Growers want one or two new hybrids that can break a yield barrier. But across the farm, they want consistency from hybrids and varieties that can pay the bills. Keeping current with newer genetics and trait packages also pays dividends, as Cossar says their 2024 hybrids had a four-bushel advantage over 2023 numbers. That's one reason why relying on four or five-year-old genetics can reduce ROI, he adds.

DELIVER YIELD CONSISTENCY

To build on consistency, CROPLAN tests experimental genetics with farmers through on-farm trials. "Whether it's corn, soybeans, alfalfa or other crops, new genetics have to prove yield and attribute consistency across a maturity range and region in farmers' fields," Cossar says.

Farmers can also choose among all trait platforms, too. For example, corn fields showing rootworm resistance may benefit from the SmartStax Pro line or the newer VT4PRO technology.

"We start with assessing a grower's issues in each field. Then we discuss hybrid solutions that fit management and drive the highest ROI—not necessarily the highest yields—because not every acre can deliver 250 to 280 bushels per acre," Cossar says.

CROPLAN innovation continues across its soybean portfolio of top trait packages with the unique WinPak products. Two complementary varieties are strategically combined in the same bag to maximize yield potential and reduce soil, weather and pest variability risks.

ANSWER PLOT TRIALS ADVANTAGE

Answer Plot Trials Offer Distinct Insights. Based on 25 years of independent research data collected from all environments and growing conditions from locations in 20 states, growers and ag retailers' trusted advisors gain comprehensive seed and agronomic knowledge.

"We independently test CROPLAN seed alongside the competition, and growers appreciate our transparency," Cossar says. "The best hybrid backstories come from localized research results. This data helps us recommend how specific nitrogen or fungicide applications can increase ROI potential."

CROPLAN and WinField United test and retest products under varying field conditions to develop regional insights for every acre. Crop response is measured against management strategies, including plant populations, nitrogen and fungicide applications, and crop rotation/continuous corn. When analyzing the data using response-to scores, up to 90 bushels per acre could be at risk for any acre every year.

PLAN OPTIMIZES SEED INVESTMENT

The Advanced Acre Rx Program Shares Financial Risk. CROPLAN partners with the best agronomic advisors who understand input ROI value and the potential risks under various crop profit margins.

"We understand the challenges of asking growers to invest more input dollars, so we

created a season-long plan that optimizes the seed investment," Cossar says. "Answer Plot data backs this unique offering to match hybrids and varieties with specific inputs that drive extra bushels. Growers who follow this prescription program have a money-back guarantee if yield goals are missed."

The two tiers of this program offer growers a customized choice of a full-season prescription plan (Elite Rx) or a targeted prescription program (Impact Rx). The popular proactive Elite Rx program includes à la carte product selection, seed selection and placement, plant nutrition by zone, pre- and post-herbicide applications, insecticide and fungicide applications, and in-season micronutrient recommendations based on tissue samples.

The Impact Rx program targets either plant health or seed and multiple modes of action. Both are managed by selected local retail agronomists, working directly with growers to help ensure success. ■

To learn more about seed and program details or find a CROPLAN retailer, visit **CROPLAN.com**

OUR RETURN POLICY IS EASY.

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Get to know a local retail seed expert and their definition of return.

2025 AMERICA'S BEST YOUNG FARMERS & RANCHERS
DTN/Progressive Farmer

EMILY MULLEN-NICCUM
The Mullen Dairy & Creamery
Okeana, Ohio

By **Dan Miller**, @DMillerPF
Photos By **Joel Reichenberger**, @JReichPF

WORTH THE RETAIL PRICE

Emily Mullen-Niccum tells a family story in which her father and dairy farmer, Tim, prayed so fervently for Holstein heifers that God blessed him additionally with four daughters, none of whom he thought would ever want to run the farm.

But, there was Emily, the third daughter—Mandy and Amber, older, and Elizabeth, the youngest. "As a young girl, I absolutely loved being involved in agriculture," says Emily, now 26. "By the time I was in high school, I was set on having a career in the industry."

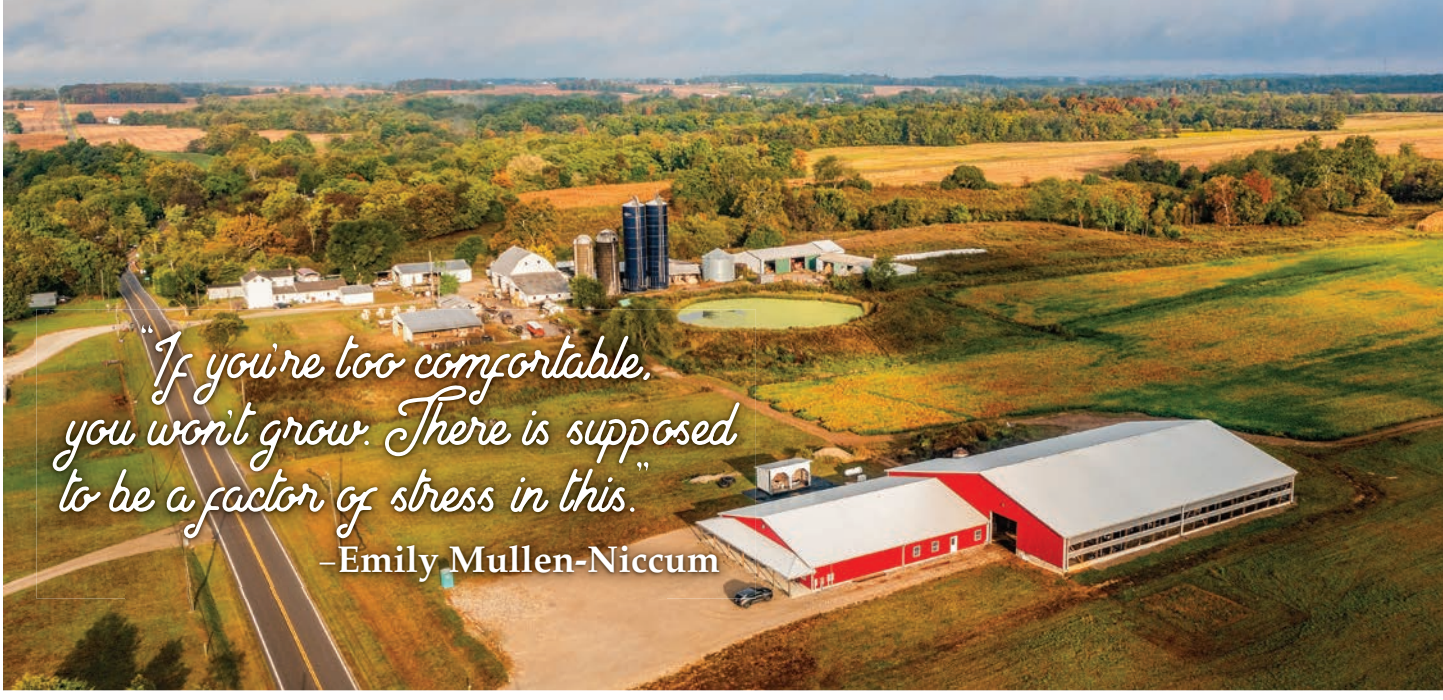
Emily's dad was not so set on her career choice. He had been dairying since he was 14, from the time his father, Harry, died. He had a hard-knocks view of the family business that, frankly, may have had, in his view, room for a son, but he had never envisioned a daughter.

A JOB TO LOVE

With some family resistance, Emily decided upon graduation from high school to attend The Ohio State University-Agricultural Technical Institute, where she earned an associate's degree in dairy science. "Working in the dairy industry is a job that you have to love to be good at. It's never easy, you rarely catch a break, and there's plenty of sacrifices to be made," Emily says. "We had some conversations that were difficult at times.

"I wasn't quite sure how the puzzle pieces would fit," she continues. "But I was willing to fight." It's part of her nature. "If you're too comfortable, you won't grow. There is supposed to be a factor of stress in this."

The now fourth-generation Mullen family dairy farm was founded in 1898 by Emily's great-grandfather, William Mullen. Home is Okeana, in southwest Ohio, near the Indiana and Ohio line. Picturesque hayfields and a mix of small towns and urban pioneers with their 5- and 10-acre lots paint the landscape.



CHALLENGE LIST

Two challenges topped Emily's list upon return home. Infrastructure was first. "My dad had accepted the fact that none of his girls would come home to farm," Emily says. "With that thought in mind, he had stopped investing money about 20 years earlier into any aspect of the operation. I knew the first thing I had to fix was the living environment of my animals."

A new facility depended on a new revenue stream. "Average was over," she says. The operation needed cash-flow that it wasn't getting from co-op checks alone.

John F. Kennedy influenced her ambitions. He said, "For the farmer is the only man in our economy who has to buy everything he buys at retail—sell everything he sells at wholesale—and pay the freight both ways."

Emily saw a direct-to-consumer business as one way to success. It won't work everywhere, she concedes. But, her urban-suburban community boasts a bit of disposable income.

Emily Mullen-Niccum built a new barn for her cows with space for retail sales and a creamery. The original family farm is seen in the back of the photo. Emily talks with her husband, Tony Niccum (photo left), at the end of another long day. The creamery produces 30 flavors of milk.

WORTH A RETAIL PRICE

"I am worth a retail price. More, it was going to be necessary for me to get that price, to build a facility that my livestock deserves but also to be a better producer," she says. "Nothing bad about Dad or that generation of farmers. They are the reason that I have the opportunity to sit here today. However, that generation has forgotten their worth. We deserve a price and that it is worth the work we put into this," she continues. It was the retail income stream that gave her the resource to improve her herd health and production. "We slowly but surely began making enough money on the [retail] milk that I felt I could safely build a new facility for my cows."

When Emily first thought about a new dairy barn, she was 19. This single structure was not a one-year project. Start to finish, it was four to five years to design and build space for the cows (96 x 286 feet) and a combination creamery and retail space (86 x 68 feet), all of it under one roof.

"Thanks to Farm Credit Mid-America," Emily says, "they gave me the confidence to not only walk through their door once to ask for help but to invite me back."

MILK FLAVORS AND LOCAL PRODUCE

Mullen Dairy and Creamery sells 35 flavors of milk along with eggs, pork, beef and other products supplied by local producers. Milk is sold in gallons and pints ➤

in flavors such as chocolate, strawberry, cotton candy, blueberry, orange-sickle, even peppermint mocha.

"Adding the creamery allows me to guarantee a different cash-flow, which makes it easier to make expansion decisions," she says. Emily's sister, Elizabeth, manages the creamery.

"I remember making our opening weekend, and I had no idea how we were going to sell 60 gallons of bottled, pasteurized milk, or 480 pints. By the end of the first day, we were sold out." Today, the creamery consumes 4,000 pounds of milk a week. Emily expects to double the volume. Mullen Creamery counts groceries and restaurants among its customers. And, Emily is managing a growing relationship with Crumbl Cookies.

FOOD COMES FROM THE FARM

"If there's one positive from COVID, it was that people started thinking about where their food came from again," Emily says.

She also is working to raise the herd's production and has invested in herd genetics. The new barn greatly improved their environment, and the cows benefited from a newly balanced nutrition program. "Quite possibly the biggest game changer for us has been adding a [Lely] robotic milker," she says. "We've increased our herd average to around 70 to 75 pounds." Prior to the robot, the herd averaged 50 to 55 pounds per day.

"With the robotic milker, I manage to produce as much milk with 65 [milking] cows as I was able to do with 100 in my old facility," Emily adds. The milker frees up six hours she now uses for other chores. For example, time to better manage her calves.

DATA AND THE APPLE WATCH

The robotic milker also provides her with individualized information of each cow by way of the Lely Qwes (cow

Tony Niccum, Emily's husband, works for the state as a mechanic. He also is Emily's free, on-farm repairman.

Watch the Video

https://bcove.video/4eLhFVF

DTN

detection system) hung around their necks. Emily calls them Apple Watches. "That information allows me to be a proactive and educated decision-maker," she says. "The simple data points I can get onto my computer thanks to that robot allow me to make treatment plans for one animal versus another."

A robotic milker has increased Emily Mullen-Niccum's average milk production and created time for her to better tend to her calves.

In her spare time (we never saw even one moment of spare time, as she jetted around the barn), Emily brings schoolkids onto the farm. She explains the role of the cows and reads books to kids as they sit among the calves.

RENT A CALF

Her county, Butler County, Ohio, counted 88 dairies in 1970. Today? She holds up two fingers. Two. The annual county fair was prepared to end the dairy exhibition for lack of dairy cows. But, Emily had an idea in a Rent-a-Calf program coordinated with the county 4-H. "The word 'rent' is a little misleading in that there is no financial cost involved for the kids to participate," she says.

Students do make a commitment of time. In exchange for at least two days of work per week, April through July, Emily loans them a heifer at the fair. In its first year (2024), it attracted 17 participants. "It really put life back into the program," she says proudly. The dairy division will be open again in 2025.

The kids and the fair allowed Emily to connect the world of the farm with a community nearly divorced from it. "I hope I exemplify the men and women who make up this industry with honesty and sincerity," Emily says. "I understand how fortunate I am to have a direct relationship with the land and the God that created it. I can honestly say that running the dairy farm and shaking the hands of the people I feed is the most humbling and honest way a [farmer] can live their life." ///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2025 AMERICA'S BEST YOUNG FARMERS & RANCHERS

MOLLIE FICOCELLO, ANNIE GORDER, GRACE LUNSKI
Sproule Farms/3 Farm Daughters
Grand Forks, North Dakota

FAILURE ISN'T FATAL

There is a truism often spoken around Sproule Farms. Failure is not fatal.

"Our parents inspire us," Mollie (Sproule) Ficocello says. "They have taught us that mentality, that 'failure isn't fatal.' Don't be scared to go out and try something new," she says. "If it doesn't work out, it is not the end of the world."

Sproule sisters Mollie, Annie Gorder and Grace Lunski, all married with college degrees ranging from marketing, finance, business and law, nine kids total aged infant to 9, seized on that advice from their parents, Paul and Susie Sproule.

They formed a pasta company they named 3 Farm Daughters. Headquartered with their parents' 15,000-acre, first-generation farm at Grand Forks, North Dakota, the sisters entered the consumer food world, a place where failure is not all that rare.

FARM TO CONSUMER

"Prior to 3 Farm Daughters, we were a traditional farm," Mollie says. "We grew crops. We dropped them off at the elevator, fulfilled our contracts. And, we wiped our hands clean of the supply chain. We never took it to a retail or direct-to-consumer model.

"When we started 3 Farm Daughters, we had to figure out what that next step looked like," she continues. "And, the next four steps after that. This is a grain growing on our farm. These are the attributes of our farm. How do you bring that to a consumer?"

In four years, Mollie, Annie and Grace have taken significant steps forward. Today, pastas like cavatappi (a family favorite), elbow, penne and rotini cuts, and a new high-fiber spaghetti are sold in 1,400 retail outlets. Whole Foods, Central Market, Albertsons, Fresh Thyme Market and Meijer are customers. As a private company, 3 Farm Daughters does not release its financial data.

3 Farm Daughters pasta is available nationally through Amazon and by way of the 3 Farm Daughters website (**3farmdaughters.com**)

3 Farm Daughters launched an orzo pasta in collaboration with Molly Yeh, the cookbook author, restaurateur and blogger who is the host of the Food Network cooking show "Girl Meets Farm." Orzo is a pasta sprinkle added to soups, salads and casseroles.

WHO IS MY FARMER?

"We started 3 Farm Daughters because at the time, we were all either starting or growing our families, and food and nutrition was becoming on the forefront of our minds," Mollie says. "We wanted to create a product that we felt good about eating ourselves and feeding to our families. Coming together to make the product and the brand was natural and already part of our daily discussions. Being that we were growing these 'better-for-you' varieties on our farm and being familiar with their properties, we thought, 'What better way to have a clean, more nutritious option than straight from the source itself—the farm?'"

Grace agrees. "Our whole goal has been bridging that gap from farmer to consumer," she says. "People want to know 'Who is my farmer?' We decided to lift the veil [and show] what a family farm looks like." She adds, jokingly, "We're making farming cool."

PHOTO COURTESY OF 3 FARM DAUGHTERS

By **Dan Miller**, @DMillerPF
Photos By **Joel Reichenberger**, @JReichPF

3 Farm Daughters bridges the gap between farmers and consumers who want to know, "Who is my farmer?"

3 Farm Daughters pasta includes two ingredients, wheat flour and durum semolina flour. Made with a specialty wheat variety that is naturally high in resistant starch, the pasta products are better nutritionally for the consumer, all while staying "clean label," meaning without any additives or enrichments.

"People are sensitized to what they are putting into their bodies, so they want those ingredient labels to be short," Annie explains.

The first couple of years, Sproule Farms grew only small test plots of this wheat. The sisters produced test batches of pasta for the family and moved forward on the pasta the family approved. They began selling some different pasta cuts on the 3 Farm Daughters website in late 2020 and, shortly thereafter, on the shelves of 39 local stores. It was all-hands-on-deck—sisters, mom and dad, cousins, team members—to make those early-morning deliveries.

"We got scrappy and made it work," Mollie says.

SPAM OR REAL

It was in 2021, only one year later, that the sisters received an email from Whole Foods asking for a meeting. They thought at first the email was probably spam. But, they replied and found the high-end grocery chain—which tends to feature "better-for-you" food sources—had already done marketing research on 3 Farm Daughters pasta and was highly interested in putting it on its shelves. By July 2022, 3 Farm Daughters pasta could be found in 68 Whole Foods stores.

"Whole Foods was big pinch-me moment," Annie says. "We had taken [a lot of] little baby steps, and all of a sudden ... 'We're making pasta.'"

It's been a marketing and logistical whirlwind, one that has evolved into a partnership with customers ➤

Meet the 3 Farm Daughters (top). From left, Grace Lunski, Annie Gorder and Mollie Ficocello. As they began to raise their children, diet and food became important to them. Their clean-label pasta products—two ingredients only—are produced for people who are sensitized to what they are eating. 3 Farm Daughters pastas are now sold in 1,400 retail outlets, including Whole Foods.

3 Farm Daughters' Annie, Grace and Mollie, with their father, Paul Sproule, of Sproule Farms, and their cousin, Michael Sproule, who provides overall day-to-day management of the farm

who invested in the sisters' story. "We ask them what [pasta] shape they want to see next. That's the reason we are launching spaghetti. The voice is so loud, that we are coming out with spaghetti this year," Grace says.

"Consumers really buy with their core values, what's important to them," Mollie adds. "Healthy, clean-label, delicious. It's almost like farm to table. But, it's grain. You really don't see the grain. [But the pasta] connects consumers to grain farming."

RULES OF THE TRADE

Mollie, Annie and Grace did not set out to create a consumer-packaged goods company. But, here they are. And, retail food has tried-and-true rules.

One buyer took Grace down an aisle to show her how the original 3 Farm Daughters bags of pasta presented themselves on the shelf. The bags—bags not boxes—were too large for the space, and as bags, they tended to fall over.

"See how the bag falls over. [Customers] can't see your logo on the shelf," the buyer said to Grace. "We were new to the industry and had a lot to learn about putting products on grocery shelves," she says.

3 Farm Daughters rebranded and changed the packaging just prior to launch at Whole Foods, selling pasta in a box and not bags—and to dimensions more accommodating to shelf space, having a stronger brand appearance and bringing more life to their branding with color and design.

3 Farm Daughters is building out a retail business based on the agricultural principles they learned on the farm. Innovation is the center of the farm and their pasta company. Their goal is to continually roll out new products, branching even outside of the pasta aisle.

GRIT, DETERMINATION AND MENTORS

"Our parents show resilience, grit and determination," Grace says. "It is the keys to their success. We've learned, don't take the highs too high and the lows too low. We need to take the hits when they come and still know why we are doing what we are doing. We focus on bringing products from the farm full circle to the consumer."

Mentors have been important to the success of 3 Farm Daughters. "Time is the most valuable thing you can give someone," Annie says. "We've had Zoom calls with a million questions. Sometimes, they were very simple questions. But, the feedback and guidance we got from those individuals are instrumental to our business."

Annie says the sisters have learned one big lesson along the way: "We have to be nimble and be understanding to whatever happens. There is only so much we can do, and the rest is in God's hands."

"We look back," Mollie says, "[and] obviously there has been a want among consumers for products with origins linking directly back to the farm. We want to keep it to our core values, to bring better nutrition to consumers from the farm and elevate their understanding of what the farm is, what grain looks like and understand the steps it takes to bring a product from the farm to the grocery shelves."

It's a straightforward consumer proposition, Annie explains. "Growing up in an ag community, we walked through wheat fields, and we know what a combine looks like. However, our consumers may have never done that, so this is our way to share that with them and bring them along on the agricultural journey." ///

Scientific Discovery Stuns Doctors

Biblical Bush Relieves Joint Discomfort in as Little as 5 Days

Legendary "special herb" gives new life to old joints without clobbering you. So safe you can take it every day without worry.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 54 million Americans are suffering from joint discomfort.

This epidemic rise in aching joints has led to a search for alternative treatments—as many sufferers want relief without the harmful side effects of conventional "solutions."

Leading the way from nature's pharmacy is the new "King of Oils" that pioneering Florida MD and anti-aging specialist Dr. Al Sears calls "the most significant breakthrough I've ever found for easing joint discomfort."

Biblical scholars treasured this "holy oil." Ancient healers valued it more than gold for its medicinal properties. Marco Polo prized it as he blazed the Silk Road. And Ayurvedic practitioners, to this day, rely on it for healing and detoxification.

Yet what really caught Dr. Sears' attention is how modern medical findings now prove this "King of Oils" can powerfully…

Deactivate 400 Agony-Causing Genes

If you want genuine, long-lasting relief for joint discomfort, you must address inflammation. Too much inflammation will wreak havoc on joints, break down cartilage and cause unending discomfort. This is why so many natural joint relief solutions try to stop one of the main inflammatory genes called COX-2.

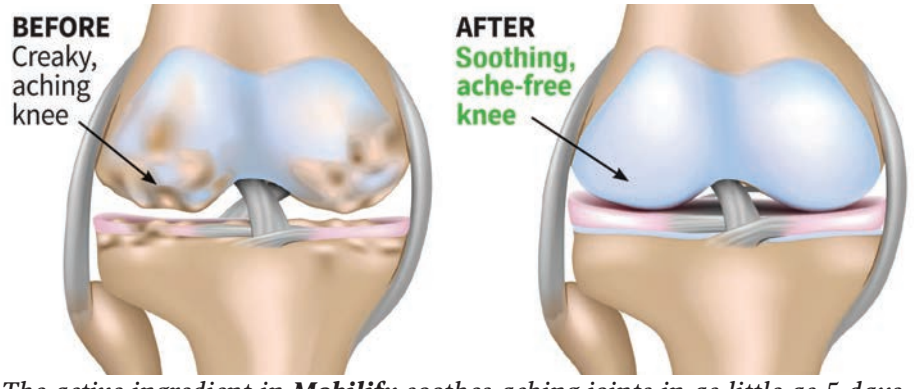
But the truth is, there are hundreds of agony-causing genes like COX-2, 5-LOX, iNOS, TNK, Interleukin 1,6,8 and many more—and stopping just one of them won't give you all the relief you need.

Doctors and scientists now confirm the "King of Oils"—Indian Frankincense—deactivates not one but 400 agony-causing genes. It does so by shutting down the inflammation command center called Nuclear Factor Kappa Beta.

NK-Kappa B is like a switch that can turn 400 inflammatory genes "on" or "off." A study in Journal of Food Lipids reports that Indian Frankincense powerfully deactivates NF-Kappa B. This journal adds that Indian Frankincense is "so powerful it shuts down the pathway triggering aching joints."

Relief That's 10 Times Faster… and in Just 5 Days

Many joint sufferers prefer natural solutions but say they work too slowly. Take the best-seller glucosamine. Good as it is, the National Institutes of Health reports that glucosamine takes as long as eight weeks to work.



*The active ingredient in **Mobilify** soothes aching joints in as little as 5 days*

Yet in a study published in the International Journal of Medical Sciences, 60 patients with stiff knees took 100 mg of Indian Frankincense or a placebo daily for 30 days. Remarkably, Indian Frankincense "significantly improved joint function and relieved discomfort in as early as five days." That's relief that is 10 times faster than glucosamine.

78% Better Relief Than the Most Popular Joint Solution

In another study, people suffering from discomfort took a formula containing Indian Frankincense and another natural substance or a popular man-made joint solution every day for 12 weeks.

The results? Stunning! At the end of the study, 64% of those taking the Indian Frankincense formula saw their joint discomfort go from moderate or severe to mild or no discomfort. Only 28% of those taking the placebo got the relief they wanted. So Indian Frankincense delivered relief at a 78% better clip than the popular man-made formula.

In addition, in a randomized, double blind, placebo controlled study, patients suffering from knee discomfort took Indian Frankincense or a placebo daily for eight weeks. Then the groups switched and got the opposite intervention. Every one of the patients taking Indian Frankincense got relief. That's a 100% success rate—numbers unseen by typical solutions.

In addition, BMJ (formerly the British Medical Journal) reports that Indian Frankincense is safe for joint relief — so safe and natural you can take it every day.

Because of clinically proven results like this, Dr. Sears has made Indian Frankincense the centerpiece of a new natural joint relief formula called **Mobilify**.

Great Results for Knees, Hips, Shoulders and Joints

Joni D. says, "**Mobilify** really helps with soreness, stiffness and mild temporary pain. The day after taking it, I was completely back to normal—so fast." Shirley M. adds, "Two weeks after taking **Mobilify**, I had no knee discomfort and could go up and down the staircase." Larry M. says, "After a week and a half of taking **Mobilify**, the discomfort, stiffness and minor aches went away… it's almost like being reborn." And avid golfer Dennis H. says, "I can attest to **Mobilify** easing discomfort to enable me to pursue my golfing days. Definitely one pill that works for me out of the many I have tried."

How to Get Mobilify

To secure the hot, new **Mobilify** formula, buyers should contact the Sears Health Hotline at **1-800-304-9908** TODAY. "It's not available in retail stores yet," says Dr. Sears. "The Hotline allows us to ship directly to the customer." Dr. Sears feels so strongly about **Mobilify**, all orders are backed by a 100% money-back guarantee. "Just send me back the bottle and any unused product within 90 days from purchase date, and I'll send you all your money back."

Use Promo Code **PFMB125** when you call to secure your supply of **Mobilify**. Lines are frequently busy and due to heightened demand, supplies are limited. To secure your suppy today, call **1-800-304-9908**.

2025 AMERICA'S BEST YOUNG FARMERS & RANCHERS

TANNER HENTO
Hento Bros.
Avon, South Dakota

By **Susan Payne**, @jpusan
Photos By **Joel Reichenberger**, @JReichPF

NEW LOVE FOR THE FARM

Tanner Hento and Kristin Vanwyngaarden farm outside Avon, South Dakota. Hento left the farm for a time, but as he visited more and more, he began to understand agriculture just felt right.

Growing up on his family farm, Tanner Hento, Avon, South Dakota, yearned to explore science and step away from agriculture. As an adolescent, he saw the struggles his parents faced—the compounding stress of loans coming due, the death of cattle, drought, diminished prices, unrelenting weather, depression and mental-health issues—and decided to spare himself from it.

"Agriculture was always embedded in my life, regardless of the times I wish it had not. Becoming a physician was my absolute priority," Hento says.

With backpack and books in hand, he went off to college in 2008 to pursue his dream.

Then, two family tragedies back-to-back sidetracked his plans but, in the process, helped him regain his love for farming.

WAYWARD JOURNEY BACK

Double-majoring in biology and English, Hento had finished his undergraduate degree and was ready to start graduate school in the fall of 2012. Like unrelenting weather, family issues started gaining pulse on his first day. He sensed something was wrong when he answered his phone.

"My mother called reminiscing on all the good she's ever done, and how she's always been proud of who I am as a son," Hento recalls. "I knew I had to race home before it was too late."

He says his mother ended her own life on that day, finally leaving her pain behind.

With his mother at peace, Hento's heart began to shift in good ways only a few months into grad school. His once tumultuous relationship with his father had begun to disentangle, and he would feel a sense of peace coming back to the family farm on weekends.

"I viewed the farm in a new light after my mother's death. Suddenly, the turmoil and adversity I viewed the farm in became positive. I found myself leaving school on the weekends more and more; I craved seeing the corn fill the combine hopper," Hento says.

Some 3½ months after his mother's death, Hento's father went in for a routine surgery but didn't recover. He passed away that December.

After tragedy, this fifth-generation farmer finds his way home.

"Unlike the death of my mother, a guiding force overcame me immediately. Not of grief or sadness, but one of hope and comfort," Hento recalls.

Within hours, Hento and his brother, Scott, who worked as a power lineman, were back on the farm batching their first load of feed for the bred heifers that would soon calve. On this day, the two decided to leave their respective fields and choose agriculture.

"We had each other and very little else," Hento says. "There were no calluses on my hand other than [from writing with] pencils up until that day. But, choosing agriculture, it felt right."

ON THE OTHER SIDE

The brothers started the new year wanting to make a name for themselves as they jumped in headfirst to manage the 1,000-acre farm, a rotation of corn, soybeans, alfalfa and a cow/calf operation.

As time progressed, strengths and weaknesses of the operation and the brothers' became evident. Decisions on economics, scale and logistics were rearing their heads—specifically, the struggle to continue the cow/calf operation.

"Weeks of tears, anger and disappointment finally led us to the decision that cattle might not be part of our narrative ... Out of the first 10 calves that were born, I think we lost six of them. Anyone who knows anything knows that's a bad rate," Hento says.

The brothers decided to focus on their strengths, which meant letting go of the cow/calf operation. With new opportunities on the horizon, the brothers' ability to work together and present a united front gave them an advantage.

"It was 2014, where after we were done combining, we saw our yields and were like, 'There may be something here,'" Hento says. "Every year after that, we started making good impressions with bankers and the community, and I started talking to different landlords."

Over the last 10 years, Hento and Scott have grown the operation, rented land to expand crop production, invested in seed partnerships with Pioneer and rented out part of their land and facilities once used for livestock production. Together, they farm 2,200 acres of soybeans, corn and alfalfa.

"I look at every field now like I can make something of it," Hento explains. "I know I can do this versus the 22-year-old that was running around pretty much terrified."

MENTAL HEALTH

As Hento walks through his fields testing the soil or checking yields, he remembers the good his father had done and how close of a relationship he had with his mom.

"My father inspires me during my lowest points. He was working for something greater than himself," Hento says. "He might not have been flawless in how ➤

TANNER HENTO
Hento Bros.
Avon, South Dakota

he expressed love, but he was a man who worked with drive, passion and a desire to not let everything that came before him be in vain."

Hento's parents divorced long before their deaths, but he says losing both in the same year made his transition to agriculture more difficult. And, he makes taking care of his mental health a priority.

"I really knew my mom well, and I saw the path she went down. If she would have been able to tell people she's not OK, that would have made a big difference. Her time might have passed, but there's so many people that can be saved yet," he says.

Hento's message on mental health is that it's OK not to be OK.

"There are days where it feels like you lack purpose, or some days you wake up stressed, and you're not sure why. The worst part some days about farming, the tough days, you know you should be OK, and you're not. And, it's almost worse having that feeling."

Tanner Hento and his brother, Scott, farm 2,200 acres.

SCIENCE AND COMMUNITY

When not on the farm, Hento invests time into what drove his love for science at a young age: the school's science fair.

"I volunteer my time during the local science fair, both in crafting and fine-tuning the projects. I judge the projects both on local and regional levels. Showing children that are at such malleable moments in their life that knowledge and adaptability are lifelong journeys brings me such an immense amount of joy," Hento says.

He also is an emergency medical technician (EMT) in Wagner, home to the Yankton Indian Reservation. He's assisted women in emergency births and has responded to a host of other traumatic health events on the reservation.

"I know I had a past life, and an EMT is not a physician, but it does help me keep a connection to what I once wanted to be, so that brings me a lot of peace," Hento says.

His involvement in the agriculture industry included applying for the Corteva Young Leader Program, which helped get him connected to the South Dakota Soybean Association, where he currently serves on the board of directors.

"Thinking of the generations that came before me, and even more so the generations coming after me, causes me to never waste a moment. This life I've been given is such a privilege. And, I never forget that," Hento says. ///

JENNIFER CARRICO

Evaluate Factors To Calculate Hay Needs

Email Dr. Ken McMillan at ***vet@dtn.com***

Q ***We had a rough hay year, and I am sure we will not have enough hay. We will need to buy hay while it is still available, but I don't know how much I will need. Is there a good way to estimate how much hay we need to buy?***

A **DR. McMILLAN:** This is tough because every operation is different even in the same area. Some farms have winter grasses that provide significant nutrition for some or most of the winter months. Others are almost totally dependent on hay and supplements. Cow sizes vary, and some cows are just more efficient than others. The stage of gestation and production will have a tremendous effect. Dry cows in the early third trimester have much lower nutritional requirements than a cow nursing a calf. And, the biggest variable is how long and how hard the winter is. Some winters come early, stay late and are colder and wetter than others. Cold, wet conditions can increase nutrient requirements 20% or more. Hay quality also varies greatly. Cows need to eat a lot less high-quality hay to get the same nutrient requirements as average quality hay, and cows may not be able to eat enough low-quality hay to meet their requirements even if they are in that early third trimester.

But, there are some rough guidelines. Let's assume your cows average 1,200 pounds. Traditionally, we have estimated cattle will consume about 2% of their body weight in hay, so that comes out to 24 pounds of hay on a dry matter basis. So that we are comparing apples to apples, feeds should always be converted to a dry matter basis. Let's assume the hay is 70% dry matter on an as-fed basis. The math is 24 pounds divided by 0.70 equals 34 pounds of hay per cow per day. For this exercise, let's assume a 25-head cow herd. Next, you need to estimate how many days you expect to feed hay. In the South, this number may be 100 to 120 days, and in the North, it may be 150 days or more.

For 100 days, the math is 100 days multiplied by 34 pounds multiplied by 25 head equals 85,000 pounds per ton divided by 2,000 pounds per ton equals 42.5 tons. But, what if your cows are 1,500 pounds, and you estimate 150 days feeding? These cattle will need almost 43 pounds, so the math is 150 days multiplied by 43 pounds multiplied by 25 head equals 161,250 pounds divided by 2,000 pounds per ton equals 80.6 tons. As you can see, this is a huge difference.

There is one additional factor that must be calculated, and that is hay loss from storage and feeding. Hay stored outside, uncovered, on the ground and not fed in rings or rolled out can have a loss of more than 50%. You must estimate your losses and adjust the amount above to account for this. More importantly, you need to start now to minimize hay loss.

Q ***Our cows do not seem to be holding their body condition this winter as they have in the past, and it has been pretty mild so far. We calve in the spring and usually overwinter on hay and some stockpiled forages. What could be causing this?***

A **DR. McMILLAN:** There are many variables that could be in play, but I would first look at hay quality. I recommend that each hay cutting or any purchased hay have a forage analysis run on it so you know the quality you are feeding. This will help you compare hay from one year to the next and can help you know if cattle need supplemental feeding.

Hay quality can vary greatly based on rain and the stage that you harvest. One of the biggest factors affecting hay quality is the stage of maturity at harvest. Most grass hays should be harvested when the grass has reached the "late boot stage," which is when the seed head first emerges from the sheath.

Fall and winter is a great time to get a head start on next year's hay crop. Get soil samples as soon as possible. These should be done every two to three years and as often as annual on intensively managed hayfields. The soil test can be used in the spring to apply the correct blend of nutrients for optimal growth. Not only will getting your soil fertility right improve your forage yields and quality, desirable plants will be healthier and better able to compete with weeds, insects and drought conditions.

Always remember: We are grass farmers first. Take care of your grasses. ///

Story and Photos By **Becky Mills**

Match Hay Amount TO COW NEED

Too many producers underestimate the weight of cattle and overestimate the weight of bales.

When a producer calls Jackson County Extension coordinator Greg Pittman and asks him how much hay he needs for the winter, Pittman fires back with a series of questions. How much stockpiled grass do you have for the winter? Will you have any winter grazing? What age are your cows? While the last question might seem a bit odd, Pittman explains, "If she is 4, 5 or 6 years old, she's heavier than if she is a 2-year-old."

Pittman wishes producers could give him a closer estimate of what their hay bales actually weigh, as well as the average weight of their cows, so he could give them more than an educated guess. "A lot of people think their cows weigh 1,000 to 1,200 pounds and their hay bales weigh 1,000 pounds." It turns out, they usually overestimate the weight of their bales and underestimate the weight of their cows.

His goal is to dispel the myth of the 1,000-pound bale and 1,000-pound cow.

Thanks to a set of scales owned by the county Extension service and loaned to producers, Pittman knows his 4- x 5.5-foot bales weigh between 850 to 975 pounds, depending on moisture content and forage type. He also knows the 60 commercial cows he runs with his father, Jerry, average around 1,400 pounds. If you don't have access to a set of scales, your local co-op should be able to let you run your empty and full hay trailer over them. If you don't have scales in your working chute, check your ticket the next time you send an open cow to the stockyard. With the improved genetics of today's bulls, she's likely to weigh more than you think.

USE THIS FORMULA

If you do have a fairly accurate estimate on the average weight of your bales and your cows, Pittman recommends this formula:

Head in the herd multiplied by average pounds of body weight multiplied by dry matter intake, % of body weight multiplied by days, with all of that divided by (1-storage loss, %) multiplied by (1-feeding loss, %) multiplied by 2,000 pounds per ton.

Or, simplified as:

$$\frac{\text{Head in the herd x avg. lbs. of b.w. x DMI, \% of b.w. x days}}{\text{(1-Storage Loss, \%) x (1-Feeding Loss, \%) x 2000 lbs./ton}}$$

Hay Feeding Loss by Feeding Method

Feeding method	Feeding period (days)	% Waste
Mechanical hay feeder/unroller	<1	2–7%
Cone hay ring	1–3	2–7%
Hay ring	1–3	4–8%
Hay cradle	1–3	15–20%
Bale, no protection	1–3	20% +
Bale, unrolled	4+	20%+

Hay Feeding Loss by Storage Method

Storage method	Twine (% of dry weight)	Net wrap (% of dry weight)
Pole barn	2–5%	2–5%
Hoop structure	2–5%	2–5%
Tarp	5–10%	5–8%
Stack pad		
(covered stack)	5–10%	5–8%
(uncovered stack)	15–40%	10–30%
Plastic wrap	5–1	N/A
Outside on ground		
(well-drained)	20–40%	15–40%
(poor drainage/shaded)	30–60%	30–45%

Adapted from: Southern Forages (5th edition) Buskirk et al., 2003. J. Anim. Sci. 81:109-115, Ball et al., 1998; and Hancock, unpublished data.

Here's an example of a 100-head herd with cows weighing an average of 1,400 pounds, the producer feeds hay in a hay ring (6% feeding loss), stores his hay on a covered stack pad with net wrap (5% storage loss) and plans to feed hay for 120 days:

100 multiplied by 1,400 pounds multiplied by .02 multiplied by 120 divided by .95 multiplied by .94 multiplied by 2,000 equals 188 tons of hay needed.

The Pittmans store their net-wrapped hay in barns except when they have a bumper crop. Then, they cover the extra with a tarp. If hay is wrapped with twine, it can be a 2 to 5% loss if it is stored in a pole barn compared to a whopping 30 to 60% loss if it is stored outside in a poorly drained or shady spot.

"A ton bale of hay in the field isn't the same as a ton of hay fed," retired Banks County Extension agent Zach McCann says. "You lose 8 to 9 inches of the bale to weathering or about a third of the hay bale."

"You can pay for a hay barn with hay losses," Pittman adds.

The Pittmans also guard against hay loss by feeding hay in rings, which usually means a 4 to 8% loss compared to feeding it without a ring for a 20% loss.

Experience also adds to the hard math. Typically, their Angus-based cows eat around 9.5 to 10 bales a winter. That's supplemented with stockpiled fescue and home-grown ryegrass and oat, or bermudagrass hay. If needed, they'll also feed corn gluten pellets, especially to the replacement heifers.

TAKE THE TEST

Besides weighing the occasional bale, the Pittmans cut down on their guesswork by religiously testing their hay. "You can look at it, and it may be beautiful, but it could still be poor quality," Pittman explains. "Relative Forage Quality (RFQ) has made it pretty simple." The average RFQ is 100 and is based on a formula that takes both total digestible nutrients (TDN) and dry matter intake (DMI) into account. Their hay runs typically 55 to 62% TDN and 10 to 16% crude protein.

He adds, "Look at the moisture level as sampled. There is a hay barn that burns down every year in this county. If the hay is over 25% moisture, I'd be highly concerned. Store it outside."

The Pittmans also depend on the hay test for the nitrate content. High nitrates are a possibility in a well-fertilized hayfield, especially after a drought, and can be fatal to cattle.

With the results of the hay test, they know what hay to feed to what class of cattle and how much to supplement. "We try to feed our best hay right before calving and right after—we aim for 115 RFQ or better," Pittman explains. "At the same time, we hope we have winter grazing. We feed our medium- to lesser-quality hay when the winter grazing is at its best in late winter and early spring, when the forages are building in the pasture, and we're trying to extend our grazing time."

Replacement heifers are fed with feeder calves and have access to more grazing and higher-quality hay. They are also supplemented with corn gluten.

At Elrod Farms, owner Cole Elrod and farm manager Beau Brissey use the same approach with home-grown hay and ryegrass baleage, which can run over 130 RFQ. Like the Pittmans, they store their hay in a barn. If they run out of barn space, they feed the hay stored outside first to minimize loss. They also feed their hay in a ring.

The higher-quality baleage goes toward developing the bulls and replacement heifers in the purebred Angus operation, as well as first-calf heifers. They save the lower RFQ hay for cold, rainy or snowy weather. Using a hay blower, they put it out in windrows so baby calves can bed down in it. "It is a game changer," Elrod says.

He also uses a genetic approach to cut down on the amount of high-quality hay he needs. "We try really hard to breed a cow that can make it on low-RFQ hay and little else." ///

Weighing hay bales lets the producers know how to determine how much hay is needed for their herd.

Greg Pittman

Test So You Don't Guess

Fortunately, taking hay samples isn't rocket science—that's left for the folks in the lab doing the actual testing.

Here's what you need:

1. **a clean bucket**
2. **a hay probe and a drill**
3. **a gallon ziplock bag**
4. **a permanent marker**

Greg Pittman, Extension coordinator in Jackson County, Georgia, recommends testing at least 10% of the bales in every field, every cutting. "With dry hay, we test it as soon after rolling it as possible. That's a true measure of moisture. As long as it is below 18%, no quality is lost if it is stored indoors. With baleage, don't test it for 40 days or more after wrapping so it will go through fermentation."

To get a representative sample, Pittman recommends inserting the probe on the curved side of the bale. Use the bucket to mix the samples from the other bales in the same field and cutting. Put the sample in a plastic bag, and mark the field and baling date on the bag.

Most county Extension offices can send it to a state forage testing laboratory for you, although there is typically a charge per sample.

New Year, New Investments In Your Family Business

GETTY IMAGES

The end of the year offers a chance to reflect on what went well over the last 12 months. It also brings opportunities to make your family business measurably better. This year, commit to a range of investments in key people, financial knowledge and future transitions. Specifically, think about those investments in terms of mental or emotional energy, conversations and planning efforts.

Invest in People. "People" in this case means your family members or key staff, and two types of investments warrant your consideration. The first is developing others, including coaching, mentoring or teaching them. It involves sharing your wisdom, encouraging them to grow or bringing them along in understanding some of your daily activities. Identify a person close to you, and invest in making them better in some way.

The second kind of investment in people is repairing or improving relationships. We all have places in our lives where the connection we have with a family or team member is not as good as it could be. Perhaps a past conflict or misunderstanding damaged your relationship. Maybe you find their personality, communication or work style frustrating. But, if you can improve the bond, even a little, it will improve your perspective on life and your feelings about the workplace. It will have a noticeable and positive impact on your day, and improve the morale of those around you, as others often feel the tension between two people.

Invest in Financial Knowledge. My nonagricultural friends marvel at all the subjects a farmer or rancher must know to run a successful business. Animal science, agronomy, equipment repair, engineering and construction, human resources, commodity marketing, finance, Farm Service Agency programs—the list goes on. Improving your knowledge in any of these areas will be helpful to the business, but one specific topic in which all agriculture business owners can improve is their financial knowledge.

Between cash and accrual accounting, grain or livestock raised and sold over multiple years, deferred income and prepaid expenses to manage taxes, multiple entities and complex ownership structures for liability protection and estate planning, knowing where you stand financially is no small chore. Spend some time and mental energy developing a clearer picture of your financial performance. Meet with your lender and accountant, perhaps together, to walk through their observations and set clear financial goals for the coming year. You will gain a clearer idea of how to make your business stronger.

Invest in Future Transitions. Almost all farms and ranches face an impending generational transition. If the younger generations return, the management of the company will need to be handed off. Even if they don't return, ownership of land will likely be passed on to them. If neither management nor ownership transition will occur, then a different set of plans around retirement and asset sales is relevant.

This year, take a step toward clarifying future transitions. Talk with your spouse, your adult children or your sibling business partners about your future. Identify tasks you should hand off. Update your last will and testament, or have your attorney review your estate plan. You and your family members will have more peace of mind knowing you've done what you can to smooth the succession of activities or assets.

Most New Year's resolutions are never accomplished. Instead, commit to investments in areas you know will produce a return for your family and business. If you invest in people, invest in financial knowledge and invest in future transitions, you will look back a year from now and be proud of all you achieved. ///

Email Lance Woodbury at
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Story and Photos By **Des Keller**

A BETTER BALANCE

A son and father trade places for the job that better fits their lifestyle.

Caleb Coleman

Sometimes the obvious business option isn't the best life path. That's what South Carolina's Caleb Coleman determined in 2023 after years of growth he and his father had experienced in their seed business.

At the young age of 30, Coleman concluded he couldn't properly do justice to all three main elements in his life: the seed business, their farm operation and his family—wife, Morgan, and 3-year-old son, Watson.

"What was the point of making this money if you can't see your kid enjoy some of it," Coleman says. "I decided I'd rather be home more." Today, he farms just under 1,000 acres of corn, soybeans and wheat, along with sesame grown on contract.

CHANGING COURSE

The decision wasn't an easy one. Prior to the change, Coleman farmed and also served 10 regional customers providing cover crop custom seed blends. While 10 may not sound like a lot, one of his clients was using 8,000 acres of cover crops on eastern South Carolina's sandy soil.

"I'd get done with harvest and go immediately into blending cover crop seed as hard as I could, because everyone wanted their cover seed yesterday," Coleman explains. "It just got to be a lot."

A decade ago, before he even finished college at Clemson University, Coleman had begun working with his father, Carl, on the use of cover crops on their farm. That interest eventually led to him growing cover crops for seed and selling what they didn't use. While at the National Farm Machinery Show in Louisville, Kentucky, one year, he was recruited by a Western-based cover crop company to sell its seed in the Southeast.

Within a few years, Caleb and Carl started their own seed business, Little Mill Seeds, either growing or contracting with other growers to produce wheat or cereal rye. They would also buy cover crop seeds not generally grown in the Southeast, like clover or radish, to make available to customers.

In an interesting twist, their cover crop seed sales led the Colemans to selling seed for the major row crops—corn, soybeans and wheat, as well.

As Caleb continued to handle cover crop seed sales, Carl took on row crop seed sales. But, they didn't sell the seeds of the major companies. Instead, they marketed off-patent or public hybrids and varieties to cut farmer costs. For instance, they use corn from companies such as Nebraska-based Seitec and Hybrid85, as well as Augusta Seed Co., in Virginia. They also use public varieties developed at Clemson University.

"Dad knew that farming was a good way to make a living," Caleb says. "But, you need a niche to subsidize the bad years. He preached a backup plan." For years, Carl's backup had been a steady business of doing custom chemical applications. Cover crop seeds became Caleb's niche.

TIME FOR A SWITCH

The seed business grew, and within eight years, the Colemans had upgraded into larger facilities three times. In addition, the 800-acre Coleman farm picked up another 200 acres. ➤

New Blood Flow Breakthrough Helps Men Enjoy Strong, Long-Lasting Intimacy – At Any Age

A new discovery that supports nitric oxide production and healthy blood flow gives men across the country new hope for a satisfying bedroom performance

After age 40, it's common knowledge that performance begins to decline in many men. However, a new potency formula is showing that any healthy man can now enjoy strong, long-lasting, and frequent performance at any age.

This doctor-designed protocol, created by leading anti-aging expert Dr. Al Sears, is celebrating its highly effective 5th generation formula, which is already helping men support a healthy performance and libido.

When Dr. Sears released the first pill — Primal Max Black — it quickly became a trusted men's performance helper, promoting bedroom fun across America.

It worked by supporting healthy testosterone levels. However, Dr. Sears knows from almost 30 years in private practice that testosterone isn't the only performance challenge men face. That's why his dual strategy includes attention to blood flow because no amount of testosterone will replace the need for healthy blood flow for successful intimacy.

And this second formula became Primal Max Red.

SUPPORTING THE MECHANICS IS AS IMPORTANT AS SUPPORTING THE HORMONES

While Primal Max Black helped maintain optimal testosterone, Primal Max Red tackles a lesser-known challenge.

Truth is, we ignore the importance of blood flow and circulation for supporting a man's sex life. Because without blood flow, nothing happens.

Luckily, a Nobel prize-winning scientist discovered a means to help support performance, strength, and confidence by supporting vital blood flow, which is essential for a satisfying performance.

Using this landmark Nobel Prize as its basis, Primal Max Red supports healthy blood flow by using a key ingredient to support nitric oxide production. Nitric oxide is the molecule that allows blood vessels to relax and expand, thereby increasing blood flow.

Al Sears MD, who has authored over 500 scientific papers and has appeared on more than 50 media outlets including ABC News, CNN, ESPN, and many more says, "Supporting optimal blood flow is an essential component of maintaining sexual health as men age. Then, once we optimized it and had a great deal of success, we set out to see if we could do even better."

Conventional nitric oxide supplements are limited to smaller doses of key ingredients because everything must fit into small capsules. But Dr. Sears followed the science and introduced a revolutionary new powder version of his Primal Max Red formula.

This new powder formulation enabled him to include bigger doses of the key nutrients, which matched the doses used in published clinical studies. Not only is the formula more effective because it uses proven doses, it also means you get a delicious drink instead of more and more pills.

HEALTHY BLOOD FLOW DELIVERS SATISFYING RESULTS

Primal Max Red is the best way to maintain an active life.

IMMEDIATE GAME CHANGER FOR AMERICAN MEN: Doctors are now recommending Primal Max Red for its ability to support the vital but overlooked need for healthy blood flow during intimacy.

It works by supporting blood flow and the production of nitric oxide.

This critical support is the reason men across the country are enjoying a full and satisfying performance at any age. Because testosterone is not the only factor men need to consider.

Primal Max Red effectively promotes healthy blood flow that men can use to support intimacy in the bedroom. The unique and powerful blend of ingredients in Primal Max Red supports the kind of sexual health and performance men are looking for.

"There was a time when supporting healthy blood flow for men was impossible," Dr. Sears said. "But science and technology have come a long way in recent years. And now, with the creation of nitric oxide-supporting Primal Max Red, men can feel more confident and more in control while they enjoy intimacy at any age."

Now for men across America, it's much easier to support peak performance as they get older.

HOW TO GET PRIMAL MAX RED ALONG WITH COMPLEMENTARY BOTTLES OF PRIMAL MAX BLACK

To secure the new Primal Max Red formula, readers should contact the Primal Max Red Health Hotline at **1-800-276-6109** and use promo code **PFPMAX125** within 48 hours. And to cut down on the cost for customers, it can only be purchased directly from the company.

READERS ALSO GET AN EXTRA BONUS SUPPLY OF PRIMAL MAX BLACK

Every order of Primal Max Red gets a matching supply of Dr. Sears' testosterone formula Primal Max Black for no additional charge.

All orders are backed by a 100% money-back guarantee. If any user is not satisfied, just send back the bottle(s) or any unused product within 90 days from the purchase date, and you'll get all your money back.


Carl Coleman

"The business grew to the point that I couldn't continue to farm and run the seed business," Carl says. "Caleb really enjoyed farming, so we agreed to switch." Caleb's primary responsibility became the 1,000-acre farm, while Carl took on the seed business full time. Not surprisingly, they help each other when needed.

Caleb's longtime cover crop clients were turned over to his dad. Both Colemans are quick to add that none of this would have been possible if Caleb's brother-in-law, Michael Benjamin, married to Caleb's sister, Heather, hadn't started helping with the seed business. An insurance salesman by trade, Benjamin left his regular nine-to-five job to work full time in the seed business.

In the process, Little Mill Seeds became Choice Ag as the Colemans and Benjamin thought the name change better reflected the choices they offered farmers.

"We can sell fully traited, Roundup Ready corn for $100 less per bag," Carl says. "We deal with independent companies who are willing to give us a deal we can then pass on to the farmer."

Caleb Coleman needed a change. Too many tasks to complete between farming and a seed and cover crops business left little time for family. So, he and his father, Carl, switched roles, which has been a win-win now that Caleb can spend more time with his son, Watson.

It isn't like the Coleman farm doesn't work hand in glove with the seed business. In addition to using cover crops from Choice Ag, Caleb also grew 200 acres of sesame last year on contract, with the seed being provided through Choice Ag. Choice Ag has benefited from a nearly 80% increase in the use of cover crops (excluding Conservation Reserve Program acres) in the U.S. since 2012, according to the Census of Agriculture. Twelve years ago, more than 10 million acres were planted to cover crops. That number increased to slightly less than 18 million acres by 2022.

A BETTER BALANCE

As for the job swap, Caleb's wife, who works a marketing job from home, says the change has been beneficial.

"Caleb does a great job prioritizing and making his family a priority, too," Morgan says. "He lets us know ahead of time when the farm is going to keep him working. I won't say it is always easy, but this is a fantastic way for Watson to grow up, around tractors and heavy machinery. He loves it."

And her stay-at-home job does offer Morgan some flexibility to make the occasional lunch drop-off or a run to the machinery dealer for a part.

For Caleb, the change means more time to spend with his family. "We're happy to make a living off the land and enjoy life," he adds while holding young Watson in a wheat field. ///

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Beginnings

GETTY IMAGES

The beginning is the most important part of the work.
PLATO

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.
2 CORINTHIANS 5:17 (KJV)

There will come a time when you believe everything is finished; that will be the beginning.
LOUIS L'AMOUR

Every day I feel is a blessing from God. And I consider it a new beginning. Yeah, everything is beautiful.
PRINCE

Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end.
SENECA

Failure is the opportunity to begin again more intelligently.
HENRY FORD

You can start new chapters in your life because it's your life, your book.
OPRAH WINFREY

I make so many beginnings there never will be an end.
LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

No matter how hard the past is, you can always begin again.
BUDDHA

Forgiveness says you are given another chance to make a new beginning.
DESMOND TUTU

The beginning is always today.
MARY SHELLEY

Keep on beginning and failing. Each time you fail, start all over again, and you will grow stronger until you have accomplished a purpose—not the one you began with perhaps, but one you'll be glad to remember.
ANNE SULLIVAN

Though thy beginning was small, yet thy latter end should greatly increase.
JOB 8:7 (KJV)

It is not death that a man should fear, but he should fear never beginning to live.
MARCUS AURELIUS

Even the greatest was once a beginner. Don't be afraid to take that first step.
MUHAMMAD ALI

You may have a fresh start any moment you choose, for this thing that we call "failure" is not the falling down, but the staying down.
MARY PICKFORD

If you don't like the road you're walking, start paving another one.
DOLLY PARTON

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