



# INTERVIEW

## SHAWN BULA, partner/owner, Signature Farms LLC

By Joe Kertzman, managing editor, *Badger Common'Tater*

*A story of resilience*, like the backstories of many farms and farmers, Signature Farms LLC, and under previous ownership as Bula-Gieringer Farms, has not only survived the usual daily curveballs thrown by Mother Nature, but also a tornado and an unfortunate fire.

**NAME:** Shawn Bula

**TITLE:** Partner/owner

**COMPANY:** Signature Farms LLC

**LOCATION:** Grand Marsh, WI

**HOMETOWN:** Grand Marsh

**YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION:** Three with Signature Farms and 25 with Bula-Gieringer Farms

**PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT:**

Bula-Gieringer Farms

**SCHOOLING:** Associate Degree in Business and Marketing from Mid-State Technical College

**ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS:** Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA) Chip and Processor Relations (Frozen) committees, and past member of U.S. Potato Board (now Potatoes USA)

**AWARDS/HONORS:** WPVGA 2013 Young Grower of the Year Award, and the farm garnering Top Grower Awards from McCain Foods and other honors from Ore-Ida Foods at the Plover factory in years past

**FAMILY:** Tricia McLain, and five children, Cailey, Kyra, Connor, Addison, and Dashed

**HOBBIES:** Snowmobiling, boating, and family time

Yet, when approaching the farm in Grand Marsh, Wisconsin, one is welcomed by beautiful buildings, a new sign, office and shop, and fields as far as the eye can see.

One of the largest potato and vegetable operations in Wisconsin, Signature Farms raises approximately 10,000 acres of potatoes, green beans, seed corn, sweet corn, field and silage corn, soybeans, alfalfa, and sweet potatoes, as well as 200-250 head of black Angus cattle at any one time on 1,100 acres of pastureland.

With Bula-Gieringer Farms founded in 1980 by Shawn Bula's father, Mark, in partnership with Ray Gieringer and later transitioning to Mark Gieringer and the rest of the Gieringer family, the operation encompasses land in several Wisconsin counties, as well as working acreage in Florida.

To offer potatoes and vegetables year-round, or as Shawn says, "as close as we can," Signature Farms partners with Paul Sowinski of Sowinski Farms on land in Melbourne, Florida, where they grown corn and potatoes, the latter for chips and dicing for fresh market potato salad.

### GOOD NEIGHBORS

"We all play well together," Shawn says of he and his neighboring growers in Central Wisconsin.

Indeed, when the Signature Farms shop burned down, in 2022, Alsum

**Above:** One of the largest potato and vegetable operations in the Central Sands of Wisconsin, Shawn Bula says Signature Farms raises approximately 10,000 acres of potatoes, green beans, seed corn, sweet corn, field and silage corn, soybeans, alfalfa, and sweet potatoes.



Farms reached out to offer use of a shop on land purchased from the Wallendal Farm in Grand Marsh.

“We got in there at the end of July or early August and were fully moved into the new office by late October,” Shawn says. “It would have been a little tough otherwise.”

As it turns out, through the generosity of many farms and businesses, including Big Iron Equipment and Sand County Equipment offering to perform maintenance on planters, harvesters and other implements, Signature Farms never missed a growing season.

“Everyone reached out, really, all the neighboring businesses and farms. It was overwhelming,” Shawn, who has been working on the farm since he was a young boy, stresses.

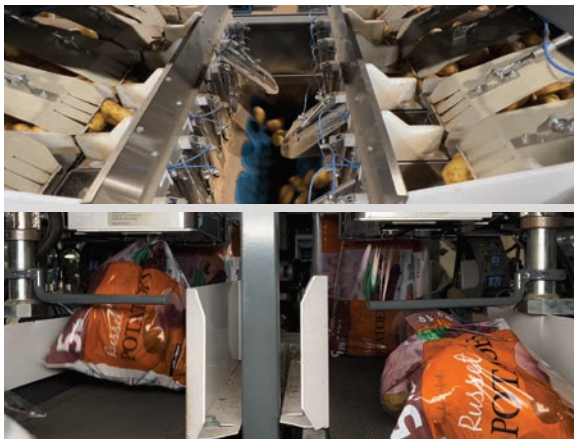
**Tell me a little about Signature Farms.** Signature Farms was formed and started in 2021 and was a change of ownership from Bula-Gieringer Farms. Not a whole lot has changed in the day-to-day operations besides the name change.

In 2021, my dad, Mark, and myself started the buyout process of the Gieringer family and changed the name to Signature Farms.

**Are you still growing potatoes mainly for the chip and frozen process markets? If so, how many acres, what varieties, and for which customers?** Yes, we are. We grow around 5,000 acres of potatoes for processing, consisting of both round whites for chips and russets for French fries and tater tots, etc.

The chip customers that we supply from our Wisconsin location are Kettle Foods, Shearers, Backers, Saratoga chips, and Utz, and we also grow chipping potatoes for Frito-Lay in Florida, which are included in the 5,000 acres. The russets are grown

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mainly for McCain Foods right here in Plover.

**How about your vegetable and sweet potato acreage?** We grow roughly 1,000-1,500 acres of green beans, 500-1,000 of peas, 500-1,000 acres of sweet corn, all for canning, 500-750 acres of seed corn, 300-500 acres of silage corn, 850-1,200 acres of sweet potatoes, 500 acres of alfalfa, and 250 acres in field corn and soybeans.

Most of our sweet potatoes are for McCain Foods, with a small amount going to Bonduelle for dicing.

**Where or in what counties is most of the farm's acreage, and how many miles do you stretch in each direction?** Most of our acres are in Adams County. From the home farm, we spread out up to 30-35 miles in all directions.

**Tell me about the new shop and location.** As you know, we

The drone shots show sweet potatoes being harvested on Signature Farms LLC. The family farm raises 850-1,200 acres of sweet potatoes a year for McCain Foods.

unfortunately dealt with a fire in October of 2022. We lost our shop, potato planters, some tractors, semis, trailers, pickups, and all our parts and supplies.

Things did turn out for the best in the end, as we were fortunate enough to build a new office right onto the shop



Shown with her dad, Shawn, in the first photo, and her grandpa, Mark, in the second image, Kyra Bula is a college student who is getting involved with the farm and learning all aspects of the operation.

and have everything in one location.

**Has the farm changed focus or philosophies in any areas?** We have probably become a little more focused on technology in the last 5-6 years and look very hard at where and how we can implement more technology from some automation or better equipment setups to do a better job throughout the farm.

**How many full-time and seasonal employees does Signature Farms have working there? How many are family members and in what capacities?** My dad, Mark, and I have 65 full-time employees between the farm and our trucking operation, and roughly 75-90 seasonal employees depending on the time of year.

My daughter, Kyra, is now working with us, getting involved in and learning all aspects of the operation.

*“We are constantly looking at our irrigation systems and wells, trying to implement new technologies for the best use of water management.”*

**– Shawn Bula**

My nephew, Conner, is also here helping in the day-to-day operations, and my kids, Dasher and Addison, work part-time on the farm.

**What is your focus on the farm and what duties does that entail?**

My father and I both oversee the day-to-day operations and do all the decision making for the most part. We have some key employees helping us with that also. We both

handle the contract negotiations and crop planning, and oversee planting, growing, and harvesting.

**You are a member of the WPVGA Chip and Processor Relations (Frozen) committees and were a Wisconsin rep for the United States Potato Board (now Potatoes USA). Why is it important for you to be involved?** I think it’s important to

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be involved in those things so that we stay on top of what's currently going on in the industry, and to have a voice on issues or what's currently happening on the farm end of things.

**It was an incredibly dry growing season in 2023. How important was irrigation to your operation, and what new irrigation technologies do**

**you employ?** Irrigation is incredibly important in our operation overall. We are constantly looking at our irrigation systems and wells, trying to implement new technologies for the best use of water management.

We use VRI (variable rate irrigation) and telemetry and keep up on our sprinkler packages to make sure we

**Above:** Machinery on Signature Farms includes a John Deere 9630T tractor used mainly for tillage, a Case unit set up for spraying, and a fully loaded potato truck.

are uniformly applying water and not wasting it.

**What else can you tell me about water management, whether quantity or quality, and any steps**



Shawn Bula does a final inspection on round white potatoes as they're loaded into a semi-trailer at Signature Farms.



**your farm is taking in that area.** We watch our water management very closely. That includes soil moisture checking daily, and upgrading equipment such as sprinkler packages, and well pumps, etc., so we aren't under- or overwatering.

**How many center pivots does the farm run?** Around a hundred.

**What does Signature Farms do better today than in your 2012 interview with Tamas Houlihan?** I think our water and fertilizer management has improved a lot since then, from efficiencies with better equipment and newer technologies to placement and timing.

**How long can you store potatoes, and have you advanced in that area?** The longest we have ever stored potatoes is until July 17th, and on



Signature Farms raises 200-250 head of black Angus cattle at any one time on 1,100 acres of pastureland.

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average, we store until mid-June.

We have built a couple new storages over the last 5-6 years, added telemetry and newer control panels to most of our warehouses, and updated the humidity sensors to get a better handle and control of things. We can store up to 1,450,000

hundredweight of potatoes, roughly.

**So, you can almost store year-round?**

We can get close to that if needed, depending on varieties and how the growing season went, which is a big part of the equation. The efforts are mostly for our closer customers, like McCains, and Kettle Foods. Cost is a

**Left:** Sweet potatoes are planted at Signature Farms.

**Above:** Shawn Bula monitors potato sorting and grading via a TOMRA control panel.

huge factor for potatoes coming in from other states.

**Does Signature Farms have its own shipping arm, and if so, how many**



**As round white potatoes are harvested on Signature Farms, a fieldworker picks out rocks and debris.**



**trucks?** We do. It's run under the name B&G Enterprises LLC, and we run roughly 32-35 semis over the road. That includes company drivers and owner-operators.

**What are your personal goals on the farm, Shawn?** My goal is to keep improving in as many aspects of the

farm as I can, whether that's growing a better crop or implementing newer and better technology as we can. And hopefully, with my daughter getting involved, I'll be able to grow the overall operation.

**How about a goal for the farm itself, then?** The focus on the farm is to grow and maintain a high level of

**Left:** Signature Farms can store up to 200,000 bags of sweet potatoes.

**Above:** When Shawn Bula was teaching his daughter, Kyra, what to look for when potatoes are in storage, he took her to the top of the shed to get a bird's-eye view.

quality crops and products to provide to our customers. **BCT**

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