



# INTERVIEW

**PAUL SOWINSKI,**  
vice president, Sowinski Farms, Inc.

By Joe Kertzman, managing editor, Badger Common'Tater

**NAME:** Paul Sowinski

**TITLE:** Vice president

**COMPANY:** Sowinski Farms, Inc.

**LOCATION:** Rhinelander, Wisconsin, and Charleston, Missouri

**HOMETOWN:** Sugar Camp, WI

**YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION:** 33

**SCHOOLING:** Associate degree from Fox Valley Tech in agri-business

**ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS:**

Member of Sugar Camp Town Board, Sugar Camp Youth Club, Sugar Camp Snowmobile Club and St. Kunegunda Church

**AWARDS/HONORS:** 2012 Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA) Young Grower of the Year, WPVGA Board, 2009 Frito-Lay North Central Region Grower of the Year, Snyder's Lance Transportation Supplier of the Year (Sowinski Trucking), 2012, 2014 and 2015

**FAMILY:** Married to Tunie, and four children, Lauren, Maddie, Brad and Kara

**HOBBIES:** Hunting, fishing, cranberry farming and raising beef cattle

*Paul Sowinski* is proud of the fact that his father, Alvin, worked in conjunction with the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA) to promote washed potatoes for chipping.

“They proved that washed potatoes save chip companies 50-70 cents per hundredweight,” he says. “Sowinski Farms is still working with the University of Wisconsin and other research facilities to breed better varieties, not only for the grower, but also for chip companies and consumers.”

Sowinski Farms signed its first contract with Frito-Lay in 1955 and received the company’s North Central Region Grower of the Year award in 2009.

Henry and Evelyn Sowinski started the farm, in 1932, where they logged, grew Christmas trees and raised dairy cows. Alvin and David (Sonny) began the potato operation with Henry in the late 1940’s.

**CHIPPING QUALITY RESEARCH**

“At that time, Sowinski Farms’ leaders saw the need for research in the areas of chipping quality, and, perhaps by researching a better chipping potato, improved storage conditions, better handling and

increased volume equipment,” Paul relates.

“While working towards those goals, Sowinski Farms was the first grower to ever contract with Red Dot Foods,” he adds.

In the late 1980’s, potato chip sales increased across the country to a maximum number.

“There was a need for the key raw material to fill the fourth of July window,” Paul explains. “That provided an opportunity for Sowinski Farms to expand to another growing area.”

“So, in 1985, Sowinski Farms began farming in Southeast Missouri,” he continues. “Volume at the Missouri location continues to increase each

**Above:** Is there a pot of gold at the end of that rainbow? This issue’s interviewee, Paul Sowinski, hopes so, as the beautiful picture of the potato field under the rainbow was taken at the Sowinski Farms location in Charleston, Missouri, where potatoes are harvested and immediately shipped.



year. We currently have the capacity to load up to 100 trailers per day.”

Paul, Alvin, Greg and John operate the farm, along with some 4th-generation family members, and Sonny has recently retired.

“We are fortunate to have many other family members and employees who have helped us over many years of operation,” Paul stresses.

**What is grown at each location, and what does each location specialize in?** We grow chip potatoes in Rhinelander and Missouri, and our seed potatoes are grown in Rhinelander and Antigo.

**How many acres of seed potatoes do you grow versus non-seed chipping varieties?** Most of the acres we grow are chip potatoes. We grow about 4,500 acres per year, with 3,000 acres of that in Missouri. About 500 acres of seed potatoes are grown each year.

**Do you have rotational crops or other cash crops, and how many acres?** The rotational crops we grow include corn, soybeans, seed peas, alfalfa, clover, oats and wheat. We grow about 4,800 acres of rotational crops each year.

**Explain the Charleston, Missouri, operation and why you’re growing there.** In Missouri, the potatoes are harvested and immediately shipped.

All the potatoes are delivered and cooked within 48-60 hours from when they were harvested.

Most of the equipment we utilize in Missouri, we transport from Wisconsin.

Our Missouri location allows us to be a 12-month supplier of chip potatoes. Our customers like that we can deliver to them year-round from different locations.

**Does it help with supply, shipping and marketing?** Charleston is centrally located among several chip plants, so being located there

**Above:** Potatoes are planted at Sowinski Farms in Charleston, Missouri, a city that is located near several chip processing plants, an advantage for shipping. Harvest season in Missouri (June and July) is also during peak demand for chip consumption.

helps with shipping. Harvest season in Missouri (June and July) is also at peak demand for chip consumption.

**Looking at your total operation, what does Sowinski Farms specialize in or excel at compared to other growing operations?** We not only grow chip potatoes, but we also

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**Left:** Paul's son, Brad (left), and father, Alvin (right), check out the 2019 potato crop on Sowinski Farms. Years ago, Alvin worked in conjunction with the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA) to promote washed potatoes for chipping.

**Right:** Alvin Sowinski does his best James Dean lean against the farm's International Harvester truck in a historic photo.



own and operate Sowinski Trucking, meaning that we deliver our potatoes on our own trucks. I think that is an advantage for us, and our customers like that attribute.

**What are your ultimate goals as far as growing and marketing potatoes?**

Our ultimate goals are maintaining

relationships with producers of potato chips and delivering to them the quality and service they demand.

**Do you store potatoes, and if so, how long can they stay in storage?**

We store chip potatoes. We usually finish shipping out of storage the first week of June, meaning the potatoes

can last up to nine months in storage.

**How many semis does Sowinski Trucking send out and where do you ship to?**

We dispatch up to 60 trucks during certain times of the year, and ship throughout the Midwest, as well as the Southeastern part of the United States.

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**Above:** Paul and Tunie Sowinski's youngest daughter, Kara, poses in a potato field.

**Left:** Chipping potatoes go into the storage warehouse on Sowinski Farms, Rhinelander, Wisconsin, in 2018.

**Interview . . .**

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Paul Sowinski says being able to deliver potatoes in the farm's own trucks is an attribute that customers appreciate.



Advanced equipment such as this new Lenco harvester allows Sowinski Farms to harvest more acres with less personnel.

**What are your biggest challenges?**

I think the biggest challenge is managing people and having all the right people in the right place at the right time. Several of our employees are family members, and many of our employees travel to Missouri for harvest.

**What do you take most satisfaction or pride in?** I take most satisfaction or pride in growing a good crop and delivering quality to our customers.

**How have things changed as far as growing and harvest?** Equipment and technology are the biggest changes.

We can now farm more acres with less personnel because of advanced equipment and technology.

**So, what innovations or technologies do you enjoy that you didn't two generations ago?** There are a couple innovations that we enjoy today that we didn't in the past. One of them is GPS in our field equipment. Another is optical sorting equipment in our storage facility. Both of those make operations much easier.

**What other challenges do you face today that you didn't in the past?** Today, our biggest challenge is labor.

It is difficult to find skilled labor and employees who are willing to work long hours.

**How many full-time, part-time and seasonal staff members do you employ?** We have about 50 full-time and 80-100 seasonal/part-time employees.

**Why do you think people are satisfied doing business with Sowinski Farms?** I think they are satisfied with Sowinski Farms because we have earned their trust over several years of business. Our customers know that we will



**Above:** The purple flowers are majestic on this close-up image of potato plants.

**Left:** This photo is of Henry Sowinski, his sons, Alvin and David (Sonny), and one of his grandsons in a field.



There's nothing quite like a golden wheat field. Rotational crops on Sowinski Farms include corn, soybeans, seed peas, alfalfa, clover, oats and wheat.

Equipment has come a long way since this photo was taken on Sowinski Farms, making operations easier albeit not quite as nostalgic.

deliver quality on a consistent basis.  
**Do you have any short-term or long-term goals for the farm?** Every day, we try to be the best chip supplier we can be. Our long-term goals include

continuing to upgrade equipment and work with researchers and organizations to develop new varieties.

**What do you hope for the future?**

I hope that Sowinski Farms will stay a family business. I look forward to future generations bringing new ideas to the company, and I anticipate much success in the years to come. **BCT**

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