



INTERVIEW

MIKE FIRKUS, farm manager, Firkus Farms

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



NAME: Mike Firkus

TITLE: Farm manager

COMPANY/FARM: Firkus Farms

LOCATION: Stevens Point, Wisconsin

HOMETOWN: Stevens Point

YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION: 20

SCHOOLING: Graduate of Stevens Point Area Senior High School

AWARDS/HONORS: McCain Foods "Over 70,000 cwt. [hundredweight] Grower Storage Champion" in 2007, '09, '13, '14, '16 and '17, and "Bruise Free" winner in 2005

FAMILY: Wife, Alycia, son, Marshall (10) and daughter, Abby (7)

HOBBIES: Hunting, traveling and spending time with family

Mike Firkus says he has enjoyed working alongside his dad, Lonnie, over the last 25-plus years to grow and improve Firkus Farms to the point where it is today.

"We have worked hard to consistently improve, year after year, to grow the best crops possible through advancing the farm's technology, as well as acquiring better equipment to improve efficiency, quality and yield," Mike, who is the manager of Firkus Farms, says.

Crops include mostly contracted acreage of Burbank potatoes for McCain Foods, some Goldrush for the fresh market, sweet corn, peas, field corn, soybeans, hay and straw.

Lonnie started farming after high school in the early 1980's. "At the time, he was also working in town," Mike says of his father. "He bought our home farm in 1992, which was a dairy farm previously, and eventually quit his job in town to farm full time when he had the opportunity to contract with Ore-Ida."

"Since then, many of the old buildings have been replaced with new structures, including our potato storage in 1997," Mike adds. "The

farm has changed dramatically since it was purchased in '92."

Did you always know you wanted to work on the farm, and why or why not? Yes, it's something that I've always enjoyed for a few reasons. First and foremost, I love that I'm able to work with my family. I also enjoy working outside and the work is never the same day to day. I'm always accomplishing something different.

Firkus Farms won the crop year 2017 McCain Foods Champion Potato Grower/Grower Storage Contract Award. And you have won McCain

Above: Mike Firkus (top right) poses for a picture with, counter-clockwise from top-left, his wife, Alycia, and their kids Abby and Marshall. The aerial picture was taken from the top of a silo. The Firkus Farms potato shed is shown at right and the equipment shed, left, in September 2019. Mike climbed the silo that day to install a windsock and took a few pictures while he was up there. Corn and soybean storage bins are visible in the background.

Foods awards in the past. To what do you attribute your success and how do you ensure top-quality potatoes? I think it's a combination of a few things—timing of planting, nutrient applications, irrigation, spray applications, harvest, etc., are all critical.

Spoon feeding the crop throughout the year, attention to detail and using quality products are also important.

We work with some great people, starting with our top-notch seed supplier, and nutrient and pest advisers that keep us informed of the latest techniques, trials and products.

Over the years, we also have been exploring applications of multiple soil health amendments, which I believe has been beneficial.

Do you have your own storage, and if so, what capacity and for how long can you store potatoes? Yes, we currently own an 85,000 cwt. (hundredweight) Class A storage. We have held potatoes as late as April in the past.

Do you grow cover crops, and what is your rotation? Cover crops are used extensively to improve soil health and reduce erosion, as well as for other environmental benefits. Our typical rotation is potatoes, sweet corn and soybeans, but we are transitioning some fields into a four-year rotation.

What plans are you already making for the 2020 growing season? Present plans include looking at any purchases (seed, fuel, fertilizer, etc.) and which equipment needs upgrades or changes in order to improve efficiency, quality or yield.

We are also looking at incorporating new technologies or products. The WPVGA Industry Show has been instrumental at showcasing new and upcoming products.

Will you be doing anything differently in 2020 than in past years, and if so, what? Yes, every year we try to improve or advance operations.



This year we are looking to increase acres that are variable-rate planted. I have planted sweet corn this way in the past two years and plan on variable-planting soybeans as well as other crops this year.

We expect to variable-rate plant our potato crop in the near future and are eager to see what results that will bring.

Do you have your seed purchased and ready? Machinery? Protection and treatment products? Yes, most

Above: A new 6160 Spudnik six-row windrower is used in harvesting Creamer potatoes for The Little Potato Company on Sigourney Farms of Coloma, Wisconsin.

of the main purchases are done, but there are a few equipment purchases that may happen this spring yet if the right opportunity comes along.

We are also working on getting some of the planting and other equipment through the shop and ready for spring.

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A dry corner of Burbank potatoes is irrigated on a Firkus Farms field in Plover, Wisconsin, July 2019, using a water winch. In the image at left, Mike Firkus (not visible) sets the water winch to catch the edge of the potatoes.

How has the farm progressed—technologically, acreage-wise, in sustainability or best practices and more—since your dad was interviewed in 2005? So much has changed since 2005. Technologically, agriculture has come a long way in the past 15 years.

In 2005, we didn't use GPS, variable-

rate planting or VRI (variable rate irrigation), variable-rate nutrient applications, Veris mapping for soil moisture holding capacity, soil moisture probes, infrared satellite imagery, drones or yield maps.

Now we implement all those things in order to be more efficient and productive.

The acres that we farm have increased since '05. Over the years, we have purchased land when we've had the opportunity.

From a sustainability standpoint, we are now GAP (Good Agricultural Practices) certified and are always looking for ways to become better stewards of the land. Technology has helped tremendously in that regard.

Water has become a big issue in recent years and VRI and soil moisture probes have worked well

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Mike Firkus's kids, Abby (left) and Marshall (right), help their dad bolt blades on a Spudnik 6140 Windrower, October 2018.



on our farm to improve water use efficiency.

Windbreaks continued to be developed on our farm as well as pollinator habitat. Environmental resources need to be protected while at the same time producing the quality product that our customers require.

Is growing potatoes and vegetables more or less challenging today than when you first started in the business? I think it's a little of both. Some things are definitely easier than

they were years ago. Technology like GPS has reduced operator fatigue, allowing you to get more done in a day while being more efficient. Today's modern equipment has also made life much easier.

On the other side, problems like the weather in the past few years, rising expenses, depressed markets and labor shortages have created plenty of challenges.

Finding good, qualified and motivated help that wants to do what we do is tough. Very few kids are growing

up around agriculture anymore, so finding young workers interested in farming might be one of the biggest challenges.

We are very lucky to have some great family and friends that help us through our busy seasons.

What are your roles on the farm?

I'm not sure that there really are specific "roles" for people on a family farm. I'm an operator when I need to be, a mechanic when something breaks, an electrician when the lights go out, a plumber when there is a leak and 50 other things in between.

I manage the planting, cultivating/hilling, much of the irrigating/fertigating and run the harvester and combine in the fall. I also do any fabrication that is needed and take care of locating and purchasing equipment. That is what keeps this line of work interesting.

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Above: Mike Firkus says the sunset on the evening of October 26, 2019, was one of the most colorful he's seen in a long time. Luckily, he caught these images of a John Deere 9660 STS combine during soybean harvest in Plover. The combine head is a Deere 625F.

Left: The view is good from the cab of a John Deere 8245 tractor while planting Burbanks using RTK (Real-Time Kinematic) guidance on Firkus Farms, Plover, in April 2019.



One of our key employees has been with us since the beginning and does the majority of our tillage, so that is one of the few things that I don't spent a lot of time with.

What do you like best about farming in Central Wisconsin? Honestly, what isn't to like? The people, businesses

and community are all great. The Central Sands really is a great area to farm and raise a family.

What do you think are your farm's greatest strengths? I think one of our greatest strengths is that we are hands-on with everything that happens. We personally tend to all

Above: Mike Firkus's son, Marshall, helps sort Burbanks on the Firkus Farms B sizer in September 2018 (left), and loads out Burbanks (right) with a Spudnik 150 bin scoop at the home storage in February 2020.

aspects of management, allowing us to maintain our customers' quality needs.

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A Spudnik 8060 planter is loaded with Burbank potato seed, and the saddle tanks of an 8245R tractor are filled with liquid fertilizer, April 2017.



The sun rises over a Reinke irrigation system and Firkus Farms sweet corn field, near Polonia, in September 2019.

We can pay attention to details, and I think that has paid off for us.

Do you see the farming operation changing in the future, and if so, how? Yes, we are always looking for ways to change for the better. That

might mean trying new crops, new rotations, different equipment or growing techniques. Ag technology will keep progressing at light speed, and I am excited to see what the future holds.

We will continue to strive for environmental protection and sustainability.

What do you hope for in the future? Hopefully, the future brings stronger

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markets and less April and October snow and frosts. In the more distant future, like any father, I hope to bring my children into the farm eventually. Marshall has already become a great asset and loves to take on any job given to him. **BC'T**



Top: Field corn is harvested on Firkus Farms, October 2018, using a John Deere 9660 STS combine with 608C head.

Left: The first Burbanks of the year—September 2015—are unloaded from a then-new Spudnik 4400 box and freshly restored 1993 International 4900 6x6.

Right: Mike Firkus stands in front of a John Deere 9360R tractor and 2623 disk on the home farm in February 2020.



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