



INTERVIEW

KATHY JO KNUTSON,

owner/president, Oasis Irrigation

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



NAME: Kathy Jo Knutson

TITLE: Owner and president

COMPANY: Oasis Irrigation

LOCATION: Plainfield, WI

HOMETOWN: Plainfield, WI

TIME IN PRESENT POSITION: 1 year, 3 months, and 19 years as co-owner

PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT: Mom and teacher, daycare provider, waitress and hostess, bean sampler, rock picker, and seed cutting and potato harvest

SCHOOLING: Bachelor's degree in elementary education with a special education and early childhood minor from University of Wisconsin-Superior (2018) and a master's degree in special education (May 2021)

ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS:

Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association, Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), former Pop Warner Football chairperson, former youth baseball area coordinator, Saint Paul Catholic Church

AWARDS/HONORS:

Six-time Zimmatic Top 40 dealership (two-year award), Top FieldNET Advisor Sales (2018), Top Precision Pump Sales and Zimmatic Circle of Excellence Gold Dealership

FAMILY: Our children, Chase (25), Lindsay (23), Dawson (21) and Preston Knutson (17)

HOBBIES: Hiking, kayaking, 4-wheeling and exploring the beauty that God has given us

Irrigation sales and farming have been in the Knutson blood for years. Ralph Knutson, father of Jerry Knutson, who sadly passed away in a snowmobile accident, December 2019, sold water reels and parts for years, all while he expanded the family farm.

"Jerry always held his father's legacy close and wanted to follow in his practices," says Kathy Jo Knutson, owner and president of Oasis Irrigation and Jerry's widow.

Jerry's brother sold irrigation in the South and was a guide in opening and running the irrigation business.

"Jerry shared his passion for quality products and helping farmers farm for the future with many people, including the kids," Kathy Jo says. "The boys worked with Jerry on the farm, so when new products became available, they were one of the first to use them."

Oasis Irrigation started out, in 2000, with Jerry and four employees. They were located at the farm office, which proved to be a great opportunity and location to start the business.

Jerry put an addition on the shop and started an inventory shed.

LARGE SHOWROOM

"This worked out well for years," Kathy Jo remarks. "In 2012, Jerry purchased the current location on 5th Avenue, in Plainfield, and moved from the small office to a large showroom with a more convenient location."

"He was proud of his business and employees and what he had grown," Kathy Jo says.

The new location brought better visibility and increased sales, as well as the opportunity to have a showroom and display some of the new products.

"I take great pride in a multi-generational business," Kathy Jo says. "It warms my heart to know that my boys are tilling the same soil that their grandfather did. The farm and irrigation business have always been a priority in our lives."

The Knutson kids have worked on the farm since they could reach the pedals, sometimes younger and with more ease than Kathy Jo says she was comfortable with.

"Not too many people get the opportunity to work alongside a family member such as a dad or grandfather, and I know that it means the world to my kids," she states.

How has the business evolved or changed in the year-plus since Jerry's passing, and how have you

Above: Kathy Jo Knutson says she takes great pride in the multi-generational business, Oasis Irrigation of Plainfield, Wisconsin, her late husband, Jerry, started.



managed to carry on? I have been so blessed with outstanding employees. Jerry had a well-oiled machine, and the transition has had its ups and downs, but the employees have been a great support and resource.

Prior to Jerry's passing, I was at the office maybe a dozen times over the years.

By April 2020, I was able to go to the office daily and was really able to get a feel for the business.

I continued to ask questions, and by summer, I was working late shifts and solo Saturdays. The business hasn't changed. We still have a quality product with a quality service department.

What is your one takeaway that you have learned most about the business, community and ag industry? The ag industry is a fabulous business to be part of. The people are more like family, and it is a culture that can't be explained until you experience it.

Farmers from all over the area have continued to reach out to me and the kids. I knew that, when I married a farmer, I married a unique person and breed. They are so dedicated to the land and families that live around them.

Is the business as strong as it has ever been? The business is running strong due to a great team and support from our customers. I am sure a year ago each of them asked, "What is going to happen to Oasis Irrigation?" I know I asked the same question, and I can tell you that it is not going anywhere.

Jerry laid out a plan that he did not share with many, and it has been up to us to figure it out. While the team lost its leader, we still have so much

Above: The Oasis Irrigation crew spans out a new corner pivot, July 23, 2020, at B&B Legacy Farms in Wautoma, Wisconsin.

to build from: a quality product with eminent service.

Are your main products still Zimmatic pivots and FieldNET by Lindsay? Is it a solid brand to build a dealership business around?

Lindsay has become the leader in the technology of irrigation. From the use

continued on pg. 10

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of FieldNET Advisor to VRI (variable rate irrigation) to remote access of the center pivot, Lindsay has led the way to bigger and better things.

We are excited to release the first Lindsay Smart Pivot this summer that will combine all the latest technology.

Above: Among Oasis Irrigation's Zimmatic by Lindsay offerings are drop-nozzle irrigation systems and controllers such as the new 712C model featuring a 12-inch interactive touchscreen that operates much like a smartphone.

What are some of your other product lines and products?

- High and low impact sprinklers
- Micro Rain water reels
- Precision pumps
- A full line of polypropylene liquid

fertilizer (Banjo brand)

- Raven Sprayer parts and nozzles
- Black steel, steel and aluminum pipe and fittings
- NFTrax and Raafit tires

continued on pg. 12

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How is technology changing the irrigation business? Technology has made farming efficient and productive. I remember the days when farmers would get up at the crack of dawn and drive around to every field, stopping in the pivot lanes to see if the irrigators were still moving.

This task took up a huge amount of time and wear and tear on the equipment. Now farmers can do this from their phones over their cups of coffee.

A grower can do all that same checking in just a few minutes by looking at the FieldNET app on his phone.

If there is a problem, such as a machine getting stuck in a muddy area, the grower will get an alert to let him know so that he can address the problem before it gets any worse.

Technology is also helping to save valuable resources such as water. Newer technologies, like VRI, help to put the precise amount of water exactly where it is needed, which also saves such resources as water and electricity.

To take it a step further, with FieldNET Advisor, growers can now track moisture levels of their fields, which helps them decide when and how much to irrigate, ultimately helping to increase their yields.



Above: Kathy Jo Knutson (far right) says she's extremely proud of her Oasis Irrigation employees, who are, from left to right, Dawson Knutson, Arturo Alejo, Daniel Kemnetz, Jon Wilson, Cheryl King and Corey Hilpiper.

Left: Oasis Irrigation's first installation of the new FieldNET Pivot Watch was for a good customer, Corey Bula of Bula Land Company. Kathy Jo Knutson says the unit was easy to install, inexpensive and a good way to monitor the position of an irrigation system in the field.



Left: Bula-Gieringer Farms dropped off its Precision Fertigation pumps to be serviced and winterized by Oasis Irrigation. Dawson Knutson, the Oasis Irrigation pump man, took care of them, with the pumps lined up and ready for the next farm season.

Right: Lindsay Irrigation was honored, in 2019, with an AE50 Award for the FieldNET Pivot Watch, the manufacturer's new remote monitoring solution. Presented by the American Society of Agricultural and Biological Engineers, the AE50 Award recognizes each year's most innovative designs in engineering products or systems for the food and agriculture industry.

The next generation of center pivots will have on-board sensors to monitor things like tire pressure, gearbox and center drive motor performance, and more.

This will help the machine self-diagnose problems so that they can be fixed before affecting the operation of the system.

Sensors will also be used to monitor crop health and help growers make

decisions so they can grow a better crop and increase yields, all while saving time and money.

What are the newest tools and technologies of the trade? Lindsay considers itself to be the innovation and technology leader in the center pivot irrigation industry, so the company is constantly coming out with new products that save time and money for our customers, while

making them more productive.

One of the biggest problems that our customers face is flat tires on their systems. They are never happy when they have to fix a flat tire in the middle of a corn field in the heat of the season.

To solve this problem, Lindsay has developed a tire that never goes flat called the NFTrax, with the "NF"

continued on pg. 14



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*"I knew that, when I married a farmer,
I married a unique person and breed.
They are so dedicated to the land and
families that live around them."*

– Kathy Jo Knutson

standing for "Never Flat."

In addition to never going flat, this wheel also reduces rutting in the field and helps the machines to have better traction in muddy areas. Again, all of this saves our customers time and money in the long run, which ultimately makes them more productive.

On the FieldNET side, one of the newest products that Lindsay has come out with is the Pivot Watch. The Pivot Watch is a low-cost option, which monitors the position of a system in the field.

So, it will tell the grower where the machine is in the field, and it will let them know if it stops unexpectedly or is not doing what it is supposed to be doing.

Again, it is low cost at about \$300 per unit, and the grower can install it

himself because Pivot Watch is solar powered and does not tie into the wiring of the system.

The difference between it and other FieldNET products is that the Pivot Watch is a monitor-only solution, so you can't do things like start or stop the system with it.

But our customers have told us that is exactly what they need in certain circumstances where the cost of full control is too much to justify, such as for machines on rented ground, or as an entry level product for customers who might want to give remote monitoring a try.

How many employees do you have, and what are their roles? I currently have five employees with the mindset of hiring two more.

Dan Kemnetz is my master electrician who handles our daily service and

Above: Oasis Irrigation sponsored a hole at the WPGA Associate Division's 20th Annual Putt-Tato Open, July 14, 2020. In the first image, from left to right, Lindsay Knutson, Cheryl King and Oasis Irrigation owner Kathy Knutson stood ready and waiting to enjoy a few games of life-size Jenga with golfers who had a chance to win beverages, T-shirts and hats. Just like in the game of Jenga, and as the Zimmatic By Lindsay sign reads, "Life is Full of Strategic Moves. What Will Your Move Be?"

services entrances. He has also taken over the role of setting up jobs and assigning the daily tasks.

Corey Hilpiper is my head salesperson. He has done a great job leading the group by meeting with farmers and offering them the quality products we sell and service.

Cheryl King is my parts manager. Her focus is maintaining inventory, along with other daily tasks, and she has also picked up some administration roles in addition to showing me how to navigate the computers and inventory.

Jon Wilson is my technology specialist whose main job is FieldNET technology and helping farmers troubleshoot technical issues. He also is an outstanding fabricator and does well hook-ups.

Arturo Alejo is my jack of all trades

and will do what it takes to get the jobs done.

My son, Dawson, was searching for his spot in the business. This summer he became our precision pump man and helped the service team when needed, and he has shown interest in continuing to grow in the area of sales and service.

Speaking of service, what services do you offer before, during and after the sale? We offer a dedicated approach to serving our customers. We start out with field mapping, measuring and designing of the field to make sure we are maximizing their water patterns.

We have a dedicated service team and an array of parts and knowledge on hand. We have extended service hours to minimize down time and will continue to offer our customers field-tested ideas in partnership with K&K Farms.

Are potato and vegetable growers



Dawson Knutson (right side of control panel in black shirt) traveled to Nebraska for Zimmatic by Lindsay's New Dealer Training, in October 2020. He was able to make connections with industry personnel and other dealers. Kathy Jo Knutson says the connections have been useful as she and Dawson continue to learn the business.

your main customers? We service and sell products to vegetable growers all over the state. We have a few potato seed farmers in Antigo and sod farmers to the south.

However, the company's focus is big and small vegetable farms in Central Wisconsin. The pivots circle anything from canning crops to potatoes to

continued on pg. 16



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Interview . . .

continued from pg. 15



cabbage and grains. We work with an extremely diverse group of people and products.

Will the business continue to grow and evolve? The business has to continue to grow. Jerry used to say, "If you're not getting bigger, you're getting smaller."

The business will grow with the times. However, as anyone who works in the ag industry knows, it is a tough business to plan for. So much of our growth depends on the success of the farmer. Mother Nature can be our best friend or worst enemy.

Are you proud of what you've accomplished in your year or more at the helm? I am very proud of what we have accomplished this past year. When God changes your life in such a huge way, you really have two choices—sit around and feel sorry for

yourself or put on your big girl pants and conquer the day.

For years, my focus had been taking care of the family, and Jerry took care of the business. When he passed, I had to do both.

Chase, our oldest son, took the bull by the horns and continued the legacy of K&K Farms. He did what needed to be done with the help of his youngest brother, Preston. They grew a bountiful crop and kept things moving forward.

Dawson and I, along with the team at Oasis Irrigation, did the same. Early on, I reached out to many of Jerry's past business partners and close friends, and they shared many ideas and strategies with me.

I was able to get a general idea of how things needed to proceed. The team at Oasis moved forward and

Left: Be careful out there and have a safe and healthy season.

Above: Shown is one of two irrigation systems delivered on a frosty morning, February 11, 2021, with Oasis Irrigation having six more yet to build in spring of this year.

supported each other and have continued to aid in the success of the business.

Anything I have missed, Kathy Jo, that you'd like to add? Life brings many challenges, many that cannot be imagined. Do not let those challenges define who you are.

When Jerry left my side, I could have become this angry selfless person who didn't value the life I had left. But I was reminded to keep true to who I am.

I am a strong individual who was brought up by some pretty awesome parents. They taught me to conquer the day, and when I put my name on something, it holds meaning and truth.

I have always been a faith-driven person; my faith didn't start in a church, but rather with my relationship with God. It is through Him and Jerry's spirit that I continue to find the strength to live my life with meaning and purpose.

"Lord lead me, guide me and strengthen me each day." **BCT**



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