



INTERVIEW

WENDY ALSUM-DYKSTRA,

Chief Operating Officer,
Alsum Farms & Produce, Inc.

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

NAME: Wendy Alsum-Dykstra

TITLE: Chief Operating Officer

COMPANY: Alsum Farms & Produce, Inc.

LOCATION: Friesland, Wisconsin

HOMETOWN: Friesland

YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION: 11

PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT: Grant Thornton LLP, Madison

SCHOOLING: University of Wisconsin (UW)-Whitewater, Bachelor of Business Administration in accounting, Master of Professional Accountancy

ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS: Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA) Board member 2021 (Promotions Committee member); Potatoes USA Board member 2021 (Finance & Policy Committee member); Produce Marketing Association Audit Committee member 2019-2021, and Budget & Finance Committee member 2013-2018; National Potato Council Finance & Trade Affairs committees member 2020-present; Potato Industry Leadership Institute graduate 2019; Wisconsin Institute of Certified Public Accountants member 2010-present; Sunday school teacher 2018-present; Foundation for Christian Education in Central Wisconsin Board 2020-Present; and Randolph Christian School Board 2018-2020

AWARDS/HONORS: Produce Business 40 under 40 Award recipient 2019, and WPVGA President's Award 2015

FAMILY: Husband, Neil, and daughters, Reagan (9) and Riley (6)

HOBBIES: Spending time with family and friends, outdoor activities, especially in Wisconsin during spring, summer and fall, and boating and water sports

Following in her father's footsteps, Wendy Alsum-Dykstra went to school for accounting and earned a Bachelor of Business Administration in accounting and Master of Professional Accountancy degrees.

Her dad, Larry Alsum, who grew up on a family-owned dairy farm, had gone to college to become a certified public accountant for Houghton, Taplick & Company, in Madison.

Unfortunately, in 1981, Larry's cousin, Glen, died tragically in a plane crash. Glen was the original owner of what was then Alsum Produce Inc., a potato and vegetable repacking operation.

Glen had started the company, in 1973, and worked out of a 600-square-foot shed. He bought 50- and 100-pound bags of Wisconsin potatoes and onions, which he repackaged into smaller 5-, 10- and 15-pound bags, selling them to local grocers.

After Glen's death, Larry made the decision to leave the public accounting sector and assume reins of Alsum Produce as general manager and owner.

IN IT FOR THE LONG HAUL

In 2010, Larry changed the name of Alsum Produce to Alsum Farms & Produce, Inc. to better reflect the company's long-term growth plans and commitment to locally grown produce.

Potatoes and onions are a mainstay of the business, and visitors can see, smell, and if lucky enough, even taste the fresh vegetables at Alsum Farms & Produce in Friesland, Wisconsin.

Larry began growing Wisconsin potatoes in 1989, and today, he and his crew farm 2,800 acres of Healthy Grown russet, red, white, gold, purple and fingerling potatoes in the lower Wisconsin River Valley, specifically in Grand Marsh and Arena.

A national distributor of Wisconsin potatoes and onions, Alsum Farms & Produce has over 150,000 square feet of production and warehouse

Above: Wendy Alsum-Dykstra, chief operating officer of Alsum Farms & Produce, Inc., says, in addition to being a potato grower and national distributor of Healthy Grown potatoes and onions, the farming operation's retail division supplies many grocery stores in Wisconsin and upper Illinois with a full line of fruits and vegetables. This enables Alsum Farms & Produce to restock produce departments multiple days a week. *Overhead farming operation photo courtesy of Dan Hagenow Video Creations*



facilities and distributes a full line of 300 fruits and vegetables in the Midwest, along with locally grown produce.

And what about Wendy? Well, she's a chief operating officer (COO) for Alsum Farms & Produce, LLC, working alongside her dad and sister, Heidi Alsum-Randall, who serves as joint COO.

Wendy was kind enough to sit down for an interview and answer some questions about the state and progress of the business, including how harvest went this year and what the future holds.

Knowing your Uncle Glen and your dad's history, what are you most proud of regarding the progress your father and Alsum Farms & Produce has made over the past 40 years?

I am thankful for the entrepreneurial passion Glen had beginning the business over 48 years ago.

I am incredibly proud of the hard work and passion my dad has carried forward over the last 40 years with an eagerness to learn, willingness to take risks and vision for growth.

The success and expansion of Alsum Farms & Produce as part of the Alsum Family of Companies has been achieved through a great deal of

hard work, commitment from our employees, and through establishing many great partnerships with both our customers and suppliers.

Alsum Farms & Produce specializes in potatoes and onions. How many acres of each, and are all acres in the Arena, Wisconsin, area? What other vegetables does Alsum Farms & Produce grow, and how many acres of each? Alsum Farms grows 1,900 acres of potatoes in Arena and 900 acres in Grand Marsh. Our farm

Above: Potato planting was underway, in 2021, at Alsum Farms & Produce. *Photos courtesy of Donald Maum and Beau Hartline, respectively*

supplies approximately half of our total potato sales in hundredweight.

We have been able to develop partnerships with many family farms in Wisconsin and other potato producing states to offer our customers a year-round supply.

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Interview . . .

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In addition, we grow about 320 acres of pumpkins in Grand Marsh. We do not grow any onions but have developed a year-round supply network.

How was harvest this year, including yields and quality? Our 2021 harvest was good overall with an unusually moderate fall. Our yields were average or slightly above average, and quality was good overall. There were some exceptions, such as a few issues due to a rain event in early August.

Explain a little bit about the sandy soil in the Arena area and why it's ideal for growing potatoes. Our farm locations in both Arena and Grand Marsh have mostly sandy or sandy loam soils. These sandy soils work well for our potatoes because of the good drainage, and soil tilth creates quality, uniformly shaped tubers.

It's amazing how your dad branched out to distribute a full line of 300 fruits and vegetables in the Midwest. What percentage of your



Evaluating plant health in the field is an integral part of ensuring a healthy potato crop for Wendy Alsum-Dykstra (left) and her father, Larry Alsum (right). *Photo courtesy of Dan Hagenow Video Creations*

business is packing and shipping those fruits and vegetables? Over the past year, 25 percent of our total sales were fruits, onions and other vegetables. Alsum Farms & Produce's retail division supplies a number of grocery stores in Wisconsin and upper Illinois.

line of fruits and vegetables allows us to restock their produce departments multiple days a week.

During the summer and fall months, we take great pride in promoting locally grown produce to our customers.

Providing our customers with a full

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Wendy Dykstra and her daughter, Riley, take part in the 2021 Alsum Farms & Produce Tater Trot 5K during the farming operation's annual Fall Festival.



Alsum Farms was in full swing harvesting Wisconsin Healthy Grown potatoes in this 2016 image.



How many full- and part-time employees does Alsum Farms & Produce currently employ? Alsum Farms & Produce has 200 full-time employees and over 250 seasonally. Our employees are based out of our main production facility in Friesland, plus both farm locations.

Is labor shortage one of the biggest challenges facing the generational farm operation now? Labor is a visible challenge right now for many industries across the state and country, with “Help Wanted” advertisements everywhere. We have faced challenges with labor

in our operation and are looking at creative strategies to combat them, including automation and utilizing contracted labor. We are also working to promote the many opportunities in agriculture right now, from on the farm to the packing shed and truck driving.



Above: Alsum Farms & Produce offers various potato and onion packaging options to its retail customers.



“We are committed to taking care of our environment and resources because it is the right thing to do.”
– Wendy Alsum-Dykstra

As technology and automation continue to advance, so does the need for more skilled labor.

You hold a Master of Professional Accountancy degree, and you serve as chief operating officer.

What are your main duties? My primary responsibility is overseeing daily operations working with our finance, logistics, maintenance, and shipping and receiving department managers and ensuring teams have the necessary resources to get the job done of providing quality produce

and service to our customers.

I work with company leaders to design and implement business strategies, plans and procedures.

I enjoy the opportunity to work alongside a dedicated team of employees and provide support wherever needed.

How many trucks are involved in the shipping arm of the business and how far across the country do you deliver? Alsum Transport has a fleet of 28 trucks and 90

refrigerated trailers. Our team of drivers stays busy hauling 52 weeks a year supporting both our farm and packing/marketing operations with pickups and deliveries.

We have 20 day-cab trucks that are concentrated with shipping and backhauls in the Midwest.

Our eight sleeper trucks ship primarily east of the Mississippi River, down to Florida, and backhaul loads out of Colorado and North Dakota from our supply partners.

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The trucks sure are recognizable, as is the Alsum brand and your dad's image on produce boxes and bags. I take it branding is a priority for your family's business. Who handles most of the branding, and what do you attribute to their success? Going back to 2009, we engaged an outside marketing firm to do a comprehensive analysis, or "uncover-y" process, on our company and brand.

Our customers, grower partners and employees were surveyed, and our tagline "Integrity from Field to Fork" was created.

We understood consumers wanted

to be connected to the farmer. Our marketing team, including Heidi Alsum-Randall and Christine Lindner, has done an outstanding job illustrating this strategy and connecting consumers to our family and our story.

What do you handle as far as logistics—what does it involve, just tracking trucks, or much more?

Alsum Transport dispatches our fleet of trucks and trailers and is also responsible for hiring outside carriers to bring in and ship out product for loads we are not able to cover with our own fleet.

Above: Alsum Farms & Produce tractor-trailer rigs are a familiar sight in the Midwest, South and east of the Mississippi River, and even in Colorado and North Dakota.

Transportation plays an integral role in our industry and for our businesses. With today's demands and challenges, our team, including our logistics manager, dispatchers and drivers, does an excellent job covering all loads in a safe and timely manner.

How many maintenance men and women do you employ? I work with our service manager responsible for maintaining our fleet of trucks and trailers, and our maintenance manager responsible for maintaining all of our production equipment as well as buildings.

We employ four full-time mechanics in our truck shop and nine maintenance technicians when fully staffed to cover three shifts.

These teams do a great job and play an important role in ensuring our equipment is operating effectively to package and deliver quality product and service to our customers.

How do schooling and your former job/work experience help you?

I believe a background in accounting can provide a strong foundation and understanding of business.

Careful analysis, strategic decision-making and an understanding of information systems can help add value to any business.



Alsum Farms produces 1,900 acres of Healthy Grown potatoes in Arena and 900 acres in Grand Marsh, Wisconsin. *Photo courtesy of Dan Hagenow Video Creations*

In college, I had the opportunity to intern with Grant Thornton LLP, and after graduation was offered a position in audit. I enjoyed the opportunity to work with many leaders in various industries and learn about their operations.

You are a new member of the WPVGA Board of Directors. Why is it important for you to be on the Board, and what do you hope to contribute/gain from the experience yourself? I am excited about the opportunity to join the WPVGA Board this year and network with and learn from others in the industry.

I look forward to better understanding the challenges our industry is facing and working together to find solutions, advocating for key issues and promoting Wisconsin potatoes.

How has sustainability, including being a Healthy Grown member of the WPVGA, been a priority for Alsum Farms & Produce? Alsum Farms & Produce was in the first group of farmers to participate in the initial discussions and efforts to advance the industry's sustainability efforts, in 1996, which became the Healthy Grown program.

We are committed to taking care of our environment and resources because it is the right thing to do.

The Healthy Grown program aligns with increasing requirements from our customers to ensure their supply partners are practicing sustainability and environmental stewardship.

Are biodiversity and conserving ecosystems part of the equation, and how? What practices does Alsum Farms & Produce routinely undertake to conserve the land?

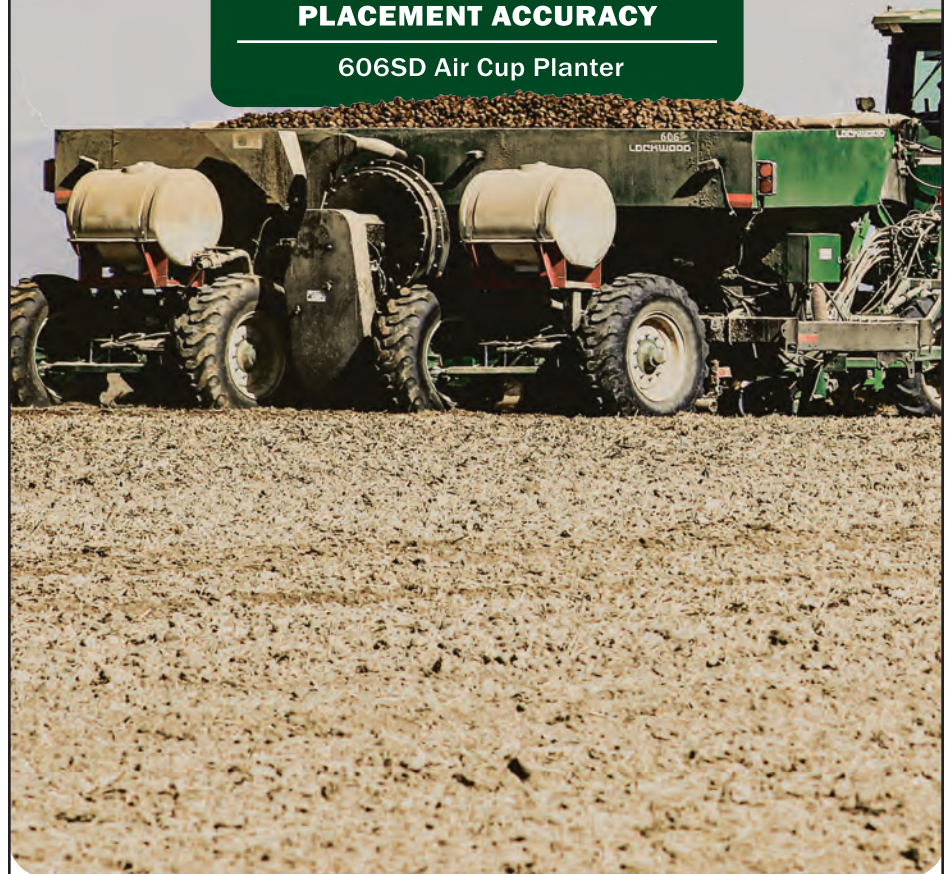
Biodiversity and conservation efforts are an important part of our practices. Alsum Farms has over 30 acres dedicated to pollinator habitat and prairie restoration in Arena and Grand Marsh.

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Our conservation practices include minimum tillage, cover crops and water use efficiency, utilizing information provided by the UW Extension as best practices and continuing to trial variable rate application of fertilizer and other crop inputs.

Who are your main supplier partners? Alsum Farms & Produce has had long-standing partnerships with several Wisconsin family potato and onion growers and other farmers, packers and shippers across the country in order to provide a 52-week-a-year supply of russet, red

and gold potatoes and onions. In addition, Alsum Farms & Produce has partnered with many Wisconsin family farms for our seasonal locally grown program offering apples, cranberries, celery, asparagus, peppers, squash, cucumbers,



Above: Alsum Farms & Produce has quite a large state-of-the-art sorting, grading, packing and shipping facility in Friesland, Wisconsin.

sweet corn and much more.

Our fruit and vegetable supply network also includes other quality growers across the United States.

How do you hope to grow professionally in the coming years, Wendy, and what are your goals?

I am so thankful for the experience I have had in college and business, yet I recognize the opportunity to learn something new every day.

I look forward to growing my leadership abilities as I continue to work with our team and others in the industry and get involved serving on various committees and boards.

We are in the process of updating our strategic plan and continuing to work on our succession plan. It is exciting for me to be a part of executing these plans.

What do you hope for the future of Alsum Farms & Produce? I

am excited about the future of Alsum Family of Companies and all opportunities that lie ahead for our operation with a team of great people and strong, solid partnerships.

In 2023, we look forward to celebrating 50 years in business.

My hope is to continue the legacy of our family business for future generations, making a positive impact every day in our employee, customer and supplier relationships, and continuing our commitment to sustainability for our land and our resources.

Is there anything I've missed, Wendy, that you'd like to add?

Agriculture is a great industry with so many fantastic people involved in supporting the growing, packing and shipping of healthy produce for all. **BC'T**



Larry Alsum addresses a sizeable crowd gathered at the company's Friesland grading, packing and shipping facility during a tour segment of the 2019 National Potato Council Summer Meeting.



We are grateful for the special people in our lives. May your holidays be filled with peace, happiness and hope. All of us wish each of you a Merry Christmas.

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