



INTERVIEW

ALEX OKRAY, chief financial officer, Okray Family Farms

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

NAME: Alex Okray

TITLE: CFO (Chief Financial Officer)

COMPANY: Okray Family Farms

LOCATION: Plover, WI

HOMETOWN: Stevens Point, WI

TIME IN PRESENT POSITION: 5 years

PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT: First job out of school

SCHOOLING: Stevens Point Area Senior High School graduate and bachelor's degree in business from St. Norbert College

ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS:

Portage County United Way Board and Executive Committee member, and currently serving as vice president of the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA) Board, as well as being a part of the WPVGA Water Task Force, and Grower Education and Vegetable committees

AWARDS/HONORS: WPVGA 2021 Young Grower of the Year

FAMILY: Wife, Anna

HOBBY: Golf

8 BC'T January

The history of Okray Family Farms parallels that of potato and vegetable growing in Central Wisconsin. In many aspects, the family farming operation has led the way.

At 115 years young, the multi-generational grower, packer and shipper of potatoes and other fresh produce remains locally owned and calls Plover, Wisconsin, home.

Okray Family Farms was founded in 1905 by Joseph Okray Sr. as the "Joseph Okray and Bros. Company," which started out as a small trading business in downtown Stevens Point.

By 1918, with the acquisition of some land, Okray Produce Company was formed. Resilient even during the Great Depression, the company continued buying land and adding to their acreage.

As is the history of vegetable growing in Wisconsin, the development of commercial fertilizer and reverse hydraulic irrigation after World

War II gave local farmers, including the Okray family, the ability to efficiently water their crops and substantially increase potato yields.

Today, Okray Family Farms produces over 1,800 acres of potatoes and 5,900 acres of sweet corn, green beans, peas, soy and maize annually, and it remains a family affair.

With Jim Okray at the helm as president of the operation, his son, Alex, is the chief financial officer and this issue's interviewee.

Alex is also the current vice president of the WPVGA Board, having been

Above: A grower, packer and shipper of potatoes and other fresh produce, Okray Family Farms has a long and proud history in Central Wisconsin that spans multiple generations.



elected to the Board in 2019 after Mark Finnessy, vice president of Okray Family Farms, had completed his term.

With a history going back to 1905, Alex, what generation of potato growers and packers do you represent? I am the fourth generation to work for Okray Family Farms. The operation began with Joseph Okray, and his brother, Al, joined the company a few years later.

Al Okray Sr. was my great-grandfather. Al's son, Al Okray Jr., was my grandfather, who also worked on the farm for most of his life. I am

currently trying to fill those shoes, working with my father, Jim.

It must make you proud to know your family's history. What most impresses you about the heritage and operation as it has evolved? The fact that the company has made it to the fourth generation is something I'm very proud of. There have been a lot of Okrays through the years that have helped shape the company into what it currently is.

I think it is impressive that so many family members across different generations have been able to come together and work towards making



Above: This issue's interviewee, Alex Okray, stands in front of a farm mural depicting several generations of his family. Specifically, Alex is shown directly in front of an image of his grandfather, Al Okray Jr., and the resemblance is uncanny.

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our company the success it is today.

I decided to join the family business after I graduated because agriculture is a strong field to work in, and because I had a rare opportunity to work for a business my family owns.

With Okray Family Farms growing 1,800 acres of potatoes and 5,900 acres of vegetables annually, is it mostly for the fresh market? Yes, the

Harvest is always a stressful and busy but rewarding time for Okray Family Farms, which raises 1,800 acres of potatoes and 5,900 acres of vegetables annually.

majority of our sales are for the fresh market.

Who are your primary customers?

Our main customers are brokers located across the country who help get our product into grocery stores.

You have a sorting, grading and

packing operation. Do you also ship potatoes and vegetables?

Most of our shipping is handled by our customers. We do have a shipping manager who is able to find/hire trucks when we need to, but we don't have our own shipping line.

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Are the bulk of the potato and vegetable acres in the Plover area, or how far does the acreage extend?

The majority of our acres are located between Plover and Wisconsin Rapids. We also own a small number of acres in Juneau County.

You have a bachelor's degree in business administration, and you're in charge of company financials and human resources. What are your main duties or charges?

Day to day, I'm basically looking at money going in and going out of the company. I keep track of our company's financial records to make sure we're on pace with our budgets, yearly projections, etc.

I also handle the company insurance and help our employees with any issues they may have.

Of course, being a family member, I try to get involved in everything that's going on. Anyone who works for their family business needs to know how

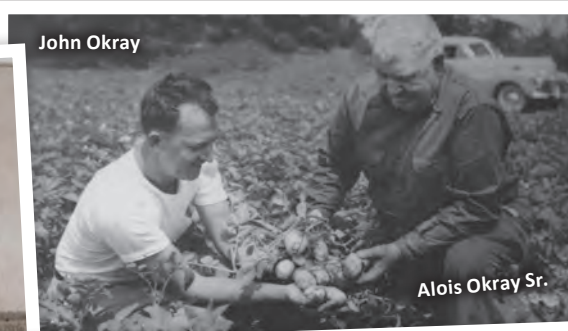
the whole operation works.

You had mentioned to me once that your mom and dad didn't push you into the family farming operation, but that you knew what a privilege it was. Does that remain true today?

I'm 28, and I've been working here for about six years now. Yes, my parents

Above: Alex Okray (left), chief financial officer of Okray Family Farms, is proud of his family heritage and privileged to work with his father, Jim Okray (right), president of the operation.

never pushed me into the business, but they helped me understand what a rare and wonderful opportunity it is.



Okray Family Farms was founded, in 1905, by Joseph Okray Sr., with his brother, Alois Okray Sr., joining the company a few years later. The farming operation spans generations, including John Okray, Al Okray Jr., Joe Okray Jr., Ed Okray, Mike Finnessy, and many more, such as the recently retired Dick and Chris Okray, and the current vice president of Okray Family Farms, Mark Finnessy. This issue's interviewee, Alex Okray, is shown as a young boy, at center in the color photo, with his grandpa, Al Okray Jr. (left), and father, Jim Okray (right).



There's nothing more beautiful for a producer like Okray Family Farms than a bountiful field of healthy potatoes.

Now that I've been here for a few years, I have an even greater understanding of how lucky I am to have this opportunity.

What makes you most proud about growing potatoes and vegetables in Plover, Wisconsin?

I enjoy knowing that the work we do helps put food on the table for families across the country. I also like the fact that our company provides working opportunities for so many wonderful people in our community.

How are you involved in the community as it relates to Okray Family Farms or outside of your duties with the farm?

I am currently on the Board of Directors for the WPVGA and United Way of Portage County. Being on the WPVGA Board allows me to understand and help

with issues our whole state is facing. Working for United Way helps me understand the issues my community is facing, and what we can do to help solve those problems.

With Okray Family Farms being a Healthy Grown grower, what does the operation do to conserve

"I like the fact that our company provides working opportunities for so many wonderful people in our community."

– Alex Okray

land, prairies and pivot corners, and in respect to sustainability?

Sustainability is a large focus of our work. We are always planting cover crops and wind breaks, and rotating crops to help maintain our fields and the soil we use.

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We also own a lot of land that is not used for farming. The Plover Buena Vista Creek runs through our property, and we've done controlled burns in those areas.

Our farm manager, Rich Rashke, serves on the Portage County Drainage District to help solve

water issues in the area. We are also a member of the Quality Deer Management Association.

What's one thing you'd want people in the Plover community to know about Okray Family Farms and your commitment to the area? The main message I'd want to convey is that

Above: Grading, sizing and sorting potatoes is all part of the operation at Okray Family Farms in Plover, Wisconsin. Potatoes USA President Blair Richardson observes from behind (third from right in the second image).

we are committed to producing crops while maintaining the land and resources we use to grow them.

We are always balancing those two mindsets, and we understand that, as stewards of the land, we have a responsibility to take great care of it.

With the recent retirements of your uncles, Dick and Chris Okray, was it difficult to replace them or at least have people filling in for some of the things they did on a daily basis? Dick and Chris were valuable members of our company, and still serve as great sounding boards for any issues we face.

They did a wonderful job passing down their knowledge, and I think our management has done an equally great job of filling their shoes after each of them retired.

You are vice president of the WPVGA Board of Directors. That's quite impressive at your age. Why is it



With sustainability being a focus of Okray Family Farms, including cover crops, wind breaks, crop rotation and maintaining fields and soils, the operation also owns land that is not used for farming.

important for you to not only be involved, but also hold leadership responsibilities within the WPVGA and potato industry at large?

There are many great leaders in our industry, and I'm very humbled to have been chosen for the vice president position on the Board.

I feel it's important to understand the many issues our industry is going through, as well as bring up any that our company itself may be facing. In terms of my leadership role, I'm just trying to learn everything I can from the wonderful people I get to work with.

What are your aspirations in the potato industry, Alex, or with respect to Okray Family Farms?

My main goals are to continue the great work my family has done and integrate new farming technology to help our company be more efficient and profitable.

I also want our company to always be on the forefront of environmental restoration and make sure we continue to be responsible farmers. **BC'T**



Cousins in arms, Mark Finnessy (left) is vice president of Okray Family Farms, and Alex Okray (right) is the chief financial officer.

An advertisement for Montana Certified Seed Potatoes. The background is a photograph of a woman in a blue shirt and hat walking through a lush green potato field. In the foreground, there are large, dark, textured rocks. A dark, curved structure, possibly a tunnel or a large pipe, arches over the field. The sky is overcast. On the right side, there is a dark blue geometric overlay containing white text. In the bottom left corner, there is a logo for Montana State University Extension.

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