



INTERVIEW

JEREMIE PAVELSKI, president, Heartland Farms, Inc.

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



NAME: Jeremie Pavelski

TITLE: President

COMPANY: Heartland Farms, Inc.

LOCATION: Hancock, WI

HOMETOWN: Amherst Junction, WI

SCHOOLING: Northcentral Technical College and Milwaukee School of Engineering

ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS: Current member of Allied Cooperative as well as the National Potato Council Board of Directors, and continuously serving on various Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA) committees, as well as a past Board president

FAMILY: Wife, Alicia, and daughter, Charlotte Pavelski

HOBBY: Spending time with the family, developing new technology and boating

Above: As president of Heartland Farms, Inc., Hancock, Wisconsin, Jeremie Pavelski represents the fifth generation of a large potato and vegetable operation that has been family owned since 1873.

When it comes down to it, Heartland Farms has always been “Farming for the Future.” After all, the fifth-generation potato and vegetable operation in Hancock, Wisconsin, has been family owned since 1873, and prides itself on a dedication to sustainability and best management practices for the long term and in day-to-day operations.

Originally settled by August Pavelski, great grandfather to current CEO Richard Pavelski and great-great grandfather of Jeremie Pavelski, president of the operation, Heartland Farms produces many varieties of chipping and processing potatoes.

Incorporated as A.M. Pavelski & Sons Inc., in 1974, Heartland Farms became the successor, in 1990, when Richard and Dave Knights partnered.

The original 80-acre farm near Amherst Junction in Portage County is still being farmed today.

The first major expansion was in 1994, with the addition of a large rinse plant/load-out facility and state-of-the-art potato storages at the Hancock location.

But as this issue’s interviewee and president of Heartland Farms,

Jeremie Pavelski, will explain, that was only the first of many expansions, improvements and technological advancements for the operation.

Jeremie, you’re preparing now for planting 27,000 irrigated acres of potatoes and vegetables, is that correct? What types of purchases does that involve? Have you gotten all your seed and equipment buys done? We mainly focus on potatoes. We will grow other crops as well if we have land available, but we really have a laser focus on our core competency, which is potatoes.

That equates to just over 10,000 acres of potatoes, and most of the other land is leased out to vegetable canning companies and other local farms who we have worked with for many years.



It's quite the extensive process preparing for the new year. We must ensure we have the fertilizer, crop protectants, seed, staffing, contracts, equipment, land, fuel, transportation needs and storage needed and allocated for the year.

All of this is a collaborative effort on the farm, but I must say, I am blessed with an amazing operations team with Dave Knights, T.J. Kennedy and Blair Miller leading their respective departments that handle a lot of the planning for the upcoming season.

The last two years have been crazy when it comes to inputs, parts and labor. I have never seen this kind of volatility and inflation in my lifetime.

We have much of the seed and equipment purchases made. All of this takes long-range planning and can't be done last-minute, or the probability of success is greatly diminished.

Now we will see if the equipment comes in when expected or not. We do have contingency plans in place to ensure operations flow smoothly if there are hiccups along the way.

How tough has this been with supply chain issues and COVID compared to other years? Tough would be an understatement when referring to supply chain issues due to COVID and the regulatory burdens surrounding it.

Many parts and equipment are 6-12

months out right now if you can even get them. Fertilizer and chemicals have long lead times as well, and many suppliers are not even quoting prices or guaranteeing delivery due to the extreme volatility and logistic issues.

We have always remained a lean organization when it comes to parts and supplies but have strategically added to our inventories as a precautionary measure.

Couple that with extreme inflation in all areas and it makes for quite interesting times. I am sure I will tell stories about this when I am older ... kind of like walking uphill to school both ways.

Above: After that primary row mark is set, planting begins in earnest on Heartland Farms, which includes 10,000 acres of potatoes and more land leased out to vegetable canning companies and local farms that the operation has worked with for many years.

Is there anything you or the farm can do to try to offset the rising costs of fertilizers and other inputs?

This is a tough one. Many of the best practices for operational efficiencies are thrown out the window right now due to supply chain issues with long lead times and ensuring we have supplies to minimize downtime.

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The biggest themes here, for me, would be ensuring the proper amounts of nutrients and crop protectants are applied, that we have the best practices in place for monitoring and achieving accuracy, and ensuring the team is engaged in discussions/strategy for inflation containment.

Do most of the seed potatoes come from Wisconsin, and can you take me through a much-abbreviated process of buying, storing and getting ready for planting? Most of the seed does come from Wisconsin.

The much-abbreviated process is we work through the needs based on customer requirements, then T.J. and his team come up with a plan, get feedback, revise if necessary and get it approved. They then take care of the rest ... easy peasy, right?

All kidding aside, it's quite the involved process that is years in the making. There are some adjustments each year, but it is very forward looking to ensure we have the seed that is needed.

We work with a core group of seed

Above: This beautiful image shows a harvester parked outside the Farm Operations Technology & Training Center at Heartland Farms, Inc.

suppliers for most of the seed needs and communication is key between the organizations.

In February/March, we will bring in seed, warm it up, cut it and suberize it until it heads to the field to get planted.

There are a lot of details involved in that, and I am not doing it justice here, but it would take a novel to get into the details. Simply put, the team is very diligent in every aspect of the seed process.

Without high-quality, disease-free seed and the proper execution of processes prior to and throughout planting, production will suffer greatly. I give a lot of credit to the seed growers for their diligence and professionalism.

Roughly how many employees/hands does that involve? It entails about 20 team members up to the planting process.

What percentage of the acreage is for chipping potatoes versus fresh market? We focus on chipping and process potatoes.



The Heartland Farms ownership team includes, from left to right, Alicia and Jeremie Pavelski with their daughter, Charlotte, in Dad's arms; Richard Pavelski; Dave, Josh and Brad Knights; and T.J. Kennedy.



What are your main potato varieties? They include Snowden, Lamoka, Pike, Atlantic, Hodag, Burbank and Frito-Lay varieties.

The history of Heartland Farms is well documented, but you are a living legacy, so to speak, of that history, from your great-great-grandfather, August, to your father, Richard, and yourself. I would imagine it's a combination of pride and pressure on you. Can you comment on or address that?

There is a lot of pride in continuing the family farm. It's really about continuing and growing upon the values we believe in.

We have grown a lot over the generations and added additional ownership to the farm as we have grown and as individuals earned into the company.

We view ourselves as a "Family of Families" and keep it that way to ensure our alignment in taking care

"The last two years have been crazy when it comes to inputs, parts and labor. I have never seen this kind of volatility and inflation in my lifetime."

– Jeremie Pavelski

of our team, communities where we live and work, and our customers.

There is a lot of pressure in any farming operation. Sure, I could see some of it as legacy pressure to continue and grow the operation, but to me, I set that aside and ask what can we do better today than we did yesterday (or generations ago).

I am not competing with what was, but rather competing with what could be. We are long-term focused,

Above: Hilling was underway this past season in a healthy Heartland Farms potato field.

which I believe is the appropriate approach.

Legacy is always going to provide a fundamental basis and experience, but we need to continually be looking toward the future, which, funny enough, is one of our core family/legacy values.

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Above: The bulk trucks are lined up and ready at Heartland Farms.

Right: Among the many honors bestowed upon Heartland Farms and the Pavelski family over the years, one that has become especially poignant is the National Potato Council's 2011 Environmental Stewardship Award, accepted by Jeremie (left) and Richard (right).

Any favorite memory of being on the farm when you were young or working it during school? To me, working on the farm, being in the shop, sweeping floors, grading potatoes, picking rock, riding around with dad, attending customer and supplier meetings at an early age, and learning from our business partners and team members are all memorable and provided a good

basis for what I do today.

There are too many memories that made a lasting impression to list just a couple. That history and experience starting from the ground up helped instill values and purpose.

Every position on the farm is needed to ensure it can run smoothly, and we all have our roles to ensure success as a team.

Your college background and one of your main strengths are in technology, is that correct? What are some of the newer technologies Heartland Farms is starting to employ now or on the horizon? I do have a background/ passion/ knack/ obsession for technology. Technology has a lot of potential to help produce great results and increase sustainability.

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We utilize a lot of technology on the farm and are continuously evaluating new things. Over the last couple years, we have begun to utilize some services that provide more in-depth imaging and AI (artificial intelligence) capabilities for detecting pests and disease.

We are also utilizing technology to benchmark operations even more and reduce carbon footprint. As that continues to develop, I believe it has the potential to greatly increase awareness.

We have also spun off some of our own technology development into a new company, Heartland Ag Tech, which has developed technologies

for better irrigation monitoring, custom embedded solutions, better equipment control, reduced user fatigue when operating equipment for long hours, increased accuracy and efficiency for fertigation, remote control of equipment, and many more items.

It is exhilarating being able to develop that technology, from designing circuit boards to microprocessor-level programming, to failure mode analysis, all the way to the user interface and data analytics.

The tech we develop starts with what Heartland Farms team members identify as gaps and areas we believe can increase overall sustainability

and ways to accelerate targeted goals in carbon and water reductions/efficiencies.

These items provide us with internal competitive advantages. Our executive, operations, IT (information technology), QC (quality control) and administration teams deserve great credit for working hand in hand on all of this.

The tight integration of Heartland Ag Tech with the farm subject matter experts ensures we tackle real-world farming problems looking for a technology, versus technology chasing hypothetical problems, and evaluate the solutions at scale to

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Above: With 10,000 acres of chipping and processing potatoes to get it, it's all hands and machines on deck during potato harvest at Heartland Farms, Inc.



measure the value added to the operation.

Conversely, Heartland Ag Tech brings skills from the tech industry, such as Lean Six Sigma, which amplifies our farming organization's ability to tackle tough problems in unique ways.

From solar panels to variable rate irrigation, Heartland Farms has been a proponent of sustainability. Is there anything on the horizon that furthers that direction? Sustainability is not only about the tech that's available, but also about overall awareness and working together as an industry and with other stakeholders.

In 2021, we began working with our local county conservation team and other farms to start a Producer-Led



Above: When all is said and done, the close-up of a flowering potato plant tells the story of why Heartland Farms has been in business for five generations.



Watershed Group for one of the watersheds in which we farm.

Other WPVGA members in the area such as Signature Farms and Coloma Farms are also part of the group, and we are excited to see what can come of this and get even more farms involved.

There are also lots of efforts for the new term in sustainability, which is Regen Ag. We have developed a roadmap for adding more pollinator habitat, benchmarking water quality and quantity, increasing beneficial soil microbes and reducing carbon footprint.

These efforts lead to an overall self-sustaining ecosystem.

Heartland Farms is solidly behind and a main backer of the Farming for the Future Foundation (FFTF). What are your goals with FFTF? To put it simply, Farming for the Future Foundation strives to connect the people who are eating the food with the people who are growing it.

As a grower, we see the benefits of more people understanding what we do and where their food comes from, and connecting students with the work that farmers do every day.

FFTF is developing partnerships with schools to bring these important topics directly to students. These partnerships will have a positive impact on the industry and our ability to feed a growing world.

Left: Heartland Farms produces many varieties of chipping and processing potatoes, including Snowden, Lamoka, Pike, Atlantic, Hodag, Burbank and Frito-Lay varieties. The closeup of chips shows fantastic consistency and coloration.

Right: With the operation's focus on sustainability and renewable energy, solar panels line the roof of the Farm Operations Technology & Training Center at Heartland Farms, Inc.

The work of FFTF will help develop the next generation of agricultural workforce, especially those who never considered a career in agriculture.

As the world's population continues to grow, it will be more important than ever to connect people with the farmers who are doing more with less by utilizing science and technology and to dispel myths around environmental impact and sustainability.

Showcasing agriculture as the exciting and technologically advanced field that it is will further the story of innovation and sustainability.

I understand you've reached recent fundraising goals. Can you update readers on the progress of the FFTF and the planned Exploration Center?

Yes, over the last year, FFTF has made impressive progress on the Cultivating Connections Campaign and is well on its way to reaching the goal to build the Food + Farm Exploration Center.

This month marks one year since the campaign cabinet was seated and fundraising formally began. The sheer enthusiasm from the agriculture industry and its aligned partners has been truly inspiring.

Groundbreaking for the center will take place next month (April). We couldn't be more excited to be a part of the development of the Food + Farm Exploration Center, a place where everyone has a seat at the table.

How many truckloads of potatoes does Heartland Farms generally ship a day, and how many truckloads is the operation capable of? We average approximately 50 trucks per day and have the capability to peak out around 250 loads per day if need be.

When other areas of the country have quality issues, logistics issues or anything else that prevents a load getting to customers, we take care of that for our customers, so they don't see disruption to their operations.

Do you have your own drivers, and if so, does that help in staying on top of shipping challenges? Some loads are brokered by customers, and we take care of some of them. We work tightly with a local carrier on a daily basis for shipping lanes we manage.

What do you hope for, not only in this growing season, but the near future of Heartland Farms, Jeremie? First and foremost, I wish good health for all our team members and their families! After that, it's probably similar to most farmers.

It would be nice to receive just the right amount of rain, excellent weather, lower pest pressures, great quality and yields, great markets and continued growth. Surely that isn't asking too much.

What do you hope for potato and vegetable growing in the Central Sands of Wisconsin in the future? Central Wisconsin is a leader in the production of potatoes and vegetables. The growers here also

understand and put forth great effort to produce sustainable crops and I believe that will continue and be accelerated with new technology, varieties and techniques.

What that means to me is that we can broaden our horizon of customer reach to different areas and see this as an opportunity for the Central Sands.

There is also a lot of talk from groups that certain regions across North America will not be suitable for agriculture in the future, but the Great Lakes states will be some of the most sustainable and productive.

This has the potential to bring in new industries, customers and alternatives to the area and could be exciting for farms here.

Is there anything I've missed that you'd like to add? I guess my last comment is that I hope everyone has a successful and safe year! **BCT**

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