



INTERVIEW

MARK BACON, vice president, Bacon Farms, Inc.

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

NAME: Mark Bacon

TITLE: Vice president

COMPANY: Bacon Farms, Inc.

LOCATION: Hancock, WI

HOMETOWN: Hancock

YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION: 23

SCHOOLING: Bachelor of Science degree in agri-business, University of Wisconsin (UW)-River Falls, 1994; graduate of Tri-County High School, Plainfield, 1989

ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS:

Tri-County School Board, 1999-present, currently serving as board president; UW-River Falls Alpha Gamma Rho Fraternity/Alpha Psi Chapter Alumni Association Board, currently serving as president; Tri-County Education Foundation, currently serving as president; and Hancock Sportsman's Club, currently serving as treasurer

AWARDS/HONORS: National Corn Growers Association Yield Contest state winner

FAMILY: Wife, Michelle, and son, Zachary

HOBBY: Hunting, fishing, trap shooting and spending time with family

The original Bacon family farmstead became a century farm 50-plus years ago, in 1969. Settled under the Homestead Act in the 1860's, Bacon Farms is one of the oldest grain and vegetable operations in Wisconsin.

"Bacon Farms, Inc., as it is now, was created by my grandfather, Merle, in the early 1970's," Mark Bacon, vice president of the family business, says.

"Over the decades, the business has seen many changes in personnel and crop focus, from dairy to beef and cash crops, to vegetables, and



Mark Bacon (pictured at his desk) says his father, Larry, and uncle, Randy, were the owners of Bacon Farms in Hancock, Wisconsin, until 1998 when they both retired. Mark and his brother, Jim, took over ownership and control of the business, and today their younger brother, Jeff, and brother-in-law, Jason Welty, are also involved on the farm.



back to what it is today—a grain and vegetable farm,” Mark relates.

Located in Hancock, Wisconsin, it was a dairy farm through the late 1960’s. With one of the first wells in Waushara County drilled on the property in the 1950’s, once irrigation was added, the farm started growing potatoes and vegetables, eventually discontinuing dairy.

“We also raised beef and grain crops through the 1980’s,” Mark notes.

“The late ’80s were very dry years that saw canning companies actively contracting additional acres in the Wisconsin Central Sands area, and we adapted to only raising potatoes, contract vegetables, and cucumbers.”

“My father, Larry, and his brother, Randy, were the owners of the business as I was growing up after the passing of my grandfather, up until 1998 when they both retired,” he explains.

Above: A John Deere tractor and planter are ready for the field at Bacon Farms in Hancock, Wisconsin. The same planter can be used for corn, soybeans, and kidney beans.

Mark and his brother, Jim, took over ownership and control of the business, and today, their younger brother, Jeff, and brother-in-law, Jason Welty, are also involved on the farm.

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Bacon Farms has grown over the years and has changed focus a couple of times.

“In 2010, we made the decision to discontinue potato operations,” Mark says, “and now focus primarily on grain and vegetables, currently growing field corn, soybeans, wheat, snap beans, peas, and kidney beans.”

“We also have a close working relationship with a couple neighboring farms that add rotations of potatoes and cucumbers to the business,” he relates.



Field corn from Bacon Farms goes entirely into the ethanol market, primarily being shipped to the plant in Friesland, Wisconsin.

That storied history must make you proud. What do you take most pride in concerning the farm, and what generation do you represent? It does. I am very proud to say I am a fourth-generation family farmer.

We have always prided ourselves in doing the best job we can to produce the highest quality products while taking great care of the ground.

We are also the labor force for the business. We each have our strengths, but ultimately, if there is a job to be done, it is one of the family members likely doing the work.

For most of the primary jobs, from planting, irrigation and spraying to running a harvester or grain dryer in the fall, or even driving truck from field to farm, it is a family member behind the wheel.

How many years have you been working the farm, and any neat memories as a kid you want to share? I have been working on the farm my whole life. I drove my first tractor at six and have done everything from working in the fields moving irrigation pipe and gun stands and cutting hay as a teenager to planting and harvesting.

I have many hundreds of hours in a tractor seat. I was 11 years old when my father put me in the planter. He said, “You plant while I eat lunch.”

Above: The evolution of Bacon Farms is illustrated via two photos, the first taken in 1977 and the second in 2018.

I have been the main planter operator for the business ever since. You can still find me running one of the planters throughout the spring.

How many acres are under crop management? We currently operate nearly 6,000 acres, with about 3,500 acres of field corn, 1,200 acres in soybeans, 600 acres of snap beans, 300 acres planted with kidney beans, 100 acres of wheat and 100 acres in peas.

This includes some rotational acres that we work with neighboring farms that are planted in potatoes and other crops. We also raise about 150 acres of grain crops organically.

Is most of it for processing, and if so, who are your main customers? Our field corn crop goes entirely into the ethanol market. We ship corn to several plants, but primarily the ethanol plant in Friesland, Wisconsin.

We also sell to three others from time to time in Oshkosh, Necedah, and Cambria. We sell locally to the elevators in Westfield, Auroraville, and Adams, mostly crop that we do not have storage enough for on the farm.

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Mark Bacon (right) teaches his son, Zachary, how to run the planter.



Two combines and two tractors with grain carts are ready for corn harvest.

Our soybeans are all food grade, non-GMO beans marketed to the DeLong Company in Clinton. The snap beans are contracted with Seneca Foods and Lakeside Foods, while the kidney beans are all for Chippewa Valley Bean in Menomonie.

How do you, your brothers and other family members split duties?

Jim is the primary office manager and takes care of the irrigation for the business, while I am more of the equipment manager and main operator for the equipment.

Jim has a strong electrical understanding and engineering background, while I have a business degree. This helps us each

understand the other roles—me the bookkeeping in the office, and Jim the equipment maintenance—without being the one in charge of that portion of the business.

I also manage the technology component with setup and data collection.



Although grain bins have been added onto Bacon Farms over the years, the owners are planning a grain storage facility upgrade this summer that will help make the harvest operations more efficient.



Kidney bean seed is shown in the planter seed box.

Jeff is the sprayer operator in the summer, and drives semi during harvest, and our brother-in-law, Jason, is our on-staff agronomist, and manages the drying operations in the fall, as well as shop maintenance in the winter.

In addition, Jim's wife, Deb, is our bookkeeper and is in the office most days for at least a little while.

My father also helps during the busy seasons doing some tillage, as well as running a grain cart during harvest.

Jim's son, Alex, is on the farm as one of our full-time employees, running equipment in the summer and driving truck during harvest and throughout the year hauling product to market.

How many people does Bacon Farms employ full-time and seasonally?

We cover a lot of acres with what I consider a rather minimal staff of seven full-time employees, including family.

During harvest, we also get a lot of help from my and Jim's wives being truck drivers, as well as Dad throughout the summer and fall.

We are very fortunate to not need much additional labor force normally, but we do occasionally hire one or two harvest team members, as well as some trucking services during the heart of harvest.

Did you make any new machinery or technology purchases for 2022? Yes, we have a few new pieces of tillage, planting and harvest equipment coming in for this year.

The planters use the latest tech of electric drive and individual row control, as well as the most advanced monitor control.

Getting the seed placed in the ground properly is very important for maximizing the crops' full potential.

We are also planning a grain storage facility upgrade this summer that will help make the harvest operations more efficient.

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– Mark Bacon



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The technology of GPS guidance, rate controllers, yield monitors and Machine Sync are all a major part of our business. It's a lot more complex than just allowing the tractor to drive straight, and seemingly more of a full-time job just managing the technology every year.

Data management is very important,

and having good, useful data is paramount. Every year, I try to add a new layer of data management within the tech to advance forward.

In the past couple years, we have also used Machine Sync technology to connect the combine to the chase cart tractors to ease operator fatigue and keep the two machines working

together to improve efficiencies within the field operations.

I assume it's been a struggle purchasing fertilizer and crop protection products. If so, how are you coping?

It has. The fertilizer supply issue has not hit us as hard, at least from a dry product perspective, as we have enough on-farm storage



for all our dry fertilizer needs.

These products we regularly bring in and put in storage in the fall for the coming year, which has helped isolate us from some of the immense price swings, but not entirely.

The liquid fertilizers are where we are much more at the mercy of the seasonal market, as we do not have storage for all our seasonal needs.

The crop protection supply issue and the fertilizer prices are going to affect all of us farmers this year. Time will tell the extent of the hit to the bottom line.

Being willing to use alternative options in some cases may be necessary depending on supplies. Being cognizant of cost of production numbers in years of high input costs is an absolute must to be able to evaluate what is the best option.

What have been the most significant changes or advancements during

your time on the farm? Outside of the cropping changes, I would say by far the equipment technologies. When I started running a planter, it was a long day of staring over the hood at a marker track. Today, it's all guidance, mapping, and high-tech rate controllers.

I expect some time in my life I will see an autonomous tractor on our farm, but likely during my son's or grandchildren's era. Even the technology inside harvest equipment has gotten immeasurably greater in 20 years.

Has grain and vegetable farming on Bacon Farms become more streamlined, challenging or both?

It is definitely more streamlined, but also more challenging. Equipment size continues to get bigger, and the technology that gives real-time data has improved the ability to cover more acres in less time, and to know what improvements



Photos on this and previous page: During harvest, kidney beans can be loaded into a truck via a combine unloader or from a hopper lifted in the air from the harvester and dumped directly into the bed. Regardless, it's a beautiful sight.

to make regarding the crops at a moment's notice.

But farming is very much more of a business than it was 30 years ago.

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The days of doing things the same as I did yesterday are gone. You must continue to evaluate, adapt, and improve in every aspect of the business to stay competitive.

As far as vegetables, I assume



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you need to stagger planting and harvest? The snap bean plantings are dictated by the respective contract company, and often we start planting them in mid-May. We determine planting dates for the kidney beans, and yes, we stagger them to allow harvest windows to cover those plantings.

We try to plant about 100 acres every two to three days, which has worked well at harvest.

As for the corn and soybeans, no. We try to vary corn maturities a bit, and that helps with harvest.

We know we can't harvest it all in one day, so we range from 94- to 105-day maturities, with hopes to be able to start harvest in early October and finish before Thanksgiving. We strive for most moisture levels to be in the low-to-mid 20 percent range.

We try to start planting as close to April 20 as we can and cover as many acres as weather allows.

Are there different machines and processes for each vegetable?

Planting-wise, no. We run two John Deere row crop planters that we plant all our corn, soybeans, kidney beans, and snap beans with. The only change between crops is the plate in the seed unit.

Left: Soybeans are harvested on Bacon Farms.

Right: A Balzer 1,300-bushel grain cart is used for corn and soybeans.

As for harvest, we can do corn and soybeans with the same harvester. We have a corn head for corn, and a draper platform for the beans that we can switch between the two in just a couple minutes with each harvester.

The kidney beans are a special breed of crop. We have tried using the traditional combine and draper platform with mixed results, but prior to the 2021 crop, we purchased a specialized harvester for these.

It has turned out to be a good decision, as it is much gentler on the crop and gives a higher quality finished product at a faster harvest speed.

Are you shipping, or are most going to local processors?

We do most of the transportation of our corn ourselves to the ethanol plants. With the amount of storage on farm, we keep one to two trucks on the road most days between January and August, as well as during the harvest season.

The soybeans are generally picked up on the farm by contract haulers as they get delivered out of state.

We have also done our own hauling of the kidney beans to date. These get delivered to the Chippewa Valley Bean facility in Menomonie, which is about a three-hour haul time from farm to facility.

Are you harvesting off the field?

Storing? We currently have roughly 600,000 bushels of on-farm corn storage, which is full every year after harvest. Our typical production the past several years has been somewhere north of 800,000 total bushels.

Therefore, we need to find a home for some 200-plus loads at harvesttime. Traditionally, we have been aggressive about contracting bushels with ethanol plants that allow us to bring the corn off the field to the farm, dry it, and ship direct to them during the harvest season.

This brings with it other trials but allows us to be as efficient as possible with our time and storage space. We have also done some contracting that allows off-the-field delivery with local elevators, which helps keep both harvesters running when the weather allows, speeding up harvest.

Has what the public and processors expect or want from you changed as of late, and is it a struggle to provide what they demand? The corn crop has not changed dramatically, but the vegetable crops and soybeans, yes. Everything continues to require more extensive quality control from the farm end, requiring more time, labor, and attention.

The efforts we take to keep equipment up to date, operating them to the highest quality, and keeping a close eye on all aspects of the crop make it a lot easier.

Supplying the best quality to the end user is the main goal, and we do everything within our power to succeed.

How do you keep the farm fertile and sustainable each year? Crop rotation? Several years ago, we started using a strip tillage machine ahead of planting. Much of our corn crop follows the previous year's

potato crop.

One issue with that is the cover crops applied to those potato fields in the fall often are too small early in the spring to give much protection, but left for a short time, they are fine.

The strip till allows some of that to grow, while giving the new crop a nice mellow, warm soil to be planted into.

We have had great success with this while preventing wind erosion at the same time. A long-term crop rotation is also a key component of our operation, with minimal double cropping.

What do you hope for the future of Bacon Farms?

An ever-changing world makes the crystal ball very hazy when it comes to the future. I do hope, however, that the next generation of family members will have the same opportunities afforded me—to be able to come aboard the business and continue to grow and prosper.

I believe the things we are currently doing, between working with neighbors on rotation, being proactive on technology, and having



A field is strip tilled before planting into the strips of a cover crop.

a sustainable approach to the business will allow us to leave a legacy for the next generation.

Is there anything I've missed that you'd like to add, Mark? With the major disconnect between food production and the consumer, I feel we all need to continue to tell our story. **BCT**



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