



NAME: Clover Spacek
TITLE: General manager
COMPANY: Eagle River Seed Farm
LOCATION: Eagle River, WI
HOMETOWN: Phillips, WI
YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION:
 Two and a half years
PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT: Wisconsin Seed Potato Certification Program (WSPCP), Copper River Cranberry Company, Country Aire Farms, and United Pride Dairy
SCHOOLING: Lakeshore Technical College for dairy herd management
ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS: Wisconsin Seed Potato Improvement Association Board of Directors
FAMILY: Husband, Josh, and dog, Cash
HOBBIES: Gardening, fishing, hunting, reading, and crafting, "but let's be honest, growing potatoes doesn't allow much for hobby time!"

Above: Taking a phone call in the field is all part of the job for Eagle River Seed Farm General Manager Clover Spacek, who is one of the few women running a certified seed potato farm in the country.

INTERVIEW

CLOVER SPACEK, general manager, Eagle River Seed Farm

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

Raised on a dairy farm in Phillips, Wisconsin, Clover Spacek is the first woman to serve on the Wisconsin Seed Potato Improvement Association (WSPIA) Board of Directors in its 120-year history, and one of the few women managing a certified seed potato farm in the country.

Spacek admits this information was a bit lost on her until a group of women from Black Gold Farms came to visit Eagle River Seed Farm as part of a Women in Agriculture

tour and asked Clover to pose for a picture with them. When she asked why, they said, "We don't meet many women farm managers."

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“I don’t think about it,” Spacek says. “You asked me about being intimidated. When I became a seed inspector with the WSPCP, the first few times inspecting fields at farms like J.W. Mattek & Sons and Schroeder Brothers Farms, who’ve been in this business a lot of years, *that was intimidating.*”

“I had a very supportive family,” she adds. “My dad made me feel like I could do anything.”

Doing anything includes managing the people and operations at Eagle River Seed Farm, an early generation foundation-class seed potato farm founded in 1935 by Felix Zeloski.

FARM EXPANSION

Through multiple generations of the Zeloski family and other tenured seed growers, the farm has continued to expand with high-quality foundation seed.

Purchased by Wysocki Family Farms in 2019, Eagle River Seed Farm includes about 1,200 farmable acres, and over 300 acres of early generation seed grown annually on a three-year crop rotation that includes oats and clover, which is mulched and returned to the soil to create high organic matter.

“Oats are under-seeded with a clover mix after potatoes,” Spacek explains. “Eagle River Seed Farm harvests the oats, and then, the following year, clover is left to grow and mowed back three times to give all the organic matter back to the soil.”

All seed grown on the farm is started from nuclear seed, which means the source material has never been grown in the soil, and the purity of the seed is one of the pillars of which Eagle River Seed Farm prides itself.

The foundation-class certified seed potato farm follows state law, which includes four yearly inspections.

You had little knowledge about potatoes when you started with the Wisconsin Seed Potato Certification Program (WSPCP) as a field inspector, in 2016, but you did have a farming background. Tell me a little bit about your background and that first job with the WSPCP. I grew up on a dairy farm and then went to school for dairy herd management.

Left: The planter is filled with more seed potatoes. Clover Spacek says Eagle River Seed Farm grows “seed to seed,” raising seed potatoes to sell to other seed growers. This necessitates keeping the seed disease free and varietally pure, so the next seed grower can keep the seed for two more years to then sell to a commercial grower.

Right: Clover’s husband and coworker, Josh Spacek, plants seed potatoes on Eagle River Seed Farm.

I managed two large dairy herds over 10 years and then my husband, Josh, and I made the move to Copper River Cranberry Marsh.

I worked on and off the marsh, and then, in 2016, I took the job at WSPCP. I knew nothing of potatoes, but I started learning *real fast!*

continued on pg. 10



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Interview . . .

continued from pg. 9

On my thirteenth day on the job, I headed off to inspector school in Canada. It is an amazing training course put on by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. I learned so much in one week.

Then I was off to Washinton and Oregon to a very cool virus training and field day. I spent that summer with Jim Meyer and Dianna Kessler, and I learned so much. I loved it.

I loved the challenge of potatoes, and I really enjoyed the disease detection. I was also involved with the Lelah Starks Elite Foundation Seed Potato Farm, where I got to plant in the NFT (Nutrient Film Technique/hydroponic) greenhouses, as well as hand-cut 60 acres of seed potatoes each season and then plant the crop up there.

During this time, I built relationships with the Wisconsin certified seed potato growers.

You caught on quickly, soon inspecting seed potatoes and planting them at the State Farm. Why do you think you took so well to potatoes and seed potatoes in general? I have always had a strong passion for agriculture, whether



animals or plants. I enjoy the challenge of learning new things, and I had really good mentors!

I have found that the potato community—seed and commercial—is so willing to share knowledge and they all are very passionate. I have connections in many certification departments around the country

and growers in other states just because we all love to talk potatoes and learn all we can.

How were you able to grow into the general manager position at Eagle River Seed Farm, and what was the learning curve like? In the fall of 2021, I was up inspecting at Eagle River Seed Farm (ERSF), and Ron Krueger let me know he was going to officially retire. He said, “Why don’t you apply?” I replied, “What the heck do I know about growing potatoes?”

Ron and Rick Hafner encouraged me to apply, and they both thought I could and would be successful at it. I thought about it for a week or so and decided, what the heck, I’ll never get the job anyway! And here we are.

The learning curve was steep, but lucky for me, I had a lot of great support in mentors. Rick Hafner spent a bunch of time with me,

continued on pg. 12

Above: Clover and Josh Spacek pose in an autumn photo with their dog, Cash. A true family farm, Josh went to work for Clover after managing a Copper River cranberry marsh, near Merrill, for 17 years. The couple has always enjoyed farming together.

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Ron stayed on part-time the first season, and A.J. Bussan was invaluable.

I also had a unique opportunity when three of our full-time employees quit before my first potato harvest in 2022. Kirk Wille and Gary Wysocki, both semi-retired owners of Wysocki Family of Companies, came up for the fall to help us.

They've both been huge supporters and amazing mentors to me and Josh. They continue to come up weekly to help. We have all built strong relationships, and they see the awesome opportunity at ERSF.

Fortunately, I was able to keep one longstanding employee, Janelle

West, who has been with ERSF for 20 years. She spent most of that first year answering my questions and everyone else's.

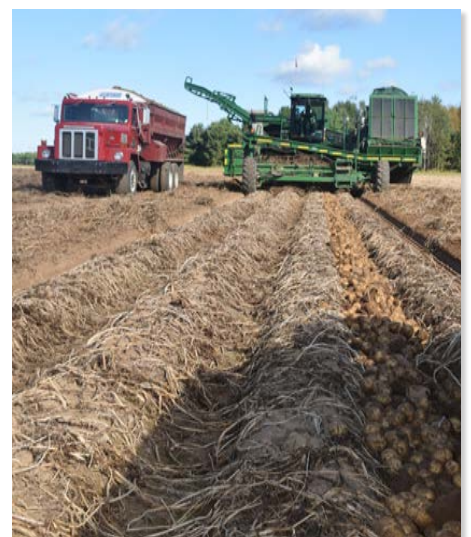
Did Ron Krueger, former general manager of the farm, take you under his wing in some respects, or show you the ropes? Ron stayed on part-time until December 2022 to help mentor me. He still lives on the property and will answer questions anytime I have them.

Aside from Janelle being there 20 years, I believe you hired most of the current team. How were you able to gain their trust and respect? Janelle has been an invaluable asset in my ability to manage the farm. Josh



came to work for me after managing Copper River Cranberry Marsh, near Merrill, for 17 years. We have always enjoyed farming together. He is extremely talented, and I would be lost without him.

Travis Evenstad and Bradley Johnson



Above: A Frito-Lay variety of chipping potatoes is harvested in late September on Eagle River Seed Farm. About 85% of the foundation-class certified seed grown on the farm is in chipping potatoes.

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Above: The longest tenured member of Eagle River Seed Farm, Janelle West has been pulling duty such as cleaning the seed cutter (shown here) for 20 years.

are the two guys we hired in January 2024, and they have become a huge part of our team and success. Neither had a potato background, but both are hard workers who will learn anything.

Along with my parents, we have a group of retired folks who come back to help us in the spring and fall. We are so appreciative of their dedication and willingness to work so hard in retirement.

Kirk Wille got thrown in to be a mentor for me in all aspects of the business. He guides me in storage, projects and COP (cost of production). His 30-plus years of buying seed from seed growers helps in understanding what we need to accomplish here at ERSF.

He is currently my project manager/builder for a new warehouse and enclosed loading facility we are building. The first two seasons, Kirk also ran our windrower during harvest.

SECOND SET OF EYES

Rick Hafner spent many days during the first harvest and planting seasons with us, providing advice, tweaking equipment and being a second set of eyes.

He also drove trucks and loaded seed if we needed it. He continues to visit

continued on pg. 14

“Farming is a tough career, and we face more challenges every year. Staying positive for my team is very important.”

– Clover Spacek



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as much as he can in his new role at Plover River Farms and is always just a phone call away for me.

Gary Wysocki is a mentor to Josh in the shop and on the equipment end of the farm. Josh did not have experience with potato equipment, and as you know, it is very specialized, so his guidance

has been appreciated.

Gary is also helping with land improvement projects and irrigation updates at the farm. He spends lots of time up here with us.

As far as gaining their trust, I believe my passion for agriculture, willingness to learn, intense drive

to succeed and my positive attitude help to earn trust. I am notorious for asking many questions and they have all been so willing to share their knowledge.

Do your parents, Charles and Mary Lepke, work on the farm, and in what respect? As most farmers know, finding help is difficult and finding quality help is even harder. So, when we were short on help going into that first harvest, I called on my parents.

continued on pg. 16

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Left: When a group of women from Black Gold Farms visited Eagle River Seed Farm as part of a Women in Agriculture tour, they asked Clover to pose for a picture with them. When she asked why, they said, “We don’t meet many women farm managers.” From left to right are Megan Davidson, farm agronomist from Rhodesdale, Maryland; Victoria Wright, Midwest regional agronomist; Clover Spacek; Christine Cash, East Coast regional agronomist; and Nicole Wickham, office administrator in Rhodesdale.

Top Right: Kirk Wille, a semi-retired owner of Wysocki Family of companies, operates a tractor at Eagle River Seed Farm.

Bottom Right: Clover Spacek tests potato samples at Eagle River Seed Farm.



They are retired dairy farmers, so working hard is right up their alley. They are now on their third harvest with us, and I have no idea what we would do without them.

It is very special to me to have this time working side-by-side with them again. They also help us grade as we ship seed out in the spring and stay on for planting!


family and other tenured seed growers? Coming into the position, I had big shoes to fill, and yes, it was a little intimidating. But I had a good background in what it takes to be an early generation seed farm, from having the opportunity to work with the Wisconsin seed potato growers as an inspector.

I saw the dedication and effort it

Is it intimidating when you think about the Eagle River Seed Farm history, started in 1935 by Felix Zeloski, and having been run by several generations of the Zeloski

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Above: Putting certified seed potatoes up in storage at Eagle River Seed Farm is a family affair, including Clover (far right in the second image), and her Dad and Mom, Charles and Mary Lepke.



takes to grow high-quality seed. Those relationships and experiences really had me well prepared.

What do you like about working in the Wisconsin seed potato industry? The people and challenge of potatoes.

How many acres of potatoes are you growing and what varieties? We raise 277 planted acres, 35 different

varieties and 64 seed lots. We grow 85% chip varieties, and some russets, reds and yellows.

Who are your main customers and growers? Our largest customer is Frito-Lay. They have been an ERSF partner since Dennis and Ron signed the first contract back in 1991.

We are also growing seed for McCain Foods, Schroeder Bros. Farms,

Above: Rick Hafner checks potato depth in a field. Rick spent many days during Clover Spacek's first harvest and planting seasons at the helm, giving her advice, tweaking equipment and being a second set of eyes.

J.W. Mattek & Sons, Wirz, Inc., Rine Ridge Farms, Miller Farms, Guenther Farms, Bula Potato Co., Baginski Farms, Johnson Bros., Agristo, and HZPC.

continued on pg. 18



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Interview . . .

continued from pg. 17

How are you able to keep the early generation seed clean and disease and pest free?

Keeping the seed clean and disease free is a challenge. Our seclusion from other seed or potato production is a big help, but it still takes vigilant care to keep the crop clean.

We also have the challenge of keeping our seed crop varietally pure. When you have 30-plus varieties in any given year, it is absolutely necessary that every piece of equipment is checked thoroughly at harvest, planting and shipping. We spend a lot of time cleaning!

All seed grown on the farm is nuclear seed, so it hasn't been planted in soil elsewhere, but instead in a greenhouse. Why is that important? Is that unusual for a seed potato farm? You are correct—all seed is purchased from nuclear greenhouse production,



From left to right in the potato storage building are Derek Thiel, Clover Spacek, Mary Lepke, Janelle West, and Charles Lepke.

primarily from Sklarczyk Seed Farm and CSS Farms. This is important because we grow only early-generation or Years 1 and 2 seed potatoes.

We are, as I say, seed for seed. So, we grow and sell to other seed growers. This means we need to keep our seed very disease free and varietally pure, so the next seed grower can keep the seed for two more years to then sell to a commercial grower.

As far as being unusual, there are multiple farms that do small volumes of mini tubers or Year 1 (YR1) production on their farms. Many times, it is for their own seed use, but there are also several other farms growing early generation seed across the country.

This is a question I have been asking since I started. Where does ERSF fit in regarding the size of early generation seed farms. I still don't know, but it has been confirmed we are the largest mini tuber/YR1 grower for Frito-Lay at this time, so that is really cool.

Growing mini tubers is a unique challenge. We have seed lots from 0.10 acre to 14 acres. We planted 60 acres of mini tubers this spring and we plan to continue to increase that number in the future.

We invested in an Erme mini tuber planter in 2023 and used it to plant this past spring. There is a bit of a

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learning curve with any new planter, but it will be a big upgrade to what we were using and will cut our planting time in half.

Was Eagle River Seed Farm already owned by the Wysocki Family of Companies when you started with the farm, and are there advantages to being owned by a relatively large operation? Yes, Wysocki Family Farms was in sole ownership of the ERSF when I started. One advantage to being part of a bigger farm is the shared resources that ERSF could not supply or afford on its own.

The story that I enjoy telling involves the morning that three full-time employees decided to quit. I made two calls that morning, one to human resources and one to A.J. Bussan.

A.J. is my boss and helps with management of the farm. Within three hours of that phone call to A.J., we had one of their best combine operators at Wysocki Produce Farm up here to get our oats harvested.

By the end of the week, we had Kirk Wille and Gary Wysocki up here full-time to help us prepare and get through potato harvest. The support we receive from the home farm is outstanding.

A.J. checks in with me weekly and provides support and advice anytime I need it. He has been key to helping move our seed business forward.

We also work with Greg Dalsbo in agronomy and O.J. Wojtalewicz in maintenance. They both make trips up to the farm to help us as we need it and are always a phone call away as well.

We have had multiple retired owners who remain active and spend time at ERSF just to understand seed compared to what they have done in the commercial sector all these years.

We cannot share equipment because we are seed and they are commercial, but due to our smaller size, some of their equipment that is

continued on pg. 20

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How do Paragon Potato Farms and Wysocki Produce Farm fit into the equation? Each of the arms of Wysocki Family Farms come together

with the same core values and vision for the future.

It is an exciting time as Wysocki Family Farms has recently moved to the fourth generation of ownership and we have a new CEO leading us into the next chapter. We also

Left: Janelle West is ready with seeds on deck for the seed-cutting machine.

Right: During the 2022 Industry Show, in Stevens Point, Clover Spacek was presented with a nice card for her service in the Wisconsin Seed Potato Certification Program. From left to right are seed potato growers Jeff Suchon, Charlie Husnick, Roy Gallenberg, and Clover.

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share services in HR, Finance, IT and management.

Wysocki Produce Farm also gives ERSF the opportunity to move excess seed or seed that does not make foundation status. Though that does not happen often, it is a huge perk to have an outlet.

Many of my customers are also seed suppliers to Wysocki Produce Farm. We are all working towards the same goals and that is really neat to be a part of.

What do you feel your most important duties as farm manager are? Keeping it all together! Keeping people safe and aware that no matter what needs to get done, no potato is worth a human life. Knowing all the happenings and making sure we are all communicating to get the needed tasks done in a timely fashion. Maintaining strong relationships with customers.

What do you strive for every day? A positive attitude. Farming is a tough career, and we face more challenges every year. Staying positive for my team is very important.

Do you have a favorite spot or activity on the farm? The fields are my favorite. Putting that seed in the ground, watching it grow and seeing that potato go into the warehouse in September. There's nothing like that sense of accomplishment to me.

What do you hope for the future of Eagle River Seed Farm? Growth. The future at ERSF is so bright right now. The Wysocki family is committed to investing in the infrastructure of buildings, irrigation, and land improvements. They see the need for, and importance of, clean seed.

Is there anything I've missed that you'd like to add? I have name-dropped so many people, and I know I have forgotten or not mentioned so many. I would not be in this position today without all the people I have worked with, been mentored by or met along the way.

I appreciate each and every person who has answered my questions and given me support. I was blessed to join the potato industry in 2016 as an inspector for the University of Wisconsin, and I had amazing mentors there.

I also was taken in by the seed growers of Wisconsin who helped me learn and grow in my position. When I received the opportunity to become a seed grower myself, I was honored

to join the outstanding group of growers I had inspected for.

As many became my customers, they also continued to help answer my questions and support me in my new role. As a member of Wysocki Family Farms, I now have made connections and have more great mentors from the commercial world.

I am blessed to work with my best friend and husband everyday doing something I truly love. **BCT**



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