



USSA Podcast: Episode 1 Show Notes

Family Farms: featuring 4th generation cotton farmers and an Alaskan fisherman

This is U.S. Sustainability is the new podcast from the [U.S. Sustainability Alliance](#) (USSA).

In episode one, we got up close and personal with U.S. family farmers and producers.

The episode featured interviews with Jay Hardwick and his two sons Mead and Marshall from their farm in northeast Louisiana, just by the Mississippi River. Then we headed northwest to Klukwan in Haines, Alaska, to catch up with fisherman Bill Thomas. We also heard from Monte Peterson, a fourth-generation farmer from North Dakota, and dairy farmer Tina Hinchley, who is based in Cambridge, Wisconsin.

To open the episode, host Russell Goldsmith was also joined online by USSA Executive Director [David Green](#).



Introducing the U.S. Sustainability Alliance

David explained that USSA was set up in 2013 by a group of U.S. farm associations and organizations, or so-called U.S. Department of Agriculture co-operators, across a wide array of sectors. Its aim is to address the fact that many overseas customers of U.S. farm products and food products had very little understanding of the long-term history of conservation and sustainability in the U.S. When the project started, USSA spoke to a number of European stakeholders, officials, industry representatives, farmers and NGOs to get their views on U.S. sustainability in agriculture and food. They found that the understanding was extremely limited, and the perception was actually very negative, with comments such as “American farms are huge. They don’t care about the land. They



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use chemicals, pesticides, GMOs". However, David stressed that the reality is very different. As such, the purpose of the USSA is not only to promote U.S. products, but also to promote and inform overseas customers of what exactly happens on the farm, on the forests and on the seas.

The Alliance is made up of [21 co-operators](#). They range across organics, seafood, the soy industry, the corn industry, the leather and hide industry, dairy, rice, almonds, etc., and a wide range of organizations in the supply chain.

The podcast is part of USSA's outreach efforts. The reason that family farms was chosen as the focus of the first episode is because the perception of American farms is that they are huge ranches and land. David said that someone USSA interviewed in 2014 asked him if American farmers preferred a helicopter or a light plane to fly over their farms because they're so large! The reality is that the average farm in the United States is 450 acres, about 180 hectares, which really isn't large. Of course, there are some large farms, and the Hardwicks, who we hear from in the episode, have a 10,000-acre farm. But David added that the U.S. Department of Agriculture's latest census shows that 98 percent of American farms are family owned and operated. This, he said, is a far cry from the popular image and misperception that they're huge corporations.

Interview with Jay, Mead and Marshall Hardwick

Jay, Mead and Marshall Hardwick couldn't be better placed to represent family farms because when Jay hands over the reins to sons Mead and Marshall, they will become the fourth generation to run their farm.





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Jay explained that Hardwick Planting Company is on Somerset Plantation, in northeast Louisiana, adjacent to the Mississippi River, approximately 200 miles upstream from New Orleans. Their farming operation is approximately 10,000 hectares (20,000 acres). 60% is in agricultural production lands and 40% is in managed timberland, wildlife riparian areas, conservation reserve programs, and the like. The Hardwicks primarily focus on cotton, corn, soybeans, and grain sorghum, and they had some experience in the past with food grade products such as sunflowers and peanuts.

Jay said that he was a recent arrival into agriculture, at least from the Hardwick side. His former career was in education at the university level, and he met his wife, who was from Louisiana and a farming family with a long history of production and ownership. He moved here, thinking that he would move on, but stayed. It was an attraction that took him by surprise. He said that it has been a real fulfillment, but greater yet is the opportunity of going forward and what that means as a family. His wife's family is very rooted in the property, and he saw this as a very good thing for their family, their children. So, their sons have embarked on the same voyage. And that wraps around the whole idea of sustainability and how your land moves forward with the next generation and the types of responsibilities you might see involved in that land. So, Jay is really thrilled that his sons are very interested and they're participating very vigorously in the farming operation.

History

Jay's wife's family has owned the property since the 1940s. Prior to that, it was owned by an English family, the Perkins, going back to 1814. That has a long lineage, it's a very small number of people that have been involved in it from an ownership point of view.

Marshall explained that both he and Mead went to college; he went to Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge while Mead attended Southern Methodist University (SMU). Marshall's degree was in Agricultural Business. He then went on to do a Masters in the School of Plant, Environmental and Soil Sciences, so his studies were agronomy related, soil sciences and agriculture in general. A lot of his responsibilities focus on that and he does a lot of strategic planning for crop rotations, variety selections, irrigation management and field activities. There's a lot of cross-over. They have six employees on the farm who all have assigned tractors, so Mead and Marshall don't particularly drive tractors. But during harvest season, fertilizing and planting require a lot of manpower so they take on a lot of responsibilities out in the field in terms of general operations.

Mead added that his path back to the farm was different. Mead went to college in Dallas, Texas, SMU, where he got a Bachelor of Business in finance. He took a real estate finance job in Dallas, did commercial real estate for Federal Express and a few other Fortune 500 companies in and around North America until about 2014. Then he returned to the farm with his wife and two boys in 2014. In 2017, they had their daughter.



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In terms of his role at the farm, based on his degree and business experience, Mead said that it's primarily financial and also strategic planning in terms of their business vision. Marshall handles more of the agronomy vision. They're about to start harvesting corn, so the brothers will be very involved with the actual operation of farming beyond the office.

Both Mead and Marshall think they work well together as a team and Jay added that, as a father, it's gratifying to watch because they bring two different sides of a very important equation in agriculture, not only the agronomy and production side, but the financial side. What they've yet to embark on fully is what Jay does on the marketing side, making certain that they know their price points and cost of production. Currently, they provide the information to Jay and together they set goals. Jay said that it's great to see the interaction that the brothers have – they're very synergistic.

Sustainability

Jay has won multiple awards for his work in conservation and leadership in sustainable agriculture. Most recently, he was inducted into the [Louisiana Agricultural Hall of Distinction](#). The notion of sustainability didn't happen overnight, he said. It really was an evolution for Jay, as an understanding of the capacity of the landscape and the needs of a family from an income perspective. So, sustainability wasn't only an act of preserving the landscape - it was finding a balance between the landscape resources, the habitat, the wildlife, the plant material that was there, but also the reality of the revenue stream that a family depends on. So, what that meant to Jay and what they have explored are the practices that will enable them to secure not only a productive capacity and treatment of the landscape and preserving the opportunities going forward but also preserving it through the family's involvement and understanding what that might mean for the future.

All the practices that they use in the field are meant to preserve the soil in this productivity and that's linked to the revenue stream of productivity as well, they go hand in glove. They shouldn't supersede one another. Jay said that if you have a viable, resilient landscape and a productive capacity in the soil, you're going to have a vibrant, increasing revenue stream outside of what markets do. That helps ensure that future generations have a full capacity to produce for their generations.

Landscape & Wildlife Habitat

The commitment by the family (and the generations of it) is to the amount of land involved in agriculture (6,000 hectares). Also, the farm is surrounded by 4,000 hectares of landscape in terms of managed timber, wildlife habitat areas, rivers and streams and bayous, and they become equally important. It's a very organic-looking farm in the sense that it's not heavily compartmentalized, with only wildlife in one minor section and production in another overbearing section. They're all integrated within that. Jay said that you become very aware of the landscape through the wildlife that emerges from it. They now leave unharvested grain, for example, purposely in some areas, and



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also residue that becomes foraging opportunities for wildlife. For example, the Louisiana Black Bear was on the endangered species list, and it has revived in great numbers because they're a foraging animal, an opportunist, and they will feed on residues and even dead carcasses. So, the Hardwicks see a great emergence in wildlife recovering as a result of the minimal practices they use on their agricultural lands.

Technology

Mead explained that, fortunately, Jay has always wanted to use different tools, whether that's something old that's used in a different way or new technology, and he also sees that technology generally is going to help them drive change. So, there aren't any arguments between the younger and older generations in that respect. In terms of technology, they have embraced variable rate seeding where they put more plants or more seed in areas of the field that they know to be more fertile so they can increase revenue there, and limit exposure in certain areas that might not be as productive. Something that they have adopted in the past four years is intensively grid sampling. They soil sample about 2,500 acres every year to get a better idea of what nutrients are in the ground. They can then plan their fertility requirements for the upcoming crop, versus just blanket applying fertilizer, which can contribute to nutrient run-off, dead zones and water and cause other damage to the environment. They also have GPS-driven tractors, which contributes to efficiencies, and means less fatigue.

Their future technology use, Marshall says, is based on what companies come out with. He sees self-driving tractors in the future but isn't sure how far ahead that will be. He explained that they spend a lot of money and time looking at new inventions and technologies that come out. Some they just know probably won't work for the farm. Some they try and they don't work out and then others they keep for several years. It's important to them to keep an eye on magazines and websites to see what's new and what's coming out. They also use a lot of technologies for irrigation purposes, monitoring moisture in their soils. They don't adopt every one but try the ones that seem to offer the best fit.

Marshall said that the driving force in choosing new technology is return on investment, but he added that technology is not just a piece of machinery or software - it can be technology in the seed. So, they do a lot of trials on the farm, where they evaluate new varieties that are coming out for large seed companies. When it comes to physical machinery or a device, it's down to trial and error.

Mead added that a lot of the things that they try are based on the fact that they are striving to be more efficient, more profitable, and more sustainable. But they don't always try things just because they think it's going to be more sustainable. If they are more efficient and more profitable, it follows that they are more sustainable. He said that the American farmer is always trying to become more



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efficient because the only control they have is control of their cost. For example, if they soil sample, they become more efficient with their fertilizer. They generally use less and that is more sustainable.

Marshall explained that they bought a piece of equipment that is used to automatically load their sprayer, which they use to spray fertilizers, herbicides, insecticides. In one week, they increased their sprayer efficiency or operating time versus waiting and loading, by over 144%. They, therefore, burnt less fuel, got over the ground quicker, missed rain events and were more efficient. They loaded the exact precise amount of chemicals required, all of which makes them sustainable in the eyes of the public, but also sustainable as a business.

Working as a Family

Jay said he's taking less and less of a role in something he has been involved with for a long time. This makes him anxious, which is probably natural, although Mead and Marshall try to minimize any anxiety. He has great confidence in what his sons are doing and where they're going because they've demonstrated that with great efficiency, particularly at a time when agriculture has had extremely low commodity prices for a lot of reasons, including supply and demand issues. He said that they've worked through those with great skill and effort in the details; this is something that's really hard for most farmers to get down to - what the real cost of production is and how that leads to other things. That has given him and his wife, their mother, great confidence in their leadership going forward because they have a tremendous responsibility on their shoulders – with the property and the number of family members involved in the business. He said the hand-over to them is happening in a very natural way. He's still focused on the marketing side of the business, but it's ordered by all the efforts Mead and Marshall do. He confers with them about decisions they're making. Jay still drives a tractor from time to time and said he's one of the few people that enjoys certain activities out on the farm that others don't! However, he doesn't operate any of the harvesting equipment anymore but he is there for advice if needed or asked.

Marshall said that Jay brings a tremendous amount to their team. He takes the time to do a lot of reading that some of them can't dive into so deeply. He added that agriculture, in general, is an occupation that you don't retire from. His mom's father, his grandfather, retired when he was 93 or 94 and he passed away a couple of months later. He says that his dad will be involved in the farm until the day he dies and, hopefully, he will be too.

Mead said that he and Marshall make around 98% of all the business decisions and Jay takes care of all of the marketing as they felt that that was an avenue that he really excels at. He took a lot of time and interest and intention to do that well when they were trying to run an operation of their size. So, they have taken on making all the capital expenditure decisions, putting forth purchasing agreements for equipment, etc. The real operation has probably transitioned from Jay to his sons, but his involvement hasn't gone away.



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Final Thoughts

Jay said that being patient is one of the things that's a prerequisite to a commitment to sustainability, whether it's the agricultural production and/or the family involvement going forward. It's like compounding interest. It may not seem very significant at first when you make these changes. They're not real knee jerk things. It might be a percent and a half increase or improvements on all kinds of things over a period of time. But that adds up. And if one is willing to be patient with that process then you have a multiplier effect that after, say, five years, 10 years, whatever your benchmarks might be, you'll see tremendous progress. It's the early stages where he thinks producers and people in general get frustrated. They don't see a rapid response. He said they are making commitments that are generational, that are long term. And for them to be something other than ephemeral or short lived, one has to really explore the bedrock of issues that are involved and figure out a game plan. It's about being patient and allowing it to work, making those small changes and letting them add up to be big changes throughout the generation of the farm.

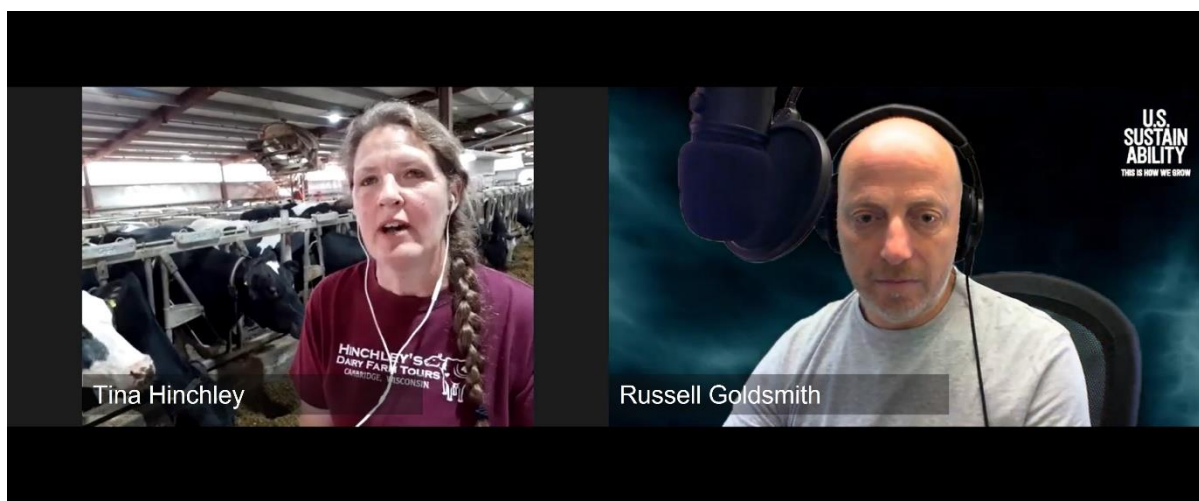
Following the Hardwicks' interview, David Green said that the underlining point and one that really needs to be emphasized in the whole discussion about sustainability is financial sustainability. Cost is a factor for any farmer, no matter how large or how small that farmer is, to try and keep the input cost down. In the interview, Mead said that they always look at cost when they're adopting a technology. It's one thing to have a technology that's going to work, make the farm more efficient and maybe more environmentally friendly, but it also has to help the bottom line. So, looking at the financial implication of sustainability is something that is really critical. It is part of the three-legged stool - environmental, social, and economic. David said that too often people forget the economic side. In addition, it's important to note that farmers the world over again, no matter how big or small, are not going to use technology unless it delivers a benefit.

Interview with Tina Hinchley, Dairy Farmer

Tina Hinchley is a dairy farmer from Wisconsin who will feature in a future episode of *This is U.S. Sustainability* on the topic of animal welfare. She also has strong family farming connections.



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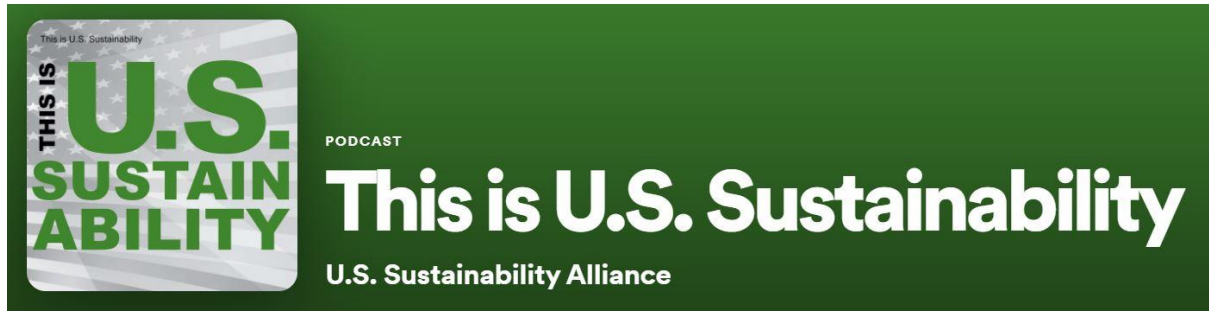


Tina's father-in-law and mother-in-law bought their farm in 1958 and Tina and her husband then purchased it from them in 2000. However, her father-in-law and mother-in-law didn't retire; Tina and her husband farmed with them. One of her four children, Anna, has chosen to come back to the farm and she is working with her full time, and will eventually take over when Tina retires.

Tina said that everything they have on the farm is because her father-in-law cared enough to keep it in good condition so that they could "slide right in" and take over ownership. The same should apply to her daughter. Tina said they need to make sure that they have a working environment that the next generation can afford to get into it. They need to help them and hold their hand all the way through the transition process. If they don't have a legacy for their children and a legacy that the community can see, then Tina believes they're being completely irresponsible as farmers.

Interview with Bill Thomas, Alaskan Fisherman

Bill Thomas was born, raised, and still lives in Klukwan, Haines, Alaska. He is located in what they call the Panhandle, with Haines located to the top, 40 miles from the Canadian border and 90 miles from Juneau, Alaska.



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Photo: Bill Thomas and his son Cole

Born to Fish

All Bill's great uncles, his grandfather and uncles were involved in the fishing industry. In fact, everyone he knew in the village of Klukwan fished and so his family were fishermen. He said the stigma was if you're an Alaska native, you're a fisherman.

Bill was 12 or 13 years old when he first starting fishing with his uncles. His job was putting the fan belt on the engine to keep the mechanical drive from pulling in the reel that pulled the net in. He'd sit inside the cabin and make sure that the belt stayed on the engine. He then worked in a cannery in 1963 when he was 16. His mom also worked out there. She was a union rep. Then in 1966, he worked on a tender - The Pacific Queen with Stan Lang. He then went into the Army in 1966 and when he got out, he returned home and started fishing with his best friend, Larry Albecker, in 1969. He's been gillnetting ever since.

Bill has fished three boats in his life, but now has a 34-foot boat that's built for the weather there. It's fiberglass and was built around 1987 – 1989. He was an aircraft mechanic in the Army and so maintenance is a priority for him, so he keeps the boat in tip top shape. It's called Ravens' Walk and is red and black.

Bill's son Cole has worked with him since he was 12. He's 39 now and calls himself the "heir apparent". When they are halibut fishing, they can be out for about five days just to make sure they have quality fish. When they gillnet, they go for three days, although on the week of recording the interview, they only went out for two days. As a result of Alaska's commitment to sustainability, there were no fish in one of the systems. So, some areas were closed, but others were open about



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40 or 50 miles south of them. Restrictions allow the fish that aren't making it up the river to go through the nets and they then go after a bigger species of fish, coho and chum salmon. But the red sockeye salmon go through.

Working as a Family

When Bill got married, his wife fished with him, and they brought their kids on board to fish with them too. He thinks they weeded out which ones didn't want to fish and which ones did.

Cole has a great reputation with the cold storages on quality fish, and he prides himself on that. He won't let them stay out over three days as they have to get in and deliver the fish because of the quality. Bill wants him to gillnet also, but Cole doesn't want to, but he hopes that one day he'll decide that he does. If not, maybe Bill's other son, Gabriel, may do, or they may fish together.

Working in Politics

Bill is trying to lobby U.S. senators in his state and their representative to change the law at Glacier Bay, where he has a lifetime fishing permit so that he can pass on that permit to immediate family. There are only 100 such permits and they like the idea otherwise only cruise ships would be going there. But this gives them a place to fish also. That's for just halibut. The gillnet permit is open and so you roam anywhere you want.

Bill said that his grandmother, Mildred Sparks, was very influential in Alaskan politics. She was in the American Alaska native sisterhood. Bill was raised by her as his mom had tuberculosis. So, they spent a lot of years with his grandma. All the politicians in Alaska would come to see her because she was very influential. Then in 1976, her daughter (his mom) took him to Washington D.C. to help lobby to get them into the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. That opened the door politically for him and he has been involved ever since. He spent eight years in the legislature and has been a lobbyist since 1976. Presently, he works for the governor and because of his experience he knows how to have influence in the fishing industry and complain.

Sustainability

After 52 years of fishing, Bill is concerned about sustainability and putting the pressure of meeting sustainability or escapement goals on their industry.

With halibut, they do test fishing all summer. Halibut fishing is a groundline fishery and so the federal government tests throughout Alaska. They then come back and set quotas. In the gillnet fishery, they have weirs or aerial flights to see what escapement is happening or what fish are going up the river or to the streams. And in Haines, they have sonars and fish weirs, which stop the fish from going up the river. They go through little holes, openings, and they count them. They try to hit escapement goals, there's a lower and upper limit – Bill prefers the upper one. He thinks they should



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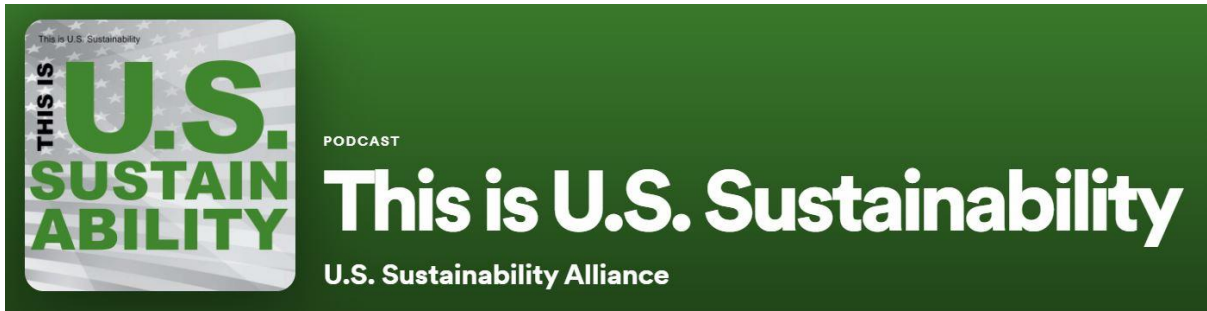
maximize the escapement goals and keep the sustainability going because if you've got one bad year, you have to wait for the overlap then. He added that it's state-wide across Alaska, not just in Haines. They manage for sustainability to make sure that that fish stock continues to come back every year.

Bill said there is a certain amount that you're allowed to catch, in terms of weight each day of halibut, but in salmon, they monitor it. They have fishing districts, called areas, and they open them depending on the escapement goals. Right now, they're fishing five days in front of town because they hit their escapement goals, which assures sustainability, and then they closed a district in between because the other river system hasn't hit that escapement goal, so they took them off the fish there completely and they moved them forty or fifty miles or so down south, putting six-inch gear restriction on them to allow that sockeye to go through. It's all about making sure the fish get up the river and spawn and they come back in four, five, six years.

In the state of Alaska, sustainable fisheries management is part of the Constitution and Bill said that it works. It's a big sales program for the [Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute](#). They can say they manage for sustainability; they don't overfish, they make sure the fish keep returning. When they do have a problem with a lake not getting enough fish, which they call a stock of concern, they are taken off completely and they allow 100 percent escapement, or as much as they can call 100 percent into the system, to rebuild the stock immediately. There are several of those that happen every once in a while, the fish are intercepted by a foreign fish fleet, or they just run into something that kills them. So, they have to close down certain areas. But Bill said that's part of the game they have to live with.

Interview with Monte Peterson, corn and soybean farmer

Monte Peterson is a corn and soybean farmer from North Dakota who will feature in a future episode of *This is U.S. Sustainability* on the topic of innovation and technology when we'll be looking at GMOs, precision agriculture, and other innovations. Monte also has strong connections to family farming.



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Monte's family history on his farm goes back several generations – he is the fourth generation and is farming in the area his great grandfather immigrated to in the late 1880s.

The family legacy means a great deal to Monte. He thinks that some way or another production agriculture, if you grow up in it, is probably in your blood. It's something that his family has taken pride in doing. They are solely interested in producing food for the rest of the world. It is a part of their life. Monte explained that there is an old saying that 'we do not inherit the land from our ancestors, but we borrow it from our children'.

Final Thoughts from David

David hopes that listeners pause, think and reflect on what was discussed in this episode. He said that the podcast featured real people who are at the front end of their different farming operations and fishery operations. It's their livelihood, he said. They do it to be sustainable because if they didn't, they wouldn't be in business. They're also doing it to protect the environment. USSA sees a lot of work that's done in farming, crop agriculture, particularly where technology does help the environment. One thing that it has found over the years is that when it brings farmers and fishermen to Europe, such as those featured on this podcast, and they engage with audiences it makes a difference. Listening and hearing the real-life experiences of the people who are producing our food, he said, is critical in promoting a better understanding and removing some of the misperceptions of American agriculture.