

Taking diversity to a new level

By DARIN LEACH

FARMING near Panora in west-central Iowa, Earl Hafner and son Jeff say they farm fields, not acres. Their philosophy is every field is different and needs to be treated as an individual piece of land, regardless of how large or small it is.

What kind of crops do they grow? Corn, soybeans and alfalfa, answers Earl. Anything else? Winter wheat, buckwheat, rye, basil, red romaine lettuce, butterhead lettuce and tomatoes, he adds. Do they have any animals on their farm? Yes, cattle, hogs, chickens, tilapia, and from bees they sell wheat honey and buckwheat honey.

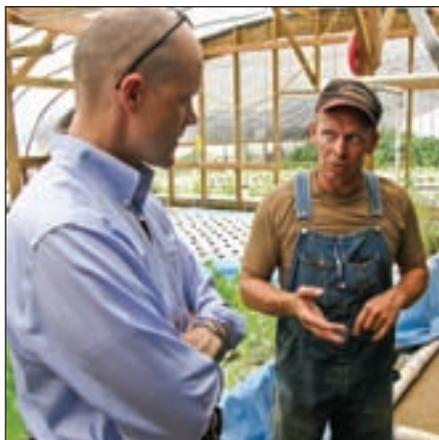
A truly diversified farm

It's pretty safe to say that Earl, a board member with the Practical Farmers of Iowa, and his son Jeff run one of the most diversified farming operations in the state.

"We've always been looking for the best ways to produce food products that meet the needs of our customers," says Jeff, who's been farming with his dad since the early 1990s. "By adding two new enterprises the last couple years, you can say we've taken things to a new level."

Around 12 years ago the Hafners converted their 2,000-acre farm to organic practices. Not using chemicals to fight weed and insect pressure isn't always easy. For instance, the Hafners have five different types of row-crop cultivators to help with weed control, including one that uses flames to burn off unwanted weeds.

"By not putting chemicals on our crops



DIVERSITY DEFINED: Jeff Hafner (right) talks to USDA official Doug O'Brien about his aquaponic system.

Key Points

- Family is taking on-farm diversity to a new level, adding value to their work.
- More farmers are realizing how farm diversification can also reduce risk.
- Diversifying means more than just adding a new crop or enterprise.

we truly believe we are doing the right things for our soils," Earl says. "Our soils hold more water and are just healthier. The extra work is more than worth it for the long-term health of our land."

The Hafners grow traditional crops such as corn, soybeans and alfalfa, as well as winter wheat, buckwheat and rye. According to USDA, only 16,000 acres of winter wheat were planted in Iowa in 2011. USDA data also suggests fewer than 400 farms across the country grow buckwheat, which is thought to have been first planted as many as 5,000 years ago in China.

The Hafners started milling their wheat and selling it as flour in February of this year. They also received a Value Added Producer Grant from USDA Rural Development to help with a feasibility study on establishing certified organic wheat and corn milling product lines, essentially doubling the milling operation.

Aquaculture and hydroponics

In 2011 the Hafners started an aquaponic system on their farm, which combines traditional aquaculture (raising fish in tanks) with hydroponics (cultivating plants in water). An aquaponic system recirculates water from the fish tanks to the plants and converts fish waste into nutrients necessary for plant growth. The plants also act as a filter to clean the water for the fish creating a closed-loop system that does not need synthetic chemicals.

The Hafners now grow produce such as basil, red romaine lettuce, butterhead lettuce and tomatoes year round in a greenhouse and also raise and sell around 100 tilapia every other month. Tilapia, a small fish that grows from 0.03 ounces to 1.75 pounds in six or seven months, is one of the most popular farmed fish in the world and a popular seafood in the United States.

"There have been some growing pains the last couple years as we've added two new enterprises and expanded our markets, but it has been a good experience



ADDING VALUE: Farmer Earl Hafner (right) and Doug O'Brien, USDA deputy undersecretary for Rural Development, discuss how buckwheat is used as a cover crop on the Hafner's central Iowa farm. The buckwheat was just a couple inches tall during this late July visit.

as we've grown from four employees in January 2011 to eight now," Jeff adds.

Traditional crops, livestock

Along with the wide variety of crops and enterprises, the Hafners also have a 200-head cow-calf herd, and they raise 5,000 hogs per year. The cattle are fed using rotational grazing methods, which gives the pastures a chance to recover. "We were able to save our pastures during the dry summer," Jeff says. "That was very important as the only grain the cattle get is a small bucket as a treat as we move them from paddock to paddock."

The Hafners highest priority is caring for their land and caring for their animals so the food they grow and offer to the marketplace is fresh and healthy. "For us to be successful we need to continue listening to our customers, the people we meet at farmers markets and the parents who want healthy food alternatives for their babies and their children," Earl adds.

For more information about products from the Hafner's family farming operation, known as Early Morning Harvest Farm, visit earlymorningharvest.com. Or call the farm at 641-757-2620 or send email to info@earlymorningharvest.com.

Leach is with USDA Rural Development.

Value-added opportunities

USDA Rural Development's Value Added Producer Grant program helps farmers develop strategies to create marketing opportunities for their value-added agriculture products.

Planning grants of up to \$100,000 are available. They help determine the viability of a potential value-added venture including feasibility studies, business plans and legal evaluations. Working-capital grants of up to \$300,000 may be used to pay for operating costs such as buying inventory, paying salaries and marketing the value-added product to customers.

Applicants must provide matching funds at least equal to the grant. Since 2001, more than 130 businesses in Iowa have been awarded more than \$21 million in grant funds through this program. The next round of applications is due Oct. 15. Another round of application deadlines will be announced in 2013.

Call Rural Development at 515-284-4663 or visit www.rurdev.usda.gov/ia.

Food Systems Council state meeting

THE Iowa Food Systems Council will host the 2012 "Healthy Farms, Healthy People" state meeting on Nov. 16 at the Fisher Community Center in Marshalltown.

The council, along with its co-sponsors, will host the all-day meeting in conjunction with the council's annual member meeting. The state meeting is co-hosted by Practical Farmers of Iowa, the Iowa Public Health Association, the Iowa Primary Care Association and the Iowa League of RC&D's.

"A charge of the Iowa Food Systems

Council is to connect food system players, identify common ground, and work together to build a resilient and healthy food system," says Angie Tagtow, co-founder of the council. "We are honored to host the 2012 Healthy Farms, Healthy People state meeting. It is a premier event in which diverse organizations are coming together to discuss the links between farming, food and health. This is the start of a broad and ongoing conversation of the complexities and interconnectedness of our food system and how decisions made across the system

impact the health of Iowans, farms and communities."

The state meeting will showcase how the health of Iowa depends on expanded and productive relationships between agriculture, food, health care and primary care. The intersection of these sectors will be highlighted by feature presentations, a speed round of presentations and a networking session allowing participants and speakers to connect, exchange information and strengthen relationships.

Register online at iowapha.org/

Events. "Anyone who's interested is invited to take advantage of this opportunity to examine the links between Iowa's agriculture and Iowans' health, and to build bridges between these sectors," says Tagtow. Registration is open to representatives from health care and public health, as well as dietitians, wellness coaches, nurses, care facility administrators, farmers, food producers, grocers and public officials.

Current Iowa Food Systems Council members receive a discounted rate of \$35; all other registrations are \$65.