

Family farmers keep up with latest innovations

By **HEATHER SMITH THOMAS**
For the Capital Press

SHOSHONE, Idaho — The Taber family moved to Idaho from Pennsylvania in 1975, when Chris was 6 years old and Darren was 2. Their youngest brother, Matt, was born in 1982. “As a young man, my dad came out West every fall to go hunting, then decided to move

here,” Chris said. “He had a farm in Pennsylvania and two sons and there was no room for expansion — no way that his children would be able to farm with him.”

The name of their farm is a combination of names.

“My dad’s name is Don, my mother’s name is Beverly so they took the first of his name and the last of hers to come

up with Donley Farms,” Chris said.

They raise corn, hay and grain, and started raising sugar beets in 1991.

“I was out of school by then and wanted something different in the crop rotation and talked my dad into planting 80 acres of sugar beets. Within a few years the farmers in our area bought the sugar company and formed a co-op. By then we were growing 300 acres of sugar beets,” he said. “We usually go 5 or 6 years with alfalfa, then plant corn. We are on a 4-year rotation of crops between beets. The sugar factory frowns on shortening the beet rotation very much, or you tend to get more disease problems.”

They generally follow corn with beets, then come back with corn, then malt barley, corn and back to beets.

Water is a challenge on dry years.

“Some crops take more water than others, so we might be stuck with small grains on some fields 2 years in a row because there wasn’t enough water for anything else,” Chris said.

The goal is to have the high-

Donley Farm

Owners: Chris, Darren, Matt and their father, Don Taber

Location: Near Shoshone, Idaho, since 1976

Crops: Corn, hay, sugar beets and malt barley

Size: 5,000 acres

est quality of whatever crop they raise. “We do some test plots, to be on the front end of new varieties. This gives first-hand information on which experimental varieties might be available in the future,” he said. They try to find varieties that do well in their farm conditions.

Chris is the farm manager. His dad and brother Matt run the dairy.

“Darren helps with the dairy and the farm, runs the baler and puts up all the hay. We do custom harvesting; we chop and thrash a lot of corn and grain for other farmers. When harvest starts in late July we are busy until everything is finished — sometimes into December,” Chris said.

They do contract harvesting



Heather Smith Thomas/For the Capital Press

The Tabers work in the field on their 5,000-acre farm near Shoshone, Idaho.

for a big dairy, which enables them to run new equipment. “If we were just doing our own crops, we’d have older equipment, trying to keep it running as long as possible — upgrading only when we have to, rather than when it’s more advantageous,” he said.

Chris also runs the forage harvester and combine.

“This is my time for myself, my peace and quiet, away from the daily grind of dealing with employees and other tasks. I spend a lot of time on the phone, because in summer we may have 34 employees,” he said, adding that it’s a big job keeping track of everything and making sure it all runs smoothly.

“We built a large shop in 2008, and have two full-time mechanics besides myself, working on the equipment,” Chris said.

“We try to be diversified. My dad is on several boards in various ag industries and brings those experiences back to the farm. He’ll tell us we ought to try this, or grow that. We put those principles to work, to optimize what we are doing, because we can’t just go out and buy another farm.”

Land is too expensive, he said, “Yet we need to expand, to keep family members on the farm.”

Creative ideas can often be more effective than trying to farm more land, he said.

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