

# Small farm grows larger with diversification

John and Becky Klimes broaden offerings to sell more to customers

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS  
Capital Press

BUHL, Idaho — Farming was a natural choice for John and Becky Klimes, who both grew up on farms, but they decided to do it differently.

After meeting while working at the University of Idaho's Kimberly Research and Extension Center, they married and in 2005 purchased a few acres in Jerome and committed to using organic practices.

The egg business they had started in Kimberly, Snake River Poultry, expanded beyond poultry to include vegetables, fruits, pork and beef, which they sold locally.

Wanting to expand and become certified organic, the couple purchased 20 acres in Buhl and gained certification in 2014. They also added broilers to their production. They market their products through Idaho's Bounty, Twin Falls Farmers' Market and direct to customers off the farm.

Their vegetables span a wide variety, from leafy greens to tubers. They have 150 laying hens and sell 45 dozen eggs a week this time of



Carol Ryan Dumas/Capital Press

John and Becky Klimes check cabbage starts on their 20-acre farm in Buhl, Idaho. The couple raises a organic vegetables, eggs, broiler chickens and hogs.

year. The farm is home to 600 broiler chickens, five sows and about 80 finished hogs a year.

The choice to farm organic is both personal and economic, they said.

Organic is "what food was intended to be and maintains soil health and biodiversity," he said.

"As a concerned mother, I

feel it's better for my body and the kids, too, and better for the earth," Becky said.

It's also a marketing advantage, John said.

"The marketability of product is much higher with organic certification," he said.

While the Klimeses had used organic practices for years, moving to larger acre-

age on land that hadn't been farmed in nearly 40 years came with a learning curve.

Longtime organic farmer and neighbor Mike Heath has been a big help. He is well versed in organic standards and regulations and has the connections to source organic seed and feed, John said.

Networking is important in

organic farming, both in sourcing inputs and marketing, he said.

The diversification of the farm allows the Klimeses to sell more food to fewer people. Yields are on par with conventional ag, but quality is higher because products are not held up in transit or sitting on store shelves, he said.

## Snake River Poultry

Owners: John and Becky Klimes

Location: Buhl, Idaho

Acres: 20

Status: Certified organic, Animal Welfare Approved

Products: Organic vegetables, dry beans, fruit, berries, eggs, broilers, pork and pastured beef

Education: John has a master's degree in plant science and bachelor's in ag education, University of Idaho; Becky has a bachelor's degree in ag science and technology, University of Idaho

Family: Three children, Elizabeth, 9; Jacob, 7; Kylie, 3.

Affiliation: John, Idaho's Bounty board of directors

"I'm trying to capitalize on every customer I have. I'm trying to do more for them," he said.

John said he's doing what he always wanted and he's always doing something different because things change on the farm with every season.

With their expanded production, the Klimeses intend to change the company name to Agrarian Harvest, but that will have to wait for the slow season, John said.

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# Diversification brings fish farmer success

Leo Ray raises trout, catfish, tilapia and sturgeon in his fish farms

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS  
Capital Press

Leo Ray has built a successful aquaculture business in Idaho's Hagerman Valley through diversity, innovation and strict attention to customer service.

Fate seems to have played a major role in the life of aquaculture entrepreneur Leo Ray, but tenacity, business acumen and hard work brought him success.

Ray's college life at University of Oklahoma began with a focus on wildlife conservation, switched direction to geology and finally settled on invertebrate zoology. But it was a job in college that would inevitably influence his career path.

A professor at the university had received a grant to research the reproductive cycle of catfish and the hormones that control their reproduction and offered Ray a job working on the project. The research would lead to the development of the catfish industry, Ray said.

After graduating in 1963, Ray taught high school for six years. But he kept in contact with the professor and when the catfish industry began developing, he quit teaching, bought land in California's Imperial Valley and opened a catfish farm.

Fate stepped in again when in 1971 Ray delivered a load of catfish fingerlings to a fish farm with a geothermal well near Twin Falls, Idaho.

"I saw the value of that hot water" and set his sights on Idaho, he said.

He worked on a fish farm in south-central Idaho for about a year, bought land and he and his wife opened their own operation — Fish Breeders of Idaho — in the Hagerman Valley in 1973.

The operation started with 106 acres of Snake River frontage, which Ray got for a bargain at \$300 an acre. People wondered why in the world he wanted to purchase a rock field with water too hot to drink, he said.

"It was perfect for a fish farm," he said.

Ray recognized the potential of the geothermal water and concrete raceways and switched his management from pond production to



Carol Ryan Dumas/Capital Press

Leo Ray stands alongside a ditch near his fish processing facility in Hagerman, Idaho. Sturgeon keep the water clear of vegetation.

high-density production with temperature control.

The catfish business took off, leading to a distributor outlet in Long Beach, Calif., to establish a presence.

"In six months, we had so much market we shipped straight to distributors," Ray said.

Three years after his first

land purchase in Idaho and sharing what could be done with hot water, Ray bought 70 adjacent acres — paying \$2,000 an acre.

He expanded the operation in 1975, launching the first successful tilapia farm in the U.S., to provide the fish to the Imperial Valley Irrigation District for moss control in its canals.

Five years later, the irrigation district switched to carp, which could survive the winter, and Ray turned to food markets for his tilapia.

In addition to geothermal water, Ray also recognized the potential of the area's cold springs and added rainbow trout to the mix in 1978 and sturgeon in 1988.

He also raised alligators, imported from Florida, marketing their meat and hides from 1992 until 2002. It was a profitable business, but he ended it after a shipment of baby alligators succumbed to West Nile virus.

"This is still a new industry with a lot of room for innovation. You have to stay on

## Leo Ray

Age: 77

Business: Fish Breeders of Idaho Inc., Fish Processors Inc., Big Bend Trout Inc.

Products: Catfish, trout, tilapia, sturgeon, white sturgeon caviar

top of it and change with it or you'll be obsolete," he said.

Today the operation raises trout, catfish, tilapia and sturgeon on warm- and cool-water farms in Buhl and Hagerman and is just getting started in the tropical fish business. Ray also processes the meat fish and sturgeon caviar and does all his marketing.

All told, the operation produces about 1.5 million pounds of fish meat and 3,000 pounds of caviar a year. Ray supplies the largest part of Whole Foods' trout sales nationwide and sells to 50 to 60 distributors, shipping to 30 to 33 weekly.

"The strength of this company is the diversity; the weakness is trying to manage that diversity," Ray said.

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