

Podcasts another way for farmers to tell their story

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

CHENEY, Wash. — During a Washington Grain Commission meeting several years ago, board members said they needed more information about a topic related to the wheat industry.

Scott Yates, director of communications and producer relations for the commission, had just written an article about the topic for the organization’s magazine.

When he mentioned the article, one farmer told him he didn’t have time to read magazines.

That conversation planted a seed. Yates started exploring a new avenue for reaching farmers: podcasts. Available for download on the internet, podcasts are pre-recorded shows similar to radio shows that can include news, interviews and commentary. They can be a few minutes long, or several parts of more than an hour each.

Yates began the “Wheat All About It!” podcast four years ago. Last year he switched from monthly to weekly podcasts, conducting in-depth, in-person interviews.

“I’ve discovered that there’s so much that comes with a podcast,” Yates said. “The podcast is an ability to reach them directly and provide them information.”

It’s also a way for a person’s passion to come through during the interview, directly to listeners, he said, or quickly give news, such as information about the U.S. withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal.

“Old dogs can learn new tricks, and the podcast is definitely a new trick for me,” said Yates, who has been with the commission for 10 years. Before that, he worked for the Capital Press for 22 years. With that level of experience, there’s no shortage of subject matter, he said.

His podcast has garnered more than 14,200 listens, or an average of about 195 people listening per podcast, Yates said. Some episodes have larger audiences than others, he noted.

Farmers and ag industry members say they use podcasts to reach out to other farmers, and farmers can use them to share their story with the public.

Yates hopes farmers will listen to the program from the comfort of their tractors or combines while they work.

“One of the gratifying things is when people hear about one they want to listen to, they discover the podcast through a particular subject,” Yates said. “They go back and then they listen to previous podcasts. I just got an email from a farmer. He was out seeding spring wheat and he listened to eight podcasts. ‘I listened to a couple of them twice,’ he said. That just made my day.”

The most popular episode is an interview with a Columbia County wheat farmer who was paralyzed from the chest down in a tractor accident.

Others are producing farm-related podcasts as well.

Washington State University launched its weekly “WSU Wheat Beat” podcast last fall. Weed science professor Drew Lyon interviews WSU and USDA Agricultural Research Service researchers, introducing them to farmers and spreading the word about interesting topics.

“A lot of Washington, especially the Palouse, doesn’t have very good cell phone coverage, but you can download it on your phone and listen while you’re doing things,” Lyon said.

Farm broadcaster Pam Jahnke, of Madison, Wis., records a podcast in addition to her day job as a farm broadcaster.

Podcasts allow more detail on stories, she said, including “slice of life” stories, such as the increasing popularity of goat yoga as a way for farmers struggling financially to find new sources of income.

Jahnke tells farmers at speaking engagements that



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

Scott Yates, director of communications and producer relations for the Washington Grain Commission, records an interview with Syngenta cereals breeder Jennifer Vonderwall April 20 at Syngenta’s facility in Cheney, Wash.



Drew Lyon

they’re “rock stars.”

“Farmers are taking the opportunity to share what they know, what they do, how they do it

with anybody else that would like to tap into that,” Jahnke said.

Corn and soybean farmer Rob Sharkey, of Bradford, Ill., runs the Shark Farmer podcast. He started two years ago.

“I try to tell the story of the farmer,” Sharkey said. “Not necessarily what they’ve got their crop in this year, but the struggle they had putting that crop in, raising a kid with autism, that type of thing.”

Sharkey’s audience is primarily farmers. The first few podcasts drew several hundred listeners, he said, and now numbers have grown “well beyond” his expectations. He declined to provide specific numbers.

Sharkey said one of his most popular episodes is about a farm family’s son speaking again after a tractor accident.

Sharkey is surprised whenever a topic, such as mental health in agriculture, draws a



Pam Jahnke

large response from listeners.

“It’s pretty humbling,” he said. “None of this is me: These are the guests that are making a difference with people. I’m pretty proud that at least we give them a platform.”

If farmers want to give podcasting a try, Jahnke recommends they be ready to face criticism from people they’ll never meet.

“Know what you know, and stick to it,” she said. “Stay true to what you do: If you’re a pig farmer, tell me what’s going on in the hog industry that impacts your operation directly. If you’re a dairy farmer, tell me stories about your cows, kids, partners, the people that work with you, what’s going on, (how) the dynamics change.”

It took a year before Sharkey’s program took off, he said.

“It’s pretty simple: Just do it,” Sharkey said. “The money it takes to get into it is pretty minimal. You can try it. If it’s something you’re passionate about and you enjoy doing it, I mean, there you go.”



1000 Springs Mill

1000 Springs Mill partners Tim Cornie, left, and Kurt Mason at part of the former Seneca Foods processing complex in Buhl, Idaho.

Milling, packaging operation slated for Buhl

By **BRAD CARLSON**
Capital Press

South central Idaho farmers Kurt Mason and Tim Cornie plan to make and package various specialty grain products — from popcorn and polenta to feed, flour and a component of vodka — starting later this year in former Seneca Foods buildings in Buhl.

In late 2015 and early 2016 Seneca wound down and closed its longtime food-processing operation. Mason and Cornie recently bought about half the complex on the east side of Clear Lakes Road north of U.S. 30. They plan to operate 1000 Springs Mill there.

“We are ordering equipment,” Mason said. “We are hoping to be packaging this fall as we bring crop in off farm ground.”

He farms in the Kimberly-Hansen area. Cornie farms in Buhl. Both farms are certified organic. They raise red wheat, often made into bread, and are raising popcorn as well as flint corn — a hard-kernel American Indian heirloom corn — and some

grain corn as a component of feed.

Mason said 1000 Springs Mill will package popcorn, and will launch organic and non-GMO chicken feed lines. The business will make cornmeal-based polenta, and will have stone mills for producing wheat, corn and buckwheat flours.

“We plan to have our brand on the shelf at Costco, Amazon, or customers can buy straight from us,” he said. “And we will be able to trace to the place of origin.”

Mason expects strong demand.

“On the organic and non-GMO side, it is just going to keep growing because people are really concerned about where their food comes from,” he said. “The consumer is starting to be more of a label reader and wants to eat healthier. We can bring it right from our farm straight to the consumer.”

Also at 1000 Springs Mill, red wheat will be turned into a flour-like material for shipment to organic vodka maker American Harvest in Rigby, Idaho. And 1000 Springs will have specialized equipment

so it can offer custom bean cleaning and storage to grower-suppliers of Amy’s Kitchen in Pocatello.

For this year, Mason and Cornie, who are cousins, are growing all the crops on 2,000 acres. They hope to increase that total substantially, with the help of contract growers — a couple of whom are contributing already — in the next few years as demand grows.

“As the markets expand for 1000 Springs Mill, we will need other growers in the Treasure and Magic valley areas (southwest and south central Idaho, respectively) to grow crops on contract to meet demand.”

Employee headcount is likely to start at about 40, at \$15 to \$27 per hour depending on qualifications, Mason said. The staff total could increase to 100 as demand warrants, he said.

Mason and Cornie bought about 40,000 square feet of ag shop space, 8,000 square feet of office space, and 233,000 square feet of dry warehousing, of which they recently sold 79,000 to another business.

Mason estimated the project’s cost at \$5 million to \$6 million, including property and equipment acquisition.



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