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Jesse and Rachel Nielsen purchased 80 acres of Umpqua Valley bottomland in 2007 and four years later turned part of their pasture and hay fields into 16 acres of Jefferson hazelnut trees.

Jesse and Rachel Nielsen: Hazelnuts a family affair

By **CRAIG REED**
For the Capital Press

ROSEBURG, Ore. — When part of the family ranch was made available for sale, Jesse and Rachel Nielsen didn't hesitate to move back to Douglas County.

In 2007, the couple purchased 80 acres of the ranch's bottomland that parallels the Umpqua River. Jesse had grown up on the ranch, graduated from Roseburg High School in 1998, moved away for several years and became a lineman.

Rachel had also moved away after graduating from Douglas High School in Winston, Ore., also in 1998. She went to school and became an ultrasound sonographer.

The Niensens wanted to raise their kids in a country setting so there was no debate when the opportunity to move back presented itself.

"When you're little, you like farming, you like the equipment," Jesse said. "I don't know if I envisioned myself farming, but then it was a case of 'now what do you do' when you're here."

There was a bit of indecision for the young couple on how best to use their 80 acres. Jesse's father, Rusty Nielsen, who had a sheep and cattle background,

suggested a hazelnut orchard and provided Jesse and Rachel with educational information on the nut.

Initially, the couple partnered with Rusty on mother cows, using the ground for pasture and hay. Some of the ground was also leased to a company that used it to grow grape starts.

But finally in the fall of 2011, diversification came to the ranch when 16 acres of the bottomland was planted to Jefferson hazelnut seedlings.

"Trees don't get out at night," Jesse said of one reason an orchard was planted. "Another draw was there is less day-to-day labor with the trees. There was a lot of work with cows and I already had a full-time job."

Rachel also worked at her profession and the couple eventually had three children.

To learn more about hazelnuts, Jesse and Rachel did plenty of reading on the crop and attended several informational conferences put on by George Packing Co. They admitted the learning curve was steep, but after their 16-acre orchard produced nine bins of nuts from its first harvest in 2018, another 20 acres was planted in 2019, half in Jefferson and half in Ennis. They

decided to add Ennis trees for diversification.

The harvest of the older orchard in 2019 was a new experience because there was rain, mud and ground debris during harvest. The crop produced 25 bins, but there was an extra cost in cleaning mud and debris off the nuts.

The 2020 harvest was a much better experience, producing 18 bins, but the same poundage as 2019 because there was less mud or debris. The Niensens have marketed the hazelnuts through George Packing.

Jesse and Rachel have done much of the orchard work themselves, planting the trees in 2011 and pruning them until hiring the work out this past year.

Their two older kids, Isabella, 11, and Tavit, 9, earned a wage by helping prune the younger orchard last spring. Kenzie, 4, isn't old enough to help, but spent time with the family in the orchard.

"I like it here," Rachel said. "When we first started dating and I was able to visit here, I loved this property. When we had the chance to move back here, I didn't need any prodding."

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