

Oak Park Farms: Efficiencies are key to hazelnuts

By **BRENNA WIEGAND**
For the Capital Press

SHEDD, Ore. — Oak Park Farms dates back to 1850, when Washington L. Coon took out a donation land claim in Linn County, Ore., eight years before the first hazelnut was planted in the state.

He returned to Pennsylvania to marry Susan, a widow with children, and they returned over the Oregon Trail. His stepsons took on the adjoining 320 acres.

Today, the family's fifth and sixth generations manage 5,000 acres in the fertile Willamette Valley. Mike Coon and his son, KC, and Mike's brother, Don Coon, and his son, Hans, raise mostly grassy rotation crops. KC heads up the cropping side of things.

"Our dads doubled it from what it was, and our grandpas doubled it from what it was, so every generation is seeing roughly 100% growth in the number of acres we farm," Hans said.

In 2012, Hans introduced hazelnuts onto the acreage and has since



Hans Coon, left, and his cousin KC, with daughter Mia, at Oak Park Farms in Shedd, Ore. In recent years the family farm began adding hazelnuts to their primarily grassy crop operation.

built it up to 250 acres.

"We'd seen what Ryan Glaser over at Mid Valley Farms was doing and really like their program," Hans Coon said. "They talked us through it and

told us you can make money at them if you do it right."

He said his senior project at Oregon State University was an analysis of the basic financials of hazelnuts.

"I know a lot more about the numbers now, but hopefully they'll still work out," he said.

He sees continued growth in hazelnuts.

"When we look at the almond industry and the walnut industry, they still dwarf us in scale," he said. "I think to have any kind of true market impact and be able to meet reasonable demand we just need to keep putting more hazelnuts in."

The keys to making a profit in hazelnuts are to plant in good soil, keep an eye on expenses and have a plan.

"It pencils out if you put them on good ground and watch your expenses and have a direction you want to be heading in," Coon said.

This includes bringing large-scale farming practices to hazelnut growing. In addition to using a large track fertilizer spreader, the Coons process their nuts in bulk.

"We specifically designed all of our orchards for bulk processing, so whereas standard headland is 15

feet, mine are about 50 to 75 on average," Coon said. "We're the only ones I know of who are running a shuttle truck, essentially a bankout wagon for the harvester so it never has to stop.

"Most everyone in the hazelnut industry uses 4-by-4 wooden boxes to put their hazelnuts in and transport them and we're doing it in semi-trucks," Coon said. "We're trying to pick up efficiencies everywhere.

"It's not that we're smarter than anybody else; it's just that up until our generation the hazelnut industry in Oregon has been boutique so it needed boutique methods of production," Coon said. "We came from 100-foot sprayers and all that stuff so we're looking at it thinking we've got to do this fast; we've got to be efficient and we've got to be effective; what's the best way we can do that?"

Their program coming out of the gate is meant to be different, he said. "We don't want to handle boxes or be in the field any longer than we have to; we want to get in and get out quick."



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