

# Derek Schafer: Growing wheat seed in Washington

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

RITZVILLE, Wash. — This family farm was homesteaded in 1889 by Derek Schafer's great-great-grandfather, about the time many Volga German families came to the area.

Derek and his wife, Susan, do the farming now, with some help from their two children who are currently both in college. Their son, Devin, is a sophomore at the University of Idaho studying ag business, and their daughter, Linnea, is a freshman at Northwest University in Kirkland, Wash., with a business major.

"This illustrates the importance of business in agriculture today," Derek said.

Farming is no longer as simple as it used to be, and a person has to be a good busi-

ness manager to make it work.

"Both our kids realize this, and I think they are interested in being part of this farm in the future. As they get older we will work on a family succession plan and accommodate them if they want to be here," Derek said.

The farm grows wheat, dry peas and canola.

"This is the heart of dryland wheat country, and over the past 10 years we've also introduced dry peas and canola as rotation crops with wheat," he said, adding that rotations help keep the ground fertile.

"The rotations also break plant disease cycles and we can clean up weeds that are hard to get rid of if the land is just in wheat/fallow rotation," he explains. "By alternating with broad-leaf crops, we can mix up our weed control strategies and also get another



Courtesy of Derek Schafer

From left, Derek Schafer with Linnea, Devin and Susan.

break between wheat crops. This improves the purity of the seed we grow, by having a rotation crop in between."

Derek has been back on the farm for 24 years and says switching to no-till and adding crop rotation is one of the most exciting things they've

done. For many decades, most farmers just grew a single crop, which depletes the soil, especially when plowing and leaving ground fallow, with soil exposed. This tends to kill the soil biology and microbes that are crucial to soil health.

"Conservation farming and crop rotations are working, and improving our soils, and we are seeing the results," Derek said.

The farm has been growing wheat seed for about 20 years.

"We worked with local seed companies to grow seed for them because we had clean fields and took extra care with maintaining purity — cleaning our machinery and doing all the things necessary to be able to deliver a good product," he said.

Wheat seed is the primary crop on the farm, though recently they've also grown some dry pea seed.

"We've grown wheat seed for five different companies. They contract the seed a year at a time, one variety at a time. We may grow different varieties in different fields, but for each contract it's a specific

variety," he explained.

"The contract requires field certification, and seed purity certification. It must be weed-free so we have to make sure our fields meet all the standards," he said.

Being dryland crops, the drought this past year made it more challenging. "We were still able to make a crop, maybe because of the health of our soil and the fact we went into winter with moisture. Most of our wheat is seeded in the fall as winter wheat, and the fall of 2020 was moist enough that the crop went into winter in good condition and had a great start, but the summer of 2021 was brutal."

The farm harvested 70% of a normal crop.

"With 50% rainfall, we felt that a 70% crop was very good, considering everything," Derek said.

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