

Kurt Melville of Cornerstone Farms unloads soft white winter wheat after harvesting a dryland field north of Enterprise on Wednesday, Aug. 18, 2021. The Melvilles have become one of the more diversified farms in the region with a rotation of 12 different crops.

Bill Bradshaw/EO Media Group, File



Choosing crops a complex task for Cornerstone Farms

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ENTERPRISE — A transition to direct seeding — what at the time was called no-till farming — triggered the process that, today, has Cornerstone Farms in Wallowa County running smoothly as a 12-crop operation.

The farm, owned by Tim Melville and his sons, Kevin and Kurt, has one of the more diverse sets of crops in the area. The primary crops, Kevin Melville said, are fall wheat and spring wheat, with the Melvilles also growing fair amounts of alfalfa and Timothy hay. Mixed in with that are rotation crops of barley, oats, flax, mustard, canola, peas, lentils and grain hay.

“This has been a long time in the making,” Kevin Melville said of how Cornerstone came to its current roster of crops. “When I was a young child and my dad was farming back in the ’80s. ... he basically raised wheat and barley. Occasionally he might have some hay. He was basically a grain farmer.”

Kevin Melville said that in the mid-1980s, his dad began the transition to no-till farming. Some of his crops — such as barley — adapted well, but disease started to be an issue in others.

So, he began adding other crops to the mix.

“The first real alternative crop we grew was canola,” Kevin Melville said.

Within a few years, peas were added to the rotation, and then spring wheat. When Kevin Melville returned from college in the mid-90s, they took a deeper dive.

“We started experimenting with more, brought the alfalfa and Timothy in the mix,” he said. “It just became more diverse. The direct seeding lends itself to a more diverse rotation. ... I think the no-till forced us to grow more rotation crops.”

What to grow?

A lot of factors influence the Melvilles’ decisions on how much acreage is devoted to each crop annually, including the contracts

Cornerstone has, the market price of various grains, and what chemicals and pesticides were used on a field the previous year, to name a few.

“The trick is trying to find a rotational crop that can make as much money as your mainstay crop,” Kevin Melville said.

One new factor that’s important now is the increase in price of some of the pesticides or other chemicals, like fertilizer. Even the presence of a weed can determine what crop may grow in a field.

“Farmers will rotate to different crops to handle a weed problem,” he said.

And some crops, even if they aren’t money makers, are still put in for rotational purposes.

“I don’t really make money growing grain hay, we grow it for a certain rotational reason,” Melville said. “Flax is the same way. (Sometimes) what we do grow is for a particular reason — we’re trying to accomplish something on that field.”

An example of how drastic things can

change: last year, Melville had essentially no contracts for mustard seed. This year, he’s growing about 150 acres.

Interestingly, though, long-range weather forecasts for temperature and rainfall amounts are not among the sources Melville uses — partly due to a climate in the Wallowa Valley that differs from the rest of Eastern Oregon.

“You could be having a cool summer, everything going great, and then in July it gets really hot,” he said, adding, though, that by then an early season crop may be done. “Up here in the Wallowa Valley, for us, we can’t make a lot of use of that on the dry land. Wallowa Valley has kind of a funny climate for Eastern Oregon. We usually get the bulk of our rain in April, May, June.”

And as a business model, it comes down to finding a crop that can turn a profit. He quipped that it’s really easy to find one that doesn’t.

“It’s been very dependent on us to try and find rotation crops that are profitable,” he said.