



HALE:
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“Some people plant the crops before they sell them,” he said. “Part of our proposition is ‘sell it before you plant it.’”

Hale said they started a marketing-based plan that tempted possible buyers into purchasing their product even before it was ready to sell. He said, in an uncertain business, they wanted to create as much certainty as they could.

“I am the chief certainty officer in an uncertain business,” he said. “We are dependent on national and international markets and those things that are not always under our control. We learned kind of by mistake early on that you wanted to create as much certainty as you could. You want consistent buyers for your products that you can depend on in advance.”

With Hale at the marketing helm and his brother Rick producing the crops, they expanded their operation, purchasing bigger and better equipment. They then began experimenting with other types of crops, including potatoes, onions and other vegetables. With success in initial potato and onion crops, they moved their operations into what they describe as the sandier and more productive soils part of the region. They rented some fields west of Hermiston that were irrigated by the Columbia River.

After expanding even more, they acquired their first center-pivot irrigated farm in Hermiston and rented a small onion-packing shed that allowed them, and Levy, to market onions and sell them under their own brand.

Bob Hale said their customers appreciate the fact they grow all

their own crops. He said they are what is called a “sourced-based,” vertically integrated vegetable supplier, meaning they plant the seeds and control the whole process. He said everything from growing, harvesting and storing, to marketing, packaging and shipping, remains in their control.

“Customers want to know, ‘Do you really farm, or do you just have outside contract growers?’” he said. “While we have great outside growers, like Jake Madison, for example, we do really farm. We are definitely a farming operation.”

Hale said they also ensured they had the best people working for them and worked hard to create relationships that would last. He said they also were fortunate to base their establishment in the Hermiston region, which has some of the best soil and climate for farming a variety of crops.

“Hale Farms is about people, soil, climate, land and water,” he said. “We are in a great area — high yields and high quality per acre.”

To date, Hale Farms and affiliates grow a variety of vegetable crops per year. That includes potatoes, sweet corn and peas, sugar snaps and carrots. The business also grows blueberries. Their products are sold to restaurants and organizations all over the United States, including Sonic Drive-In, where their potatoes are commonly used in french fries.

Hale Farms success allowed the Hales and Levy to expand into another venture in 1983. Today, River Point Farms is controlled by Bob and Rick Hale, in addition to Craig Reeder and nephew Todd Longgood, and the operation now produces about 450 million pounds of onions per year.

Bob Hale said they de-

veloped a sustainability plan that includes protecting the area’s natural resources, including water. They conserve about 7.8 million gallons of water per year, which is enough to sustain about 683,000 people. Hale said the reason they conserve is because they wanted to give back to the region that has given so much to them.

He said, at River Point Farms, like at Hale Farms, they do everything from planting the onions to the fresh-cut processing, warehousing, marketing and shipping of their product.

“We control the process, from seed to sandwich,” he said.

Hale said, with their latest business venture, they landed their first national chain restaurant contract with Subway in 2003.

“That is part of our proposition in selling it before you plant,” he said. “It’s a long story,

but they were looking for red onions. We asked them what they wanted, and they asked us what we could do. We’ve been together for years.”

Now, Hale said they are expanding the River Point Farms venture by building a new 80,000-square-foot whole packaging plant, which will be complete in August.

Hale said there really isn’t any secret to their success. They earned their keep through good, old-fashioned hard work and by surrounding themselves with smart, talented people who believe in the same things, he said.

“We work hard, have great people work for us and have really been a marketing-driven organization,” he said. “We are in an area with great people. The support for agriculture in this area is second to none. The ag industry has a great support structure around it.”

DITCHEN:
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“I run my entire 3,000-acre irrigation system from my smart phone and a laptop,” he said. “We’re ever-evolving and changing. What used to take me four hours a day to drive in and out of each circle to check and change water now takes me 15 minutes a night, and I’m doing a better job. I really don’t have the surprises of a stopped circle. I already know it’s stopped. If something happens, it calls me within a minute or two.”

Even the farm’s tractors utilize advanced technology. Ditchen said, with GPS systems, the tractors can be used 24 hours per day.

“Our same tractors are doing double the work now,” he said. “We’ve gone from ‘Once the sun goes down, you go home’ to ‘You can go

all night’ now with these GPS tractors. That’s how farmers evolve. We’ve had to grow.”

Ditchen said he enjoys the challenge, and the farm’s crops are growing well so far this year. He said he is a little worried, however, about the little precipitation over the winter and how the lack of snow in the mountains could affect irrigation later in the year, but he’ll “figure something out.”

At the farm in Stanfield, Ditchen said the primary crop is grass harvested for its seed. He said the farm grows perennial ryegrass, Kentucky bluegrass and Chewing’s fescue. He said the seed is sold “all over” through a brokerage company in the Willamette Valley, and the prices and contracts are determined before the grass is even planted at the farm.

“We plant our grass in the fall,” he said. “Usually, the end of August all the way up

to the first of October, there’s some type of seed going in the ground depending on the varieties of grass seed. The grass basically goes dormant in the winter. In the spring, we get out there and do dry fertilizer, and then we start irrigation. Once we turn on (irrigation) in mid-March, that’s a 24/7 job. During the growing season, we are watering (and) spraying for weeds and bugs. Harvest is at the end of June and the whole month of July. In August, we work the grounds and get ready to plant.”

Ditchen said the farm employs 11 people full time and adds another 20 temporary employees for a month and a half during the summer. He said he began working on the farm in Stanfield during the summers when he was in high school, and he loves his career.

“Some days, I think have the greatest job on the face of the earth,” he said. “I get to be

a businessman and challenge myself, but I also get to grab a dirty truck with a dog in the back and not have to worry about combing my hair and put a ball cap on. Not many people can say that, and I have the best office in the world when I’m outside.”

Ditchen said he also gets satisfaction from seeing the result of a long day’s labor.

“When you’re measuring the day in productivity and acres and you look out over a big field and say, ‘Man, we did this today,’ there’s something great about that,” he said. “It’s not like clocking in and clocking out. When you look out over what you’ve done and see your accomplishment, it’s a pretty good feeling some days. It’s not a job, it’s a lifestyle.”

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