

Georgian Central Soil & Crop Improvement Association Fall Bulletin, 2021

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Bowling Green Farms, Dufferin SCIA
L to R, Kris & Kevin Bryan

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Member Spotlight

Kris Bryan, and his brother Kevin, are joint shareholders of Bowling Green Farms. The family farm has evolved and grown to include a Holstein dairy herd, cash cropping of grains and oil seeds, and a fully licensed elevator. They also offer harvesting, trucking and marketing services. In this fall issue of the Georgian bulletin, we are delighted to feature Kris Bryan. Kris has been a member of Soil and Crop for four years and is currently a Dufferin SCIA director.



The Bryan Family

Family

The Bryan name has been on mailboxes in Dufferin County for generations. The Bryan ancestors left Ireland during the famine, and settled in Amaranth township, near the hamlet of Bowling Green, about 8.5 km from Grand Valley. In the '60s, Kris' grandfather Charles shipped cream, and then the operation evolved to incorporate a pipeline milking system with quota. The Bryan family have had a closed Holstein herd since that time. Kris' parents, Grant and Sandra, helped on the farm with Grant's dad and Grant's brother Bruce. Kris' parents raised three children, Kevin, Kathy and Kris. In 2009, a joint shareholder agreement was formed between Kris, Kevin, and their parents, and Bowling Green Farms was established. Kevin and his wife Kate, have 3 children, Claire, Cole and Kiera. Kris and his wife, Cassandra have 3 children as well, Anne, Ty and Maddison, so there is plenty of potential that the farming legacy will continue.

The operation

Kris emphasized that the dairy was the backbone that helped them get started. They currently milk 60 cows in a free stall barn built in 2012, with a double eight parlour. Kevin is the herdsman. Kris milked cows for a lot of years and hated every minute of it, so he is thankful that Kevin has gravitated to the dairy side of the operation. They share cropping responsibilities, and Kris manages the elevator. The company owns 350 ac, the family owns 900 ac, and they rent an additional 400 ac. They grow small grains and oil seeds: IP beans, corn, wheat, barley, oats

and hay for the cows. Approximately 10-15% of the crop production is cattle feed.

When Kris was asked how many employees they had, his response was a very clear "not near enough"! They have two full time employees. His sister's husband was hired last spring during Covid, and that has morphed into full time employment. Another employee is heading to Ridgetown this fall and "will leave a big hole," added Kris. They also have numerous part time people assisting them, including their dad and uncle, and part time office staff.



"The Guys" Grant, Jay, Kris, Ty, Bruce, Kevin & Kyle

Kris would like to hire at least two more people but finding employees has proved to be difficult. Their mom Sandra has been the babysitter and lawn care person, but as her grandchildren grow, that position is evolving. Kevin's wife looks after the calves and milks when needed. Kris' wife, who is the small business advisor at the local Scotiabank branch, is a much needed and appreciated sounding board.

Kris' guiding philosophy is to make decisions solely based on the business, rather than making emotional ones. "At the end of the day, we are more than just a family farm. We are a business with employees, and customers," explained Kris. He stressed that decisions should not be made because that is how it has always been done, and added that "Emotional decisions may not be the right ones!"

Cropping

All the fields are tiled on the farms, and Kris described their soil type as Harriston Loam, with some clay pockets. He believes that his area is a bit of an anomaly. The water table is two inches below the surface of the ground and the soil is cold. Kris explained, "We farm in a neat spot in Dufferin County where you can't always follow a strict crop rotation." They try, but sometimes it is difficult to manage based on planting times and weather conditions. They typically get frost at the end of May, and again as early as Sept. 7. Because of the cold or wet weather conditions, they often can't get on some of the fields till June 1, so the fields get switched back to soybeans. Kris made note that many of the common practices in the general Ag community do not work on their farm. They have tried no-till and strip till, but typically they need to use a chisel plow in the fall and go in with a cultivator at least twice in the spring to open the fields to dry them out. Within hours after the cultivator pass, the soil can go from too wet to perfect. Kris was clear that in his area, if you consistently used no-till, you would not succeed! Surprisingly, they were able to no-till beans this past spring, but it was exceptionally dry and warm.

Member Spotlight cont.

In terms of cover crops, they like to put oats in after wheat, and the crop is chisel plowed in as green manure. They split apply nitrogen on their wheat and go in as late as possible with the second application. If there is residual nitrogen, they plant the oats to try and save it for the next year. Manure from the dairy operation is spread on about 150-200 ac each year.

Elevators

There were grain bins on one of the farms that they purchased, so they started using the bins for their own use. Discussions with neighbours highlighted that the elevators were a potential business opportunity, so Kris upgraded the facilities, put the scale in, and became a licensed dealer in 2015. Six years later, they have not been able to expand fast enough to cover the volume that comes down the lane each year. With highways getting more and more treacherous for farm vehicles, the fact that farmers can access their elevators without driving on them is proving to be a significant advantage. Kris is very appreciative of their growing customer base.

Although the cash flow required to be in the business “is ridiculous”, Kris believes that investing in the elevators was the best thing that they have ever done. “As it is almost impossible to expand your land base with rising property prices/rental rates, and equipment costs continue to escalate, the elevators give us the ability to be in the Ag industry, stay at home, and still do what we love to do,” explained Kris. He is amazed by the marketing side of the grain business, and he has a deep passion for it. He does the marketing, contracts, tickets, and grading. Kris, who describes himself as an information guy, admits that it has been a steep learning curve, but enjoys learning new things daily. He is glad that his first few years in the business were relatively easy, with limited problems and lower volumes. Those years provided a great learning ground, and better prepared him for the last three years. In 2019 there was VOM, in 2020 the volumes exploded, and in 2021 we are experiencing tremendously high markets.

Kris values that their current operation delivers something different daily. He expressed that “I enjoy helping the guys make better decisions.” Kris and Kevin really value the relationships with their neighbours. By expanding their services - offering the “whole kit and caboodle”, from planting, combining, spraying, harvesting, and marketing, it



Elevators on Bowling Green Farms

has allowed the Bryan brothers to get back in touch with their neighbours, to create a win-win situation!

Storage capacity is always a tricky issue. Kris added that they have spent a lot of wintery/early spring nights combining corn because they did not have the capacity to do their own harvest earlier. Alternatively, if other farmers are not ready, they will do their crop early, and pay the drying costs.

Trucking services

In December 2015, they added trucking to the list of services that they offer. When they started the elevator, they learned very quickly that trucks are a necessity when their facility can't handle all the grain that is coming in. They have two trucks on the road. As their networks grows, they are hauling different items, including hauling agricultural products for feed mills. Kris added that it is helpful to diversify to make each effort financially successful.

Challenges

Moving forward, Kris believes that farm labour will be the biggest challenge facing the Ag industry. They have had struggles securing labour, and they know that they are not alone. “If we get to a point that Kevin does not want to milk anymore, and if the kids are not interested, will it make sense to hold onto the dairy side?” asked Kris. Escalating input costs is another concern. Kris added that “Costs are getting way out of hand and are not sustainable!”

The future

A few years ago, Bowling Green Farms started receiving IP beans for Sevita. They are still in the early stages of that venture, and they are looking forward to seeing where that takes them.

Kris is proud of what he and Kevin have achieved thus far. They have built a brand, but it has taken time, sweat and accumulated debt. He commented that their family life may have been sacrificed somewhat as they continued to grow the operation, but he hopes and anticipates that they will be able to spend more time with them in the years ahead. They aspire to add to the capacity of what they do well, like the custom work, and the elevator business. He is happy and appreciative that their parents and grandparents set them up to succeed and acknowledges that “None of this would have been possible without their help and assistance.” When Kris was asked what is next, he replied, “We have a lot on our plate! I am not sure if we can handle more, but we plan to enjoy the ride.”

We would like to thank Dufferin County SCIA for suggesting that we interview Kris Bryan. It was a delight to speak to him. We thank him for taking the time to share his farm story. His passion for his farm and business is inspiring!

Lorie Smith