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DTN News

Farm Partner Wanted

Growing Farm Hires an Equal, Not an Employee



Elizabeth Williams DTN Special Correspondent  
Bio | Email

Mon Oct 12, 2009 02:27 PM CDT

INDIANOLA, Iowa (DTN) -- Mike Kennedy was not born into a farm family, but he soon knew agriculture was in his blood.

Kennedy, the son of an aerial applicator who was killed on the job when Kennedy was only five, began working for farmers as a teenager and studying agronomy in college. He felt a passion for the business and ultimately became manager of a leading fertilizer and chemical dealership in the Palouse. After nearly 15 years in the business, he thought his career would begin and end in serving farmers. But fate intervened and a year ago Kennedy, then 34, became a partner with brothers Steve and Nathan Riggers on a 6,400-acre wheat farm near Nezperce, Idaho, the only non-family partner in the farm.

Kennedy's case shows how farm families willing to expand might want to consider a non-family partner, or how potential farmers without family support could work into a current farm operation.

Nathan Riggers said he and his brother were looking for ways to improve their farm and for a person with a background that could fit into their operation, but "could also challenge us on how to improve our business."

The Riggers needed Kennedy's skills as a certified crop adviser and his experience as an insider in the input industry. "In the past, maybe you just needed someone who could drive a tractor straight. But we're all direct seeded, so you have to ask, can a guy run a computer and what chemicals can or can't be used before disaster happens," Kennedy said.

Their business arrangement allows Kennedy to build equity over time. All three partners are employees of Clearwater Farms, which provides the machinery, labor and capital for about 6,400 acres.

As an equal partner on one farm, Kennedy rented 800 acres from a new landlord and helped expand the brothers' operation his first year on the job.

"In the future, if Mike wants to buy into our farm operation of Clearwater Farms as an on-going concern, he can," explained Nathan.

"And if Mike finds an opportunity to invest in land completely on his own, he has access to our machinery, labor and capital," Riggers added.

"They've allowed me a modest ownership level, and I plan to continue to add to that as the years progress," said Kennedy.

Kennedy is hesitant to give advice on starting farming at mid-career. "I'm in such a unique situation. But, the best thing is to keep your eyes open. I can just say, God can put the opportunity in your hands."

The three partners outline four keys to bringing in a non-family partner to the farm operation:

1. The timing has to be right. Nathan and Steve Riggers needed to add a key employee if they wanted to continue to expand their operation. "But the more we thought about it, we decided we did not just want someone who could drive a tractor or do just what he was told. We wanted someone who could give us the absolute best crop management in-house and who thought like a manager," said Nathan Riggers.

"When you are all partners, the mental strain isn't as severe on anyone. You don't have to babysit an employee to make sure he gets something done right. Many growers stop growing when they need to add an employee," explained Kennedy.

Kennedy had reached a level in his agribusiness career where there was



Two of his Idaho agronomy customers invited former crop consultant Mike Kennedy to join them as a farm partner. (DTN/The Progressive Farmer photo by Geoff Crimmins)

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little upward mobility. The Idaho native wasn't convinced it was the best time to get into farming. "But if you wait for the perfect time to do something, it will never happen. For better operators, it's always a good time to get into farming. For someone without the right skill set, it's never a good time to start farming," Kennedy noted.

2. The personal chemistry and professional fit has to work. To bring a partner into your operation, you must mutually respect each other's decision-making. Kennedy had been a crop input consultant to the Riggers farm operation for several years and had admired their professionalism. "They have a different thought process on how to run things compared to many farmers who operate more traditionally," said Kennedy.

The Riggers -- in their mid-40s and early 50s -- were looking for someone with the agronomic background to raise as many as 10 different crops from barley, canola and peas to specialty grasses, garbanzo beans and different types of wheat in the Palouse region and had the intellectual capacity to optimize new technology.

"Mike knew more than just how to take the weeds out of winter wheat. He also had the business acumen we wanted to help us be an efficient, profitable operation. "Mike connected with us on our progressive nature," said Nathan Riggers.

3. Training is important. Kennedy was the winner of DTN/Progressive Farmer's scholarship to attend The Executive Program for Agriculture Producers (TEPAP) in Austin, Texas, in 2009. "The insights and contacts at TEPAP are invaluable," said Kennedy. Riggers concurred. He attended TEPAP in the late 1990s and "it opened my eyes to a different mindset on how to run your business. TEPAP teaches you to think about strategic issues on a daily basis. And it has led to valuable relationships with several farmers across the U.S.," Riggers explained. "TEPAP is time and money well spent."

"We're in the field from late March to mid-November except for just a couple weeks here and there," said Kennedy. "But from the end of November through February, we emphasize continuing education, plus we have a more relaxed approach on the farm and we have fun."

4. Everyone has to be willing to make a sacrifice. It's a big step to take on a non-family partner after you've been farming with your brother for 20 years. "The Riggers are giving me a chance to get into farming and the potential to take advantage of future opportunities," explained Kennedy.

But they weren't the only ones to give up something. Kennedy had a good salary in a professional career. "My decision to farm was not financial, and it did not advance my career per se," said Kennedy.

He does have the satisfaction of being a business owner, but Kennedy has four main reasons for wanting to farm: his wife and three kids. "The love of farming is in my 12-year-old son's blood," said Kennedy. "If I want to discipline him, I tell him he's not allowed to come to the farm for a few days. He's devastated."

The clincher was his younger son's comment when Kennedy was a crop consultant, seeing his family only four or five hours per week during the busy season. He used to say, "Dad, why don't you want to spend time with your family?" For Kennedy, that's not an issue anymore.

Editor's note: For information on the 2010 DTN-Progressive Farmer scholarship to TEPAP (The Executive Program for Agricultural Producers) - a weeklong, mid-career management course -- go to [http://tepap.tamu.edu/...](http://tepap.tamu.edu/)

Editor's Note: DTN-The Progressive Farmer sponsors two, \$1,875 scholarships for TEPAP, The Executive Program for Agricultural Producers directed by Texas A&M. It offers operators mid-career oriented coursework in finance, family business issues, negotiation and more. TEPAP's next sessions runs Jan. 10-16, 2010 in Austin, Texas. For information, call 979-845-7171 or see [http://tepap.tamu.edu/...](http://tepap.tamu.edu/)

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