

A Collective Approach: Central Oregon Bender Brothers Embrace New Farming Practices

Kyle Bender began farming in 2016 and he was followed shortly thereafter by his brother Jordan in 2020. Both had been encouraged to seek further education before coming back to the farm. Jordan pursued a diesel mechanics degree from Blue Mountain Community College. This is a skill set that serves him well in his day-to-day farming operations. After graduating from Blue Mountain Community College, Kyle farmed part-time in Culver while working for Oregon State University. While working for O.S.U. he managed the farm operations for the Sherman County Experiment Station. In November 2023, he transitioned to full time farming as his operations in Central Oregon continued to grow.

While they are three separate business entities and farms, the two brothers also farm with their father, who started his farm operation in 1999. “Our dad gave us access to equipment, and we had the desire and want to grow the farm to its potential. In the last three years we have quadrupled in size,” noted Kyle. Buying ground, picking up their own leases and doing more custom seeding has supported that growth. Each began full-time farming during some challenging times, and reported, “hard times create opportunity”. Both Kyle and Jordan look back over the last few years with the obstacles that they overcame with a sense of pride. Farming 1,500 acres, running two hay trucks, owning and operating a feed store keeps them very busy. In addition to wheat, they grow hay, peas, carrot seed and beans.

Farming is in the blood and a passion that began at an early age. “No question. I always wanted to farm,” stated Jordan. This influence came from working with their dad on the farm, being involved with 4-H and FFA and the desire to work the land and build something.

With their farm 100% irrigated, many of the inefficiencies have been realized in the last couple years with the ongoing drought. Kyle noted, “We realized tilling the soil, and making five trips across the field was as inefficient as it gets, especially with diesel being \$5 a gallon.” The biggest change they brought to the operation was no-tilling, a practice that came from working with farmers in North Central Oregon. “Seeing what the farmers up there could do in 10–13-inch rainfall, I knew we could incorporate that to our operation successfully,” stated Kyle. He had learned from his work in Sherman County and particularly credits a mentor in Bryan Cranston. Bryan encouraged Kyle to implement no-till farming practices and helped him source his first air drill. The brothers indicate that they are the first in the Culver area to implement these farming practices and have seen results. In 2023, one of the fields they transitioned to no-till wheat hit a record yield of 165 bushels an acre. Having a network of successful producers has helped Kyle and Jordan learn from those who have had similar transitions elsewhere. The next challenge they encountered was dealing with the residue coming off a big crop. The solution was to upgrade their combine so that it could handle the residue disbursement to continue no-till farming.

While they continue to learn and innovate, there remain several headwinds they must face. Their biggest challenge is having enough water to irrigate. Being involved in securing the ongoing future of agricultural operations in Central Oregon and throughout the state is part of the purpose for the Benders engaging with the League. Joining the League, Kyle was appointed the Central Oregon President to the Oregon Wheat Growers League Board of Directors in 2023. Jordan serves as the Vice-President. Like their farming operations, they are approaching it collectively.