

From Aviation to Farming: A Unique Pathway

Sometimes you take the correct turn in life, even when you don't know it at the time. "Grandma always said 'there is a reason for everything,'" says Brent Martin. The reasons that created a pathway for this third-generation farmer were varied, and the route held a fair share of moves before creating a return to Oregon to farm in 2004.

Brent grew up in Pendleton but chose to follow in the footsteps of his grandfather and father who pursued separate careers before returning to the farm. Receiving his pilot's license in 1990, Brent began a separate career in aviation that would take him around the world. His first job was in Arizona, working for Evergreen. He then moved to Seattle, working seven years with BF Goodrich Boeing. That position had him training pilots and mechanics, including time living in Panama.

With his aviation career path, Brent says "I hadn't imagined I would be here to farm." However, the first reason to return to farming presented itself when he met his wife, Jill. With an opportunity to support continuation for her family farm, in 2004 the Martins settled into ownership of Nelmar Farming Company in Lexington, Oregon (Morrow County). Then, his parents retired and Brent started farming their ground. Subsequently, he took on custom farming work and the dryland wheat operation continued to grow and change.

When he started, Brent's farm practices included full conventional tillage across all the ground he managed. He began a gradual transition towards a no till fallow system as updates in technology allowed him to shift. It took a partnership to do. "Initially, I did not have an air drill, so I would help a buddy who had an air drill seed his ground and then in turn would be able to use that equipment to seed my ground." Ultimately, Brent was able to purchase a used air drill. Now, he is facing the next challenge in continuing that farm management practice.

"It is important to preserve the moisture in the ground through that system and it provides value to the soil and environment. However, it is costly to do so. The cost of chemistries is expensive." Looking towards a mix of management practices is an avenue he hopes can be explored. He sees an opportunity for revisions to conservation programs that would allow tillage practices to be periodically rotated into predominantly no-till practices to help break disease and weed cycles through mechanical means.

Ensuring flexibility is important for business operations. Maintaining sustainability with rising costs, especially for farmers who do not have ready access to credit or family funding support, is difficult. He emphasized the dual challenge of dealing with rising input costs in a commodity market situation. We "rely on the market and cannot pass those costs on to customers. Essentially, the increased costs all get passed on to us."

Despite the challenging road ahead, he is optimistic. One of the greatest opportunities is that he still sees a lot of family farms where kids want to come home and take over the family business, with their reason and purpose tied to the ground. He also sees opportunities with those who move off the farm. As one who took a career path outside of agriculture initially, Brent recognizes that the farm is never far from the heart, even when not directly working the soil. That passion can help the next generation extend an understanding of agriculture to those who are not directly engaged in farming. He points to his daughter, Eva, as an example. "We instilled in our daughter an

appreciation for agriculture, and she wants to promote ag.” Currently Eva is able to carry that effort forward through an internship with AgWest Farm Credit Services.

Together with his wife Jill and daughter Eva, the family is focused on supporting their rural community and ensuring a strong future for wheat producers in Oregon. Brent previously served on the Oregon Wheat Growers League and Morrow County Grain Growers Board of Directors, as well as serving as Chair of the Lone Community Church Board of Trustees. He has continued that service mindset and in 2024, Brent received an appointment from the Oregon Department of Agriculture Director for a Producer position on the Oregon Wheat Commission. It was a way to continue to give back. There are a lot of “dedicated individuals in the industry,” he says and he hopes that he can make a significant difference through his position on the Commission.

Among the areas of focus during his term on the Commission is an interest in supporting investment to research. “Be it in varieties or weeds or changing practices to improve soil and the farm, I want to support research that produces tangible results for dryland wheat areas,” Brent notes. It is part of what will contribute to his long-term legacy and create a reason for others to be successful in farming. Essentially, he says, “I want to leave it better than when I got into ag: the industry and the land.”