

## **Thad Eakin: Following in the Footsteps of Prior Generations**

Sherman County is surrounded by the deep canyons created by the Deschutes, John Day, and Columbia Rivers and Buck Hollow that make up its borders. The area is the epitome of the wide-open spaces that characterize the West with its rolling hills of waving grain.

Farming has been central to the area's economy and now, soft white winter wheat is the County's most important crop.

Seven miles east of Grass Valley just off of Highway 97 lies Eakin Ranch. The area is located in the heart of Oregon's grain belt and has been part of the Eakin family legacy for generations.

The Eakins have a long family history in Sherman County, with the Eakin family establishing their roots in Oregon when they emigrated west. Volando (V.B.) Biddle came to Oregon with his parents Otis and Rachel Eakin when he was two years old. The family made the nearly 2,000-mile journey from Missouri to Oregon by wagon. They homesteaded on the same land where the farm is located today.

Thad Eakin is a 5th generation wheat farmer. Though, since there is no paperwork, he may actually be 6th, he says with a laugh. Over the years, there have been major changes to their processes in order to produce crops and continue caring for the land.

"When dad and his dad were farming, we plowed," he says. "They pulled the plow across the ground and we ran the iron through the dirt. We made summer fallow and used 150s to seed. It was a big process."

Today, the farm operations have completely switched over to a conservation fallow system, running an air drill. Thanks to the switching of farming practices, a large part of the erosion that happened in the past has been prevented.

"It's pretty much a game changer. The yield has gone up and moisture has been better."

As he looks to the future, he is experimenting with planting canola, which is risky since the weather is so unfriendly to the crop in his area with such low rainfall. However, if he is able to get a good crop established, the new rotation would provide better weed control and a bump in wheat yields.

These are just a few of the methods he is employing to preserve and sustain the land. By switching to minimum and no-till farming methods with an air drill, he has been able to use variable rate seeding. Combining these efforts with GPS technology and precision farming allows him to be more efficient per acre while reducing costs.

His goal is to care for the land, leave it in better shape than it when he took management and ultimately pass it on. That's why he focuses on doing the best practices he can with the time and technology he has available.

"If you don't treat the ground and take care of it, it won't take care of you," he says. "You won't get to see next year."

The results of his ongoing efforts are paying off. 2022 in particular saw a good harvest. With an abundance of rain in the early summer months, the wheat had time to ripen and mature, providing both

a high yielding and quality crop. Harvest brings long hours and hectic days, and with it, closure to the previous year. As Thad says, "Harvest reaps the benefits of everything you did the year before."

Following harvest, Thad moves directly into preparation for the next crop, planting winter wheat in September. There's a solitude during seeding season that Thad loves when he is able to sit in his cab when no one is around. It brings a balance to the busy harvest season it follows. And while every year presents its challenges, each season presents a new beginning and another chapter in the family's legacy.

*Thad Eakin is a member of the Board of Directors for the Oregon Wheat Growers League, and serves as the Sherman County President.*