

**NRHEG STAR EAGLE** 

THURSDAY, MARCH 29, 2018

# The same crops, only different

### Albert Lea Seed House is leader in rapidly-growing organic farming

By MELANIE PILTINGSRUD Contributing Writer

Thursday, March 29, 2018

The Albert Lea Seed House has been in business since 1923 when Lou Ehrhardt bought it. But rather than being steeped in the way things have always been done, the business is known across the country as a leader in the chain of organic food production.

"The biggest part of our business in terms of area is the organic seed part of our business," says Mac Ehrhardt, who co-owns the business with his brother, Tom. "That accounts for probably 40% of our total gross sales." From the Dakotas to the east coast, a large portion of the organic farmers buy their seed from the Albert Lea Seed House. "If you're an organic farmer, you have to plant organic seed, so we are providing those organic farmers with organic seed."

How did the otherwise small business become such a well-known organic seed provider across the northern United States? Ehrhardt explains: "Organic farming makes up fewer than 1% of the acres in the U.S. And because it's a rapidly growing industry, it's not the established supply chain that there is on the conventional side. So there's not this network of organic seed companies supplying organic farmers like there is on the conventional side. That's why we would ship seed to Michigan or Pennsylvania or New York, because there's not a lot of people in that busi-

"It's primarily the same Midwestern crops that we're looking at here," Ehrhardt continues. "Corn seed, soybean seed, oat, wheat, barley, rye, alfalfa, clovers, pasture grasses, cover crops."

Another part of the Ehrhardt business is the wide range of seeds they sell to local farmers within a 250-mile radius, including Minnesota, and parts of Wisconsin, Iowa, and the Dakotas. This is the non-organic part of the business, which includes conventional seed - seed that hasn't been genetically modified. Ehrhardt says that conventional seed is becoming increasingly popular among farmers.



"IT ALL BEGINS WITH SEED," says Albert Lea Seed House co-owner Mac Ehrhardt, standing amidst their main product. The Seed House sells organic corn, soybean, oat, barley and rye seeds from this area and from Europe. Star Eagle photo by Melanine Piltingsrud

the traited seed they sell as a dealer for NorthStar Genetics. Ehrhardt explains, "In 1996, Monsanto launched Roundup Ready soybeans, and that was the first traited seed product, and so now, when you drive up and down the highway in the summer, 90% of the soybeans and corn around you are genetically engineered to be resistant through a herbicide. We don't sell that anymore in our own brand. We did up until two years ago, but we just decided to stop doing that because it wasn't really our core business."

Ehrhardt is quick to point out that they don't have anything against GMOs. "I A third part of the Ehrhardt business is think they have a place in modern farm-

ing for sure. It just wasn't our core business." As a dealer for NorthStar Genetics, the Seed House can still provide genetically modified seed to those who want it. "It's not a focus of ours," says Ehrhardt, "but if a long-time customer comes in and wants to buy 40 bags of Roundup Ready soybeans, we can supply them." Ehrhardt estimates that traited seed makes up about 10% of their business.

Dealing primarily in organic seed makes the Albert Lea Seed House unusual for a Minnesota-based company, because organic crops are not a significant part of the surounding acreage. "But, nevertheless, Americans spent

about 50 billion dollars on organic food last year," says Ehrhardt, "so it's a pretty rapidly growing part of the agricultural scene. Of the grocery dollar that Americans spend, about 5% of that is spent on organic food. But around 12% of the fruits and vegetables that Americans buy are certified organic."

Minnesota primarily grows corn and soybeans, but Ehrhardt says that any time you get close to a metropolitan area, like the Twin Cities, there are an increasing number of fruit and vegetable farms that participate in farmer's mar-

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kets and/or function as CSAs. These farms plant organic cover crops, and they get their seed from the Albert Lea Seed House. "They're buying oats and hairy vetch, and winter rye, and clover from us," says Ehrhardt.

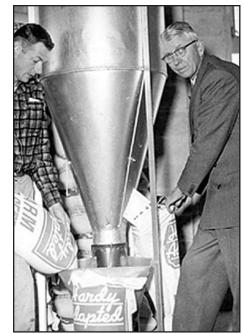
Where does the Seed House acquire its seed? "We don't farm," says Ehrhardt. "We don't own any land, so it's all contract grown." Ehrhardt says that the organic soybean, oat, barley, and rye seed that they sell is grown within about a 150 mile radius. But a lot of the organic corn seed that the Seed House sells comes from Europe, and that is because corn is promiscuous and crosspollinates over long distances. According to Ehrhardt, "For us to be able to produce organic seed corn that's essentially GMO-free, we have to do it in Europe."

The Seed House attains other types of seed from Europe, too. "Some of the dominant grass seed companies, and forage seed companies are from Europe," says Ehrhardt. One of his favorite imports is hybrid winter rye, developed by a company in Germany called KWS.

"The easy ones that naturally grow in the upper Midwest, like oats, wheat, barley, soybeans we produce locally. Generally you want to produce seed where it's best adapted," says Ehrhardt. "So things like orchard grass and tall fescue, and some of these pasture grasses are most commonly grown in the pacific northwest in a dry environment like Idaho or Oregon or eastern Washington." Another example Ehrhardt lists are the sorghum-sudans, which grow in Texas. "That's another forage crop that gets chopped for silage or baled up to feed animals.

"We also have a garden center," Ehrhardt continues, "and that's not a huge part of our business. It's probably around 5% o our business, but we do sell garden seed and bedding plants, and that's what the people that live here think that we do, because when you walk in our front door, that's what you see. But about 95% of our business is farm seed."

Ehrhardt estimates that they sell about 50,000 units of seed corn in a season, which would be 125,000 to 150,000 acres. "So in the scheme of corn, we're a small player, because there's 90 million acres of corn in the United States. In the organic business we're one of the larger players just because it's a much smaller



**FOUNDER LOU EHRHARDT** (right) bagging seed.

Submited photo

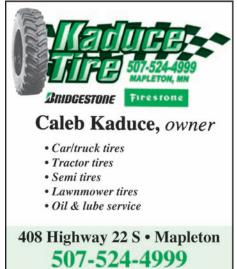
space and we got there first. We started selling organic seed in 1998."

How is corn seed treated with herbicides and pesticides? "For conventional corn, meaning corn that most farmers are planting, it's all going to be treated with probably three fungicides and an insecticide," says Ehrhardt. "Usually, that insecticide is going to be applied at

a rate where it protects the corn seed and seedling from things like wireworms and cutworms, seed corn maggots. And it's not without controversy, because the most common insecticide that gets used in that kind of seed is neonicotinoids." This class of insecticides is designed to kill insects, so the controversy lies therein that they also kill butterflies and bees. Ehrhardt mentions the colony collapse disorder that bee keepers face. "Definitely the seed coatings that are applied to conventional and traited corn are a contributing factor in that; they're not the sole culprit," says Ehrhardt. "What's going on with bees is extremely complicated. [...] There's other things that have a big impact on that like Varroa mite, and some people are postulating things about climate change... Bee keepers have this weird problem, where they're trying to somehow kill the Varroa mites without killing the bees."

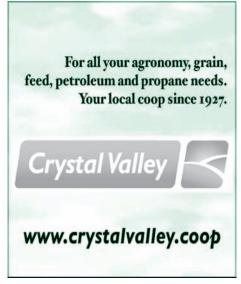
Ehrhardt goes on to explain how seed companies attempt to protect organic seed: "Organic corn is coated with some kind of a biological usually, so it doesn't have the same kind of protection from fungal diseases and insects that conventional corn does, and it's a problem.

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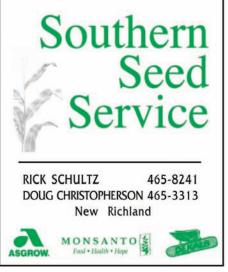


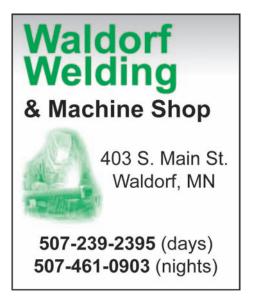












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There's a concept called competitive exclusion, where there's a theory that if you coat that corn seed with some Trichoderma fungi spores, then when you plant it those Trichoderma fungi spores will start doing what mushrooms do, and they'll kind of competitively exclude the bad guys. But it's just a theory, and some of it doesn't work very well."

Three years ago, the Albert Lea Seed House started experimenting for themselves to find out if they could help farmers produce a more successful corn crop. "We are this spring going to be spending a bunch of money to trial some new organically approved compounds to see if we can identify a compound that will help organic corn get out of the ground," says Ehrhardt, "'Cause that's a significant problem for organic farmers. This last winter we bought a plot planter and a plot combine, and a tractor with GPS, and a trailer, and a pickup, and a cultivator, and a..." Ehrhardt trails off. "Once you start, you don't stop. So we're going to be doing on-farm research on an organic farm actually. They're doing research on seed coatings that would be helpful to organic farmers. They're also going to be doing on-farm research to help us identify soybean varieties and corn hybrids that perform well under organic conditions." Ehrhardt says that about 99% of the curent research that goes into corn and soybean development is necessarily performed under conventional conditions. "There's very little research actually done under certified organic conditions."

One of the things necessary to organic corn farming are hybrids with excellent emergence. Ehrhardt explains that one of the primary problems for organic corn farmers is just getting the stuff to grow



#### THE ALBERT LEA SEED HOUSE STAFF

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eficial [organisms]." Ehrhardt explains that there is research definitely showing that the more diverse a system is and the fewer synthetic inputs involved, the more biologically active the soil is.

Ehrhardt says that corn is the Seed House's biggest seller in terms of dollars. "In terms of volume, it would actually be oats," says Ehrhardt. What do farmers do with oats besides sell them to the Quaker company? Per Ehrhardt, "Well, they actually don't even do that, because Quaker imports almost all their oats from Canada. In 1950, there were six-and-a-half million acres of oats in Iowa, and last year there were 50,000. If someone is growing oats and actually harvesting them in Iowa, more than likely, they're trying to sell them to Grain Millers, which is a milling company based in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, that has plants around the United States and Canada. They have a huge oat plant in St. Ansgar, Iowa."

Ehrhardt returns to one of his favorite themes: hybrid winter rye. "The reason I'm so excited about hybrid winter rye is... We used to feed a lot of small grains to animals, and now we don't. We feed them DDGs, which is a by-product of ethanol. Over half the corn in Iowa goes through an ethanol plant, but it doesn't disappear. They just get the part that they

Submitted photo

use to make alcohol, and then there's all this other stuff left over. Those are DDGs. They call it 'dried distillers' grain,' and they feed that to animals." Does this deplete the nutrients that the animals get? "'Deplete' might be the wrong word," says Ehrhardt. "but their definitely not getting the whole kernel anymore as much as they used to, although whole kernel corn that gets ground up into an animal ration is still very widely used. But we use a lot of other things now, too: soybean meal after they've taken the oil out of it; DDGs, which is the corn after they've taken some of the starch out of it, and other sorts of food by-products [...]. But we used to feed them a lot of small grains, and that was why in 1950 we had six-and-a-half million acres of oats in Iowa. One of my dreams is that we are able to reintegrate small grains into animal rations, and I think hybrid winter rye poses the most exciting way to do that because the yields are so good." Ehrhardt says, "If we could make 20% of every bacon cheeseburger come from winter rye, well, then when you drove down the highway [...], it wouldn't just be corn and beans, there'd be another

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in the first place. He says, "So they plant the seed, and there's all these fungal pathogens in the soil, like Pythium, and [for] a conventional farmer that seed is protected with fungicides, so the Pythium is no big deal at all. But an organic farmer doesn't have those kinds of protections, so they need to get that seedling growing really fast and up out of the ground to get ahead of the weeds, because they don't have herbicides. So they need the seed corn to germinate, sprout, and grow really quickly, and that's what fast emergence would be."

Because of the theory that conventional farming, with its dependency on fertilizers encourages the growth of harmful insects, I ask Ehrhardt about the effect of organic farming on this problem. "There's no doubt that the more diverse a system is, the more you are encouraging the growth of beneficial insects and organisms," says Ehrhardt. "You're also encouraging the growth of non-beneficial insects and organisms, but there's a theory that, with really diverse systems, especially if they are "healthy" - and there's gonna be quite a bit of debate about what that means - but if the ecosystem is diverse, and biologically active, meaning that the soil is very biologically active, [...] there's a theory that there's a balancing of pests and ben-

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crop out there."

Ehrhardt says that hybrid winter rye is much less intense than corn or soybeans in terms of soil depletion. "But the main thing is that it grows at a different time of year," says Ehrhardt. With corn and soybeans, the soil is bare from mid-October to about June 1st. In contrast to that, winter rye is planted in mid-October and harvested in mid-July. "So there are roots in the ground and a growing plant out there during that whole time period, even in the wintertime when it thaws a little bit and the snow melts, then the rye will start to green up," says Ehrhardt," and so it's preventing erosion, and it's tying up some nutrients, and improving water quality, because it's preventing those soil nutrients from going out of the tile lines and into the streams and down into the rivers." According to Ehrhardt, the average acre in Iowa loses about 4 tons of topsoil per year. "Hybrid winter rye poses this opportunity to slow down that erosion. It slows it way down, because it's growing at a time of year when corn and soybeans aren't." It also breaks up the endless rotation of corn and soy-

beans, potentially helping to thwart pests that have evolved to thrive in that rotation. "If they could just have one more crop in their rotation, they wouldn't have [corn] rootworm," says Ehrhardt, "and that's just one example." It would also reduce the problem of herbicide-resistant weeds. "We'd have all these benefits to ecosystem services that would be pretty profound, but none of it works unless we're feeding that stuff to animals, because you can't just grow it and put it in a bin. [...] Since we've stopped using small grains in animal rations largely, we're going to have to re-learn how to do that."

Ehrhardt has an obvious passion for farming and seed production, and a seemingly encyclopedic knowledge in that area. What does he want local farmers to know about the Albert Lea Seed House? "I think we've gotten the reputation of being an organic, non-GMO seed house, and in fairness, that's what we are," says Ehrhardt. "But, if I could say one thing, it's that we're pro-farmer. We're not against GMOs. We're not against conventional farming. We're definitely pro-farming and we're prorural America. We believe that there's more than one way to grow food, and we support those different streams of agri-







## Plan for lowering nitrates is 'a tough sell'

AgriNews — Gov. Mark Dayton that was released last summer. unveiled a revised measure on March 6 to reduce elevated nitrate levels in water supplies that includes restrictions on the application of farm fertilizers in the fall, his administration's latest move as it seeks to make protecting water a hallmark of his final term.

The rule would create a system of voluntary and mandatory mitigation practices in vulnerable areas with porous soils, and in locations that have high nitrate levels in public water supplies. Dayton and Agriculture Commissioner Dave Frederickson announced the update after holding 17 public meetings attended by over 1,500 farmers, landowners and other Minnesotans, and receiving more than 800 written comments on an initial draft

"One of the ways in which we're protecting water quality Minnesota is by asking farmers to look twice at their practice of spreading nitrate ... on their land in the fall," Dayton said.

The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency said most nitrates entering groundwater come from humancaused sources including manure and other fertilizers. Excessive levels can be toxic, particularly to bottle-fed babies younger than six months old, because they can affect how blood carries oxygen. They can cause a life-threatening disorder known as blue baby syndrome. There's also been some research associating high nitrate levels in drinking water with elevated risks for certain cancers. High levels can

harm fish and other aquatic life.

But Minnesota's nitrate rule has been a tough sell to farmers. It's common and convenient for farmers to apply chemical fertilizers and manure in the fall after harvesting their crops, instead of waiting for spring when there's often limited time between when the soil dries out and planting deadlines. Doing so, however, raises the risks of nitrates seeping into groundwater and running off into streams and lakes when the snow melts.

The subject was so sensitive in heavily agricultural Brown County that the county board December rejected the Minnesota Department of Agriculture's offer of free well tests for nitrates. Local farm groups objected, and commissioners expressed worry that the

state would use the data to regulate how farmers use fertilizers.

Steve Suppan, senior policy analyst at the Minneapolis-based Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, which promotes sustainability, said the fertilizer industry is largely self-regulated and that approach hasn't been working well to cut farm pollution. But he said Minnesota's rule could become a good model for other states, particularly the upper Midwest.

A 30-day public comment period will begin in mid-May, and the Minnesota Department Agriculture will hold more public hearings sometime this summer. The department expects to submit the final revised version in December.

### be counted in Census of Agriculture Still time to

(Minnesota Ag Connection)

Minnesota farmers and ranchers still have time to be counted in the 2017 Census of Agriculture. Although the first deadline has passed, the USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) will continue to accept Census information through the spring to get a complete and accurate assessment of American agriculture.

"Thank you to everyone who has completed their Census to date," Minnesota Agriculture Commissioner Dave Frederickson.

"If you haven't already done so, I encourage you to respond before things get busy this spring."

Minnesota currently has a return rate of 47 percent of the 96,400 Census questionnaires mailed last fall. Every Census report is important. The results provide a complete account of the agricultural industry, its changes, and emerging trends.

Frederickson says through the Census, Minnesota producers can show the nation the value and importance of agriculture, and influence the decisions that will shape the future of American agri-

"The data are used by all those who serve farmers and rural communities -- federal, state and local governments, agribusinesses, trade associations and many others," said Frederickson. "At the Minnesota Department of Agriculture we use Census results to develop priorities for new initiatives and existing programs."

NASS will continue to follow up with producers through the spring with mailings, phone calls, and personal visits. To avoid these additional contacts, farmers and ranch-

ers are encouraged to complete their Census either online at www.agcounts.usda.gov or by mail as soon as possible. By filling out the Census online, respondents can save time skipping sections that do not apply and automatically calculating totals. The online questionnaire is accessible on desktops, laptops, and mobile devices.

For more information about the 2017 Census of Agriculture, visit www.agcensus.usda.gov. For questions or assistance filling out the Census, call toll-free (888) 424-7828.







# **Community Supported Agriculture** farms now accepting sign-ups

The Minnesota Department of Agriculture's Minnesota Grown Program encourages consumers interested in Community Support Agriculture (CSA) shares to sign-up for memberships now. CSA memberships offer many benefits, including subscriptions to healthy foods, the ability to connect with a local farmer, and the opportunity to directly support an agricultural business.

CSA farms sell subscriptions or memberships, and members receive a share of locally grown produce throughout the season, which generally lasts from 14-20 weeks. CSA farms deliver member shares to a drop site, where members can pick it up, take it home and enjoy a variety of local agricultural products.

Lisa Baker is the owner and principal operator of the 15-acre organic certified Bakers' Acres farm in Avon, Minnesota. Baker and her staff grow produce, sell eggs, and raise poultry, grass-finished lamb and beef. Bakers' Acres also offers a CSA program and Baker recommends signing up early.

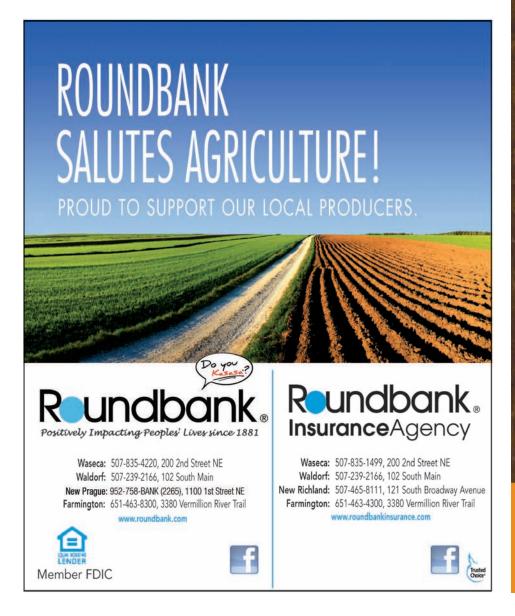
"CSAs offer a journey through the seasons that's unique to each farmer and customer," said Baker. "CSAs can help fami-

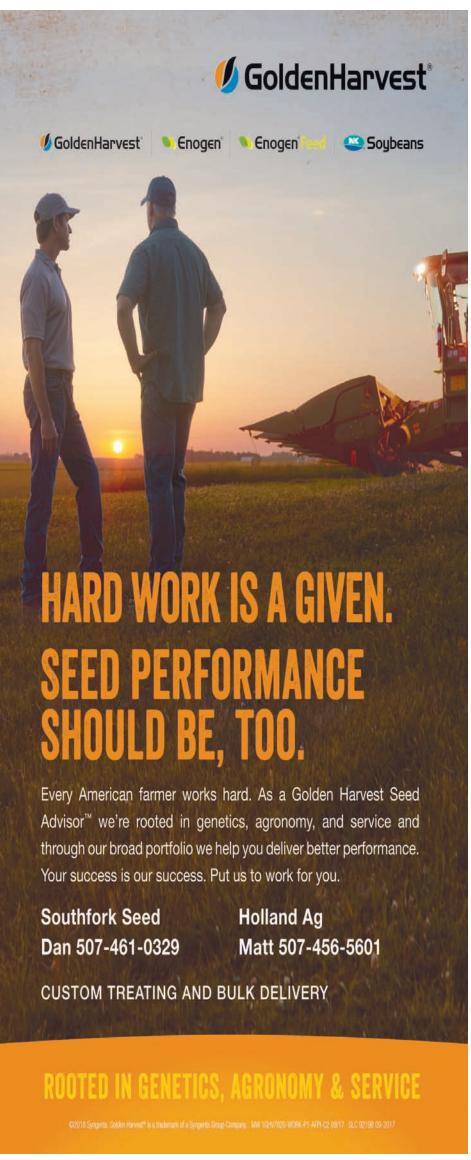
Minnesota Department of lies get their kids to enjoy fruits and vegture's Minnesota Grown Program etables because they get to know their farmer and see where their food is grown. Plus, supporting small family farms keeps o sign-up for memberships now.

> Minnesota Commissioner of Agriculture Dave Frederickson encourages customers to look for a CSA option in their communities.

> "Dozens of Minnesota farms offer CSAs, which give customers a chance to try new produce and even meat or dairy products," said Commissioner Frederickson. "Each CSA is different, so do some research. Many farms offer half shares that might work best for smaller families, and some deliver produce to multiple drop sites. Buying directly from a farmer is a great way to contribute to your local economy."

The Minnesota Grown Directory includes 82 CSA farms to choose from with 129 drop sites throughout the state. Visit the Minnesota Grown website for a searchable list of CSAs, or pre-order a free copy of the printed Minnesota Grown Directory by calling 1-800-657-3878 or visiting www.minnesotagrown.com.





# Minnesota corn growers set another record

growers saw a third record-setting year of yields, according to estimates by the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service.

Corn yields rose to an average of 194 bushels per acre in 2017, eclipsing the prior year of 193 bushels per acre. In 2015, corn yields were an average of 188 bushels per acre.

Kirby Hettver, the president of the Minnesota Corn Growers Association, said high yields are essential for corn growers in preserving equity with low commodity prices still plaguing farmers.

Hettver farms in Swift, Chippewa, and Yellow Medicine counties. Hettver said in Swift and Chippewa counties, they averaged 220 bushels of corn per acre, an amount that's higher than previous years. In Yellow Medicine county they had a slightly lower year.

Based on the NASS data, Minnesota had an estimated total 2017 corn production of just more than 1.48 billion bushels, compared to 1.54 billion bushels in 2016, 1.43 billion bushels in 2015, and 1.18 billion bushels in 2014.

Twenty-eight counties in the southern third of Minnesota had 2017 average corn yields that exceeded 200 bushels per acre. Watonwan County had the highest estimated average corn yield at almost 219 bushels per acre.

Hettver also farms soybeans, saying harvest was likely 10 bushel per

Agri-news - Minnesota corn acre lower than the previous year. Farmers across the state can relate to Hettver's soybean struggles.

Soybeans dropped to 47 bushels per acre in 2017, missing the previous year's yields that were 52 bushels per acre.

Minnesota produced just more than 380.2 million bushels of soybeans in 2017, compared to slightly less than 389.5 million bushels in 2016, and 377.5 million bushels in

The top five soybean producing counties in 2017 all exceeded a total production of more than 10 million bushels, led by Polk County in Northwest Minnesota with 12.3 million bushels.

Michael Petefish, the president of the Minnesota Soybean Growers Association, said there shouldn't be an over-reaction to the soybean numbers, citing the 47 bushels per acre as being closer to historic trend lines. According to NASS, during the past 20 years, 47 bushels per acre has been more than than any other year except 2015 and 2016.

Petefish, a resident of Claremont, Minn., said that on his farm they also dealt with white mold issues and he cited an exceptionally cold August while their soybeans were preparing for harvest.

Both Petefish and Hettver said that weather always plays a factor in the growing and production of corn and soybeans. "Mother nature holds the trump card," Hettver said.



Corn yields rose to an average of 194 bushels per acre in 2017, eclipsing the prior year of 193 bushels per acre. In 2015, corn yields were an average of 188 bushels per acre.

Craig Kilian, vice president of grain at Central Farm Service, said the weather's effect on grain elevators was actually positive. Kilian said because of the fall's wet weather, farmers were able to move product out of the grain elevators instead of being in the field.

Central Farm Service oversees 20 grain elevators in Minnesota and Iowa. Kilian said they've been working diligently, while commodity prices are higher than usual, to move product from the elevators.

Selling to ethanol plants is common, according to Kilian, especially in the western part of the state.

In Iowa

The estimated 2017 statewide average corn yield in Iowa was 202 bushels per acre, which is just

below the record Iowa average corn yield of 203 bushels per acre in 2016; however, the 2017 yield was well above the 192 bushels per acre yield level in 2015.

Iowa produced just more than 561.5 million bushels of soybeans in 2017, compared 566.4 million bushels in 2016, based on the NASS production estimates. Iowa had an estimated 2017 statewide average soybean yield of 56.5 bushels per acre, well below the 2016 record average statewide soybean yield of 60 bushels per acre.

Iowa produced just more than 2.6 billion bushels of corn in 2017, compared to slightly more than 2.7 billion bushels in 2016, and 2.5 billion bushels in 2015.





## Agriculture: trade, health care, jobs are on minds

Agri-news - Experts in agriculture, public policy and business gave their insights into some of the biggest issues facing rural Minnesotans at a recent Rural Legislative Forum in Mankato.

STAR EAGLE

The panel, moderated by Kent Thiesse of MinnStar Bank, included Amber Hanson-Glaeser, policy director at Minnesota Farm Bureau, Bill Blazar, senior vice president of public affairs and business development at the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce, and Dan Dorman, executive director at the Greater Minnesota Partnership.

The trio answered questions covering several topics, including farm trade, rural health care, and immigration and job training.

#### 1. Trade opportunities

"We see great promise in trade agreements, whether it's NAFTA or the (Trans-Pacific

Partnership)," said Blazar. "Interestingly, 15 percent of Minnesota turkey production is sold to customers outside the (United States)." U.S. beef consumption may be slipping a bit down to 52 pounds per person a year in 2014 from a high of 88 pounds in 1976. But "if you look at consumption of beef on a per capita basis outside the U.S., it's growing substantially. And the only way that Minnesota beef producers can take advantage of that opportunity is if we have up-to-date trade agreements." Uruguay, Argentina and Hong Kong led the world in beef consumption in 2016, with each topping 100 pounds per per-

#### 2. Health insurance

Minnesota Farm Bureau's Hanson-Glaeser said she hears about health insurance as often as any other issue.

Unfortunately, she doesn't have an answer to the problems of affordable health insurance or accessibility. It's a priority for people in rural communities to have access to health care, she said.

"How are we making sure we have accessibility to doctors in these rural areas while addressing the cost?" Hanson-Glaeser asked.

Dorman said partisan politics have gotten in the way of solutions.

"I think we have a pretty good health care system. I think there's some need for improvement, that's no question," Dorman said. "But my biggest personal concern is that we're going to end up with a system that costs as much money and overall doesn't deliver as much health care."

## **3. Job training, immigration** Blazar said immigration reform

and bringing workers to Minnesota will help growing businesses prosper, especially in rural areas.

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"Our experience with Minnesota companies is that if they have the opportunity to grow, and they can't find the people they need, that makes them look elsewhere pretty quick," he said.

Education also is part of the solution. Dorman said higher education and investment in trade schools can improve worker quality, quantity retention.

As a society, "frankly, we need to spend some more money on (higher education) and particularly in our two-year schools that are going to produce these trades people that will fill the jobs out there," Dorman said. "There's a tremendous opportunity — if we don't take 20 years to respond to it."







# No walleye keepers again this summer on Mille Lacs

(MPR) Catch-and-release-only rules are in effect for walleye on Lake Mille Lacs, state officials said.

Thursday, March 29, 2018

The rules are essentially a continuation of last year's controversial order that kept anglers from keeping the prized fish and the third consecutive season anglers will face catchand-release only.

Department of Natural Resources officials did note that because Mille Lacs' spawning walleye population has improved, they will not seek to close the lake completely to walleye fishing as they did for several weeks last summer.

"It was a difficult decision and we knew that we weren't going to make many people happy with this at all," said Don Pereira, the DNR's fisheries

Mille Lacs' walleye population has been under close scrutiny as scientists try to figure out what caused it to plummet. They point to factors such as increased water clarity, invasive species like zebra mussels and spiny waterflea, and a decline in species like tullibee that walleye eat.

Pereira said the catch-and-release regulations are needed to continue the recovery of the lake's walleye population, which is dominated by those hatched in 2013. The DNR wants to see more younger fish survive. Pereira said some of the fish caught by anglers and returned to the water will die anyway — a condition known as hooking mortality.

Still, news of catch-and-release only is likely to anger local resort owners who've argued the DNR's walleye management plans the past few years have wrecked their business because anglers want to keep what they catch.

Terry McQuoid has owned McQuoid's Inn resort and guide service for more than 40 years. He said he's not surprised that the DNR decided to continue the catch-andrelease policy this summer, but McQuoid doesn't think it's justified because he says fishing on the lake has been great.

"It's very common last spring and each year here that we were catching anywhere from 50 to 100 walleyes a day on the boats and that. That's not a lake that's hurting by any means," McQuoid said.

Some business owners, like Linda Eno of Twin Pines Resort, have been vocal critics of the DNR's management of Mille Lacs and the methods it uses to estimate the lake's walleye population.

"Their process has brought this lake from six fish, to four fish, to two fish, to no night fishing, to no fish, to closure, to no live bait," Eno said. "And they will sit there and contend to your face that they've done a great job with their management system."

A recent external review by a researcher from the U.S. Geological Survey found no major issues with the way the DNR gathers data on Mille Lacs' fish population. That didn't satisfy critics.

Mille Lacs' walleye population has fallen significantly in recent years and officials have struggled to balance the demands of local businesses



THE WALLEYE POPULATION in Mille Lacs Lake is of great concern to the communities surrounding the popular central Paul Middlestaedt Minnesota lake.

dependent on walleye fishing with survive being caught. the need to rebuild the fishery.

In 2015, the state closed the openwater walleye season early. Officials then OK'd a winter season, but the warm weather put a damper on it.

In 2016, the DNR went to catchand-release only and also banned the use of live bait for those who planned to catch-and-release.

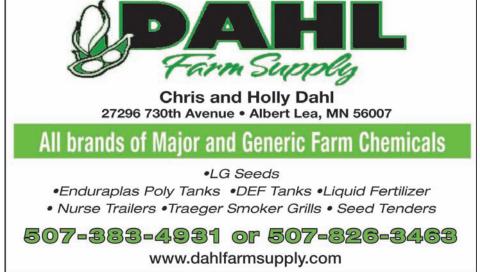
The move triggered waves of anger. That August, Gov. Mark Dayton intervened to keep the season open after the DNR moved to close it earlier than anticipated.

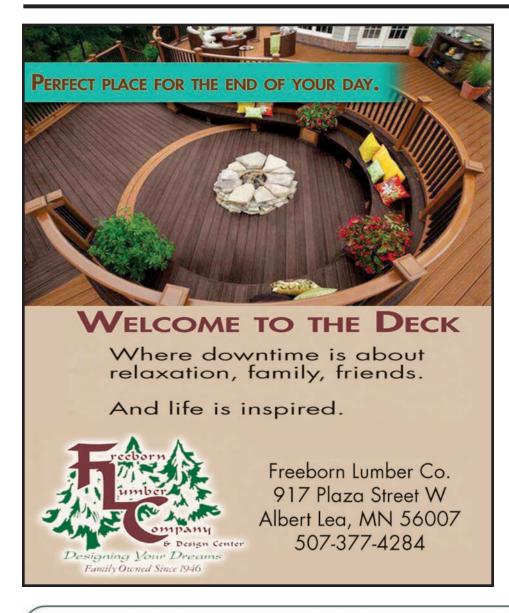
Last year, the DNR not only closed Mille Lacs to walleye keepers, it stopped all walleye fishing for about a month in mid-summer, the peak of the season, to cut down on the hooking mortality of walleye who were caught and released but still didn't

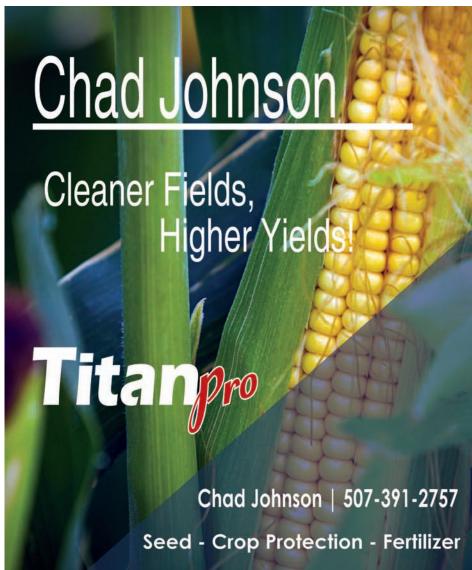
"Improving the walleye population on Mille Lacs is a top priority for the DNR," Tom Landwehr, DNR commissioner, said Monday in a statement as he announced catch-andrelease only would continue this summer. "Anglers have had a very good winter walleye season on the lake and we will be able to continue that trend into the open-water season no mid-season closure planned."

DNR analyses, as well as external review, indicate that the walleye spawning stock has increased significantly in Mille Lacs and the lake can support a larger safe harvest level of walleye in 2018, if a catch-andrelease rule is in place, DNR fisheries chief Pereira said in the state-









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