

NewsWatch

Sietsema talks turkey and then some

By RHONDA DEDYNE

WHEN he was a young boy feeding turkeys on the family farm in west Michigan, Harley Sietsema could never have envisioned the land becoming part of Grand Valley State University, or raising upward of 1.4 million turkeys every year.

Harley also didn't anticipate helping organize Michigan Turkey Producers, a cooperative that generates more than \$200 million annually; having pork operations across Michigan and Ontario, where upward of 35,000 sows and 750,000 market hogs are raised; owning two feed mills with close to a 300,000-ton capacity; or building the nation's first biomass gasification system, where turkey litter is transformed into 300 kilowatts of electricity and 12,500 pounds of steam per hour.

Those and a host of other ag-related accomplishments are cited by Harley's family, friends and business associates as making him a worthy recipient of the 2014 Master Farmer award.

"Those who know Harley or are involved in the farming industry in Michigan and beyond know that Harley along with personnel under his leadership continue to represent agriculture in our state and the farming industry overall with respect and a clear focus," says Rick, the eldest of Harley and wife Marcia's three children, who are all actively involved with Sietsema Farms.

"Not only are his ag operations celebrated for their significant economic impact in the state, but also for their important evolution and innovative leadership in the industry. He leads with compassion and respect for the environment and people on a daily basis, and is an inspiration to others who he collaborates with in the industry to fulfill a commitment of producing the safest, highest-quality food available for con-



MASTER FARMER: Master Farmer awardee Harley Sietsema and his wife, Marcia.



FAMILY OPERATION: Sietsema family members were on hand for the opening of the biomass gasification system. Adults from left are Tina, Jamy, Marcia, Harley, Rick, Dalayne, Eric, Kristi and Jed. The grandchildren are Amber and Taylor.

Master Farmer Profile

Name: Harley Sietsema

Spouse: Marcia Sietsema

Children: Rick Sietsema, 48; Jamy Sietsema, 44; Tina Brown, 35

Farm: Sietsema Farms; turkey and swine production, raising 1.4 million turkeys, 35,000-plus sows and 750,000 market hogs annually; 2,100 acres owned and leased cash crops; two feed mills, processing 300,000 ton of feed annually.

Nominator: Rick Sietsema, CEO, Sietsema Farms

Leadership: board chairman, Michigan Turkey Producers; director, Michigan Pork Producers; Ottawa County Farm Bureau; Allendale Chamber of Commerce; director, First Michigan Bank, Zeeland, and Macatawa Bank, Holland; member of MDA Animal Initiative Committee; American Farm Bureau Poultry Meat Advisory, Michigan Allied Poultry and MDA Animal Initiative Committee; MFB delegate to Washington, D.C., Legislative Days; past director, Vriesland Growers Co-op; and ag consultant, Macatawa Bank loan board.

Achievements: Built and operated first U.S. biomass gasification system.

sumers in Michigan and around the world."

The original farm owned by Harley's parents, Ralph and Celia, was primarily a dairy and cash crop operation, but he remembers "checking on the turkeys," as being among his first childhood farm duties. "That was part of my job every day. My grandfather who came from the Netherlands was involved in farming, also. This is a fifth-generation farm now, and we hope to keep moving forward."

Harley's entry into college in 1963 coincided with the opening of GVSU, and it was a logical selection for the young man who had grown up across the road from what would become the main campus.

"I was a pioneer student in that first class, and it's wonderful to have watched such a great university grow here over the years," Harley says, noting the bachelor's degree he received in economics and business administration led him to initially pursue what turned out to be a highly successful first career with the U.S. Treasury Department. "I worked in several divisions in the Grand Rapids area, including serving as a special agent with criminal investigations. As our family grew, we wanted to be

closer to home and that drew me back into agriculture — and turkey production."

Michigan Turkey Producers

Sietsema Farms began in 1979 with turkey production as its primary business. Harley grew the operation over subsequent years, raising upward of 400,000 birds by the 1980s. The addition of pork production in 1993 gave Sietsema Farms a chance to diversify. Pork production tops turkey today at the farm and is a good fit, Harley says.

"Pork is similar to turkey in husbandry practices, and they complement each other very well in terms of production."

Adding pork also helped sustain the family operation when the local turkey processing plant closed in 1998 — an event that had serious ramifications for Harley and other poultry producers in the area. As he has all his life, Harley devised a positive outcome from the negative happening.

"A group of us got together and did a study on the possibility of forming a cooperative that would operate its own plant," the entrepreneur says about the venture that became Michigan Turkey Producers, which today is the 15th largest producer of

turkeys in the nation.

Having control of production and processing helps ensure a quality product is always delivered to the cooperative's customer base, Harley says. "We are continuing to increase the number of turkeys processed at Michigan Turkey Producers, and that means more employment opportunities for individuals across the state. Sietsema Farms has 2,100 crop acres and buys about 4 million bushels of corn and other commodities annually from farmers across the state. "Part of the dynamics of farming is the interconnection between crop producers and livestock operators."

Energy from turkey litter

Construction of the biomass gasification system at Sietsema Farms' Howard City feed mill is another example of Harley's innovative spirit. In this case, what do you do with all the litter from all those turkeys?

"The idea of developing a gasification system that could produce energy from turkey litter evolved from our previous attempts using the byproduct in ways that are environmentally responsible and earth-friendly," Harley says.

The system creates a synthetic gas from the litter that is used to heat boilers at the feed mill, similar to natural gas. Steam turbines power a generator at the mill, producing electricity. The system is carbon-neutral and self-sustaining. Plus, the ash that remains from the process is used as fertilizer. Nothing is wasted.

"With the exception of nitrogen, all the necessary nutrients are available for use as fertilizer," Harley says.

At Sietsema, sustainability was in vogue long before it became a political buzzword. Harley has always been an active participant in state and national environmental programs, and all the farm properties are verified through the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program in livestock, farmstead and cropping.

Family, faith matter

Values that Harley learned as a youth on the Sietsema homestead six decades ago continue to form a solid foundation. As the family grows, so does their involvement: Rick is CEO at the farm and his siblings, Jamy Sietsema and Tina Brown, are administrators and managers. Harley's eldest grandchildren, Eric Sietsema and Kristi Roelofs, work at the main office in Allendale. Eric supervising IT issues, and Kristi overseeing HR and PR.

"It's rewarding to have them all involved full time in the business," Harley says, adding another group is equally important — its employees and associates. "We have been fortunate to work with a very capable group of people, some of whom have been with us more than 30 years."

Those key ingredients are an essential part of future growth, he says. "We'd like to expand the volume of through-put at the turkey processing plant and add more turkey production. The key is to be as efficient as possible, while providing quality product and service. Michigan is blessed with many natural resources and a good workforce, and the outlook for agriculture in Michigan is positive. We hope to continue being part of it for years to come."

Dedyne writes from St. Johns.