## Bob Finken — Douglas, North Dakota

### Summary of Operation

- *Wheat, oats, oilseed crops, field peas, chickpeas, corn and alfalfa on 1,550 acres*
- *Durum wheat, barley and flax for seed*
- *60 head of beef cattle in management-intensive grazing system*
- *Member of wheat and oilseed cooperatives*

### Problems Addressed

*Soil erosion.* Using a "typical" dryland rotation, the Finkens used to raise wheat and small grains on two-thirds of their acreage, idling the remainder in fallow until the next growing season. The bare fallow ground was susceptible to the harsh climatic conditions of the Dakotas. "It made a big impact on me as a teen-ager," Bob Finken says. "I'd help my father by doing the tillage for the summer fallow and saw the fields later either blow in the wind or the water wash the soil down the slopes."

*Low wheat prices.* Before diversifying and joining value-adding cooperatives, Finken accepted conventional prices for wheat. Even though durum wheat makes up the main ingredient for most of the pasta consumed in this country, overproduction drove prices ever downward.

### Background

When Bob Finken was a senior in high school, in 1977, his father became disabled. By then, his father had expanded the family's grain, cattle and sheep farm to about 1,040 acres.

Finken wanted to take up where his father left off. After high school, he enrolled and graduated from a two-year college program in farm and ranch management. His first year, he raised crops on just 238 acres. Later, he expanded by buying and renting land to reach the farm's current size of 2,200 acres, of which 1,550 are cropped.

Once he picked up the management reins for the farm, Finken emulated his father's system. He grew durum wheat and alfalfa and raised sheep. He plowed the fields and seeded the two-crop rotation, allowing about one-third of the cropland to sit fallow. The combination of plow and fallow proved harmful to the soil, especially on the farm's steep slopes, where erosion became acute.

Years of growing continuous wheat held other implications, too. Finken found that certain leaf diseases — particularly tan spot — liked a steady diet of wheat.

### Focal Point of Operation — Diversification

To meet twin goals of preserving the soil and improving profits, Finken diversified his crops, adopted a more complex rotation, switched to no-till and introduced cattle. He found it more profitable to grow some of those crops, such as durum, barley and flax for seed.

Today, he still relies on durum wheat seed as his main rainmaker, but also grows spring wheat, barley, oats and a bevy of oilseeds: flax, crambe, safflower, sunflower, borage and canola. He also added field peas, chickpeas and corn. The array of crops doesn't fit neatly into one rotation; Finken grows a few grains, a few oilseeds, a legume, corn and alfalfa each year, depending on the markets. In 2000, he grew durum wheat, barley, flax, canola, field peas, chickpeas, corn and alfalfa. He likes to follow wheat with a small grain like barley, then a broadleaf crop like peas or an oilseed.

"I considered myself a small farmer for many years," Finken says. "This is probably why I have always tried to make the most of what I did have instead of trying to get bigger to make a living. My philosophy has been to put every acre to its most profitable use without damaging the environment."

Finken's main soil-saving tenet is to keep it covered, and he does so with continuous cropping and residue management. Gradually, he switched to less invasive tillage and less idled ground until, in 1995, he went virtually 100-percent no-till after purchasing a no-till drill.

"I feel that the best way to keep the soil in place is to be growing a crop on it and to maintain the residue from prior crops on the surface," he says. "Managing this residue can be a big challenge, and makes me plan a lot further ahead."

Finken's combine is equipped with a straw chopper and straw/chaff spreader so he is able to spread residue as he harvests. Sometimes he bales the excess straw to feed to his livestock or to sell to neighbors. Either way, he alternates high-residue crops with low-residue crops to maintain a consistent blanket on the soil.

No-till requires a stricter weed control regimen for Finken, who uses a burn-down application of Roundup either just before or just after seeding, before the crop emerges. He has more perennial grasses since he stopped tilling and has had to spray at higher rates to control them. On the other hand, some of the weeds he used to find most troublesome — wild oats and pigeongrass — are no longer a problem.

Finken spreads manure from his beef cattle on his fields and also uses commercial fertilizer. The crops do not seem to suffer too much from insect damage, so Finken rarely applies insecticides. Occasionally grasshoppers become a crop pest, particularly when it's dry. Finken finds that most insect pests do not seem to prey on many of his crops, such as field peas and crambe.

"I don't like to use insecticides — I feel they're so dangerous, and it's so hard to kill just the pest and not the good bugs," he says. "I can count on one hand the number of times I've applied it."

Finken raises a 60 head cow/calf herd, selling the calves each winter when they're halfway to slaughter weight. A main reason for introducing cattle was to use some of his more marginal land that isn't suitable for cropping. Finken runs the herd through a 12-paddock rotational grazing system. The cattle graze a native prairie grass, some of which used to be enrolled in the federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). For about five or six months each winter, the cattle are kept in a pen and eat hay. Finken collects their manure, then hauls it out to the fields each fall.

Years ago, the Finkens raised sheep, too, but the labor demands around lambing season were too much for one farmer to handle.

### Economics and Profitability

To earn more than he made from low bulk commodity prices, Finken joined several of the new cooperatives, including a pasta co-op, that began springing up in North Dakota in the early 1990s. He hoped he could add value to his crops by pooling the costs of processing and marketing with farmers raising the same commodities, thereby expanding "vertically" rather than increasing acreage to expand "horizontally."

"The farmers were looking for a way to capture some of the value that should be in pasta production," he says. "There has always been a lot of competition for additional acreage to expand the farm, so I decided it was better to expand the farm up the food chain."

Finken was an original member of the Dakota Growers Pasta Cooperative, based in Carrington, N.D. Now numbering 1,150 durum wheat farmers, the co-op began with little more than a good idea. A steering committee of farmers raised money to get a loan, then built the first plant. To join, Finken needed to buy at least 1,500 shares — each one representing one bushel of wheat — at $3.85 per share. He scraped together the money for 2,000 shares, kept up wheat production and waited for annual dividends.

The investment proved shrewd. The Dakota Growers Pasta Co-op is now the third largest pasta manufacturer in North America and the no. 2 manufacturer of private label pasta (where the co-op makes pasta for other companies to package it under their labels). Finken's average investment per share was $4, and his return — in annual dividends — has gone up 16 percent, or 64 cents per bushel.

"The shares are presently worth over twice my initial investment," he says. "It's a big outfit, and it's mind-boggling to think that

I'm part of it."

Finken also belongs to an oilseed cooperative that buys and markets crambe and high oleic oil sunflowers. The group used to be part of AgGrow Oils, an enterprise that sought to add value to niche oilseeds and sell them on the specialty market. After a few years, AgGrow Oils closed its crushing plant because of equipment problems, but the growers formed a new oilseed limited liability company to which Finken belongs.

Finally, Finken joined Dakota Pride Cooperative, a group of durum producers that market durum and spring wheat collectively. They now promote several varieties of "identity-preserved" spring wheat with unique milling or baking qualities.

By raising certified wheat seed, Finken receives a 50-cent premium over the current $3.80 per bushel rate. He sells some of that seed to a North Dakota seed plant.

## Environmental Benefits

Finken's careful residue management has helped conserve moisture in a dryland system that sees just 17 inches of precipitation a year. Less water runs off his no-till fields after a heavy storm, he says.

"Each summer, we seem to go through a dry spell that usually takes a toll on crops," he says. "The no-till crops just seem to keep hanging on and not experiencing the usual yield drop. No-till adds organic matter to the soil, which increases its water-holding capacity." It also helps the nutrient levels in the soil.

Finken now notices that his soil is less compacted than it was before he moved to the no-till system. "I know that no-till has increased my soil's health," he says. "I have seen an increase in the amount of earthworm activity."

His efforts to improve the soil on his farm won him the Ward County Soil Conservation Achievement Award in 1997. Finken began planting trees on the farm in 1980 and now has many miles of trees. He began by planting shelter trees, then moved on to species that harbor wildlife. In 1989, the farm was listed as a North Dakota Centennial Tree Farm.

*Bob Finken created a no-till system to maximize his area's sparse rainfall.*

## Community and Quality of Life Benefits

Becoming involved in farm cooperatives and other agricultural organizations has brought Finken in touch with dozens of other farmers who raise the same crops under similar conditions. "I have learned a lot by visiting with other producers who are facing a lot of the same challenges that I am," he says.

Finken and his wife, DeAnne, have four children, all of whom are involved in community organizations. Finken serves as president of the Ward County Farmers Union and the county Ag Improvement Association, and has been very involved in 4-H.

## The Future

Finken continues to challenge himself to maximize profits using new crops, rotations and other innovative techniques.

"I'm always on the lookout for ways to make my farm more profitable," he says. "No matter what past successes I might have had, I'm always competing with myself to do better."

He is starting to explore the use of global positioning systems (GPS) technology as a way to map yields, seeding, fertilizing and spraying. "I feel that GPS is a great tool to be able to manage the resources that one must put into the farm without causing runoff and harming the environment," he says. "I'll also keep my eyes open for opportunities to add more or different value to my crops."

■ *Valerie Berton*

## For more information:

Bob Finken
16300 359th Ave. SW
Douglas, ND 58735
(701) 529-4421
bdfinken@restel.net