



The *New* American Farmer

Tom Larson

St. Edward, Nebraska

Summary of Operation

- 90 to 100 stocker cattle and flocks of chickens
- Organic grains, popcorn, soybeans for tofu, barley for birdseed and forage turnips

Problems Addressed

Demanding labor requirements. Tom Larson's father, Glen, began raising corn and alfalfa as feed for beef cattle and hogs on the Nebraska farm after World War II. His farm, described by his son as "very traditional," followed standard dictates: a clean monoculture system. Glen Larson plowed, disked and harrowed to get straight crop rows with no weeds. Just preparing the field required up to four tractor passes, with another two to three for cultivation. The laborious work kept Glen Larson busy from sunup to sundown for much of the season.

Low profits. A former conventional farmer who followed in his father's footsteps in the mid-1970s, Tom Larson took stock of the operation, its size and the labor requirements in the mid-1980s and found it lacking. The 156-acre farm was reliant on just a few commodities, and was too small in the prevailing "get big or get out" economy to make ends meet. Meanwhile, he spent hours and hours atop a tractor to produce feed for livestock.

Background

Larson decided to strive for maximum returns rather than maximum yields, and adjusted his operation accordingly. He diversified by planting a greater variety of crops, became certified organic and began a cattle stocker operation in a unique grazing system. He also raises poultry in the garden. His profitability goals go hand in hand with soil improvement.

"There are crops that deplete the soil and there are crops that build up the soil and we try to have a mix of those," he says. "We grow whatever mix it takes to be profitable in a very long-range outlook."

Focal Point of Operation — Diversification

Once Larson decided to diversify, his path was set. Over the next decade and a half, he would try new ventures, focusing both on their outcome in the marketplace and their place in his rotation. His new motto: Spread the economic risk through diversification.

A major change came when Larson began raising pasture and forage crops for grazing rather than harvesting grain and feeding it to confined livestock. Larson double-dips wherever possible, selling organic grain in the marketplace but also sending his cattle into the crop fields to graze grain stubble in conditions carefully controlled to maintain a steady diet.

"We're turning sunlight into dollars through grass and alfalfa," Larson says.

Glen Larson used to tell Tom that they raised cattle to pay their property taxes. Their old system of growing and harvesting grain as livestock feed helped raise fat cattle, but the cost didn't justify the return.

These days, the cows are gaining weight just as fast from eating forage turnips and the stubble after grain harvest. Larson says that forage turnips provide as much nutrition as high-quality alfalfa.

To diversify in a way that would help the soil as well as the bottom line, Larson introduced a small grain, a coarse grain and a legume that he plants in narrow strips for weed control. Those products are produced for human consumption, not for animal feed.

“Being on limited acres, we looked at crops that would net more dollars per acre,” he says. “I’m not really interested in production per acre. It’s the net dollars per acre that I can generate.”

The farm is configured in narrow, 12-foot-wide strips arranged in a striped pattern across the landscape. As such, Larson’s

grains and forages grow side by side in a rotation orchestrated for environmental benefits as well as profits. Typically, he plants small grains in the spring, then harvests them in July in time to plant forage turnips for his livestock.

His standard rotation: growing corn the first year, followed by a double crop of barley and turnips. In the third year, he plants soybeans, followed by a year of corn. He concludes the long rotation with one or two years of alfalfa, which he grazes about two times a year in a managed paddock system.

Cattle graze within 27 paddocks. When his stocker operation, which centered on raising 100 heifers from early spring into late fall before selling, lost money in the mid 1990s, Larson began renting his pasture to a neighbor for several months a year. Key to their diet are the forage turnips he plants in mid-summer but never harvests with a machine.

“The turnips walk off the farm on the hoof,” he says. “The cows get a nice salad every day between grain stubble and turnip greens.”

The protein content of the mix is about 12 percent, compared to 6 to 8 percent in a cornstalk/hay ration.

Larson constantly reassesses his rotation, choosing crops that “we’re able to sell without a lot of hassle or effort.” He grows organic soybeans for the tofu market as well as popcorn. He used to raise oats, but low market prices prompted him to try Ethiopian barley, which he sells to a birdseed processor at about twice the price.

Larson markets his crops through a variety of organic channels. He uses local processors and the National Organic Directory from the California Alliance with Family Farmers as main sources. After establishing good relationships with wholesalers, Larson now needs to spend little time on marketing.

Economics and Profitability

In 1992, a community college in Columbus, Neb., conducted a survey of farm and ranch budgets for 95 area families. The average net return on irrigated corn came to \$22 an acre. That might have been a livable income for most of his neighbors, who have an average farm size of 800 acres, but to Larson, at one-third the size, those returns spelled foreclosure.

Realizing he needed to earn three to five times more value per acre, Larson decided to raise food crops.

“Having a small operation, \$22 an acre does not cut it,” he says. Being certified organic has given us access to different markets than we had, and it’s much more profitable.”

According to a state extension educator, Larson brings in between \$150 and \$200 per acre, while his neighbors earn just \$20 to \$50 per acre. With their larger land base, Larson figures their standards of living are about equal.

Larson continues to nurture a hobby that helps keep the operation in the black: retrofitting farm equipment for his unique needs. Much of the equipment on today’s market is built for larger farms, so Larson continually reconfigures old equipment. He has modified planters, cultivators and harvest equipment. Rather than buying a new tractor outright, he lowers the out-of-pocket expense by trading in an old one he’s fixed up.

Experimenting with new crops often brings good rewards. Switching to Ethiopian barley



Tom Wolfe

“If you don’t make mistakes, you’re not trying hard enough,” Tom Larson says.

was a better investment than oats, which brought just \$2.40 per bushel. He receives about \$8.40 per bushel for organic barley, although he gets lower yields. In real numbers, the barley is about twice as profitable.

Environmental Benefits

The crop strips and rotations in Larson's organic system allow him to eliminate purchased chemicals without a noticeable increase in pest pressure.

After a heavy rain, Larson sees little water pooling or running off his farm, which he attributes to improved soil structure with better infiltration.

"If we have a significant rain event, I can go across the road and look at the neighbor's field and see quite a lot of water standing around," he says. "We have a soil structure now with good infiltration capacity."

To control weeds, Larson plants with minimal soil disturbance and seeds at twice the recommended rate. The dense cover of small grains early in the season crowds out weeds. He also retains crop residue on the soil surface not only to deter weeds, but also to increase water infiltration and slow erosion.

The system also seems to attract more wildlife, particularly songbirds, as well as deer, raccoons and opossums. "We have all sorts of these creatures running around, and I think they're an indicator of the health of the ecosystem," he says.

Community and Quality of Life Benefits

Larson makes time for his family. When he raised only a corn crop, he spent intense, busy weeks in the field clustered around field preparation, planting, cultivation and harvest. By raising four crops, he has spread his work across the calendar, planting about one-third of his acreage at one time rather than 100 percent.

"I do the same amount, or maybe a little bit more, but it is spread more evenly through the year," he says. He found a neighbor with whom he exchanges farm chores so they can both travel.

"If you walk in a graveyard and look at the headstones, you see names, but I don't think you see any of them that say: 'He worked every day of his life and that was it.' To me, the events in life that make up quality of life are the little trips you take and the good times you have together."

Larson's type of farm is so different from his central Nebraska neighbors that he has bonded with others in the sustainable ag movement far from Saint Edward.

"The way I farm puts me outside this community, and I think that's a common experience for people in sustainable or organic farming," he says. "I see myself in a network of people in a community of interest."

Larson travels frequently, both in the U.S. and abroad. Nebraska's Center for Rural Affairs often asks Larson to speak about his farming system both locally and regionally. Larson rarely turns down an opportunity to speak to farming groups, even if that means traveling to South Africa, which he did in the year 2000 at the behest of a South African mayor who heard him speak.

"I think I offer them hope," Larson says of his diverse invitations to present. "I talk about succeeding on a small scale and learning from your mistakes."

Transition Advice

Farmers should not be afraid to try new things, Larson says, but they should do so on a small scale. Networking with other farmers is key to success, especially because beginning farmers can learn from the mistakes of others — although they should

expect to make plenty of their own.

"If you don't make mistakes, you're not trying hard enough," he says. "I just don't like to make big, ugly, expensive ones. We take the tactic of trying very small-scale experiments and keeping track of the results."

The Future

Larson plans to continue tweaking his farming system year by year, seeking not only better profits, but also new challenges.

"I would be very frustrated if I was in a job where I did the same thing, day in and day out," he says. "Some say they've been in farming for 35 years. Does that mean they have 35 years' experience, or do they have one year of experience 35 times? I like the challenge of having a little variation from year to year."

To Larson, good stewardship means measuring his impact on natural resources against the desires of future residents of the land.

"If, 200 years down the road, an anthropologist would look at this particular farm and find no evidence of whoever was here, then I've been a good steward with a vision beyond my life span," he says. "Some of the Native American religions center around doing nothing that will adversely affect the next seven generations. I think that's a realistic goal to strive for."

■ Valerie Berton

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