

CONSERVATION *Showcase*

Stewardship, tenacity, innovation combine to create bright future for Berg farm

If you look closely as you drive along State Highway 221 near the Berg farm just a few miles north of Paterson, Washington, you'll find agri-business caps and tattered leather boots strategically placed atop dozens of barbed-wire fence posts.

It's the artful – even playful – work of 92-year-old Art Berg.

“Grandpa has a great sense of humor,” says grand daughter Nicole Berg. “He likes the idea of people driving down the highway scratching their heads wondering ‘what in the heck are all those boots and caps doing on those fence posts?’”

It takes a good sense of humor to farm in a seven-inch precipitation zone. It also requires tenacity and an understanding of how to manage limited natural resources – something Art learned on his own, then passed down to subsequent generations, including his son, Frank.

Farming through the generations

Currently, there are three generations of Bergs who help operate the expansive farm – and one generation waiting in the wings. Each of the five family partners has his or her area of expertise – ranging from operations and contracts, to irrigation and nutrient management.

“I’ve always had a passion for agriculture,”



Three generations of the Berg family (from left) Steven, Frank, Matt, Art and Nicole, all play important roles in the expansive agricultural operation.

she says. An agricultural communications graduate of Washington State University, Ms. Berg handles finance, legal, banking, insurance and governmental relations for the operation. In an emergency, she may even be called upon to shuttle equipment parts from the dealer back to the farm. “You do whatever it takes to get the job done,” she says.

Nicole and her two brothers, Matt and Steven, represent the third generation of

Bergs to farm the land. But it became clear that if the farm was to provide a living for this and future generations, they would have to change the way they did business.

From a practical business standpoint, the Berg's realized that without access to the most precious of those natural resources – water – it would be difficult, if not impossible, for the family members to make a living from their land. They would have to convert from dryland to irrigated farming.

But the change would come at a price – about \$2200 an acre – assuming the farm could acquire the water permits necessary to do so.

After years of financial, legal, and mitigation work, the family installed a 4800 horsepower pump at the Columbia River, and ran six miles of 42" pipe to their farm. The water has transformed the landscape, and in doing so, it has transformed the future. "Now we can possibly pass this farm on to the next generation," Nicole says.

Technology enhances conservation efforts

The computer screen Nicole monitors in her office displays a mosaic of blue, grey and turquoise circles. Each of the 33 quarter-sized dots represents a 125-acre, center-pivot irrigated parcel of ground growing crops ranging from sweet corn, seed grass, potatoes, wheat, onions, peas and alfalfa.

At the heart of the system is a computer-operated irrigation system that monitors and controls the rate and timing of water application, as well as the carefully prescribed application of fertilizers for

each of the 33 pivots. In all the Bergs own, manage and care for some 4,000 acres of irrigated land in south central Washington. In addition, Berg Farms LLC



After moving one of the center pivots to facilitate access during harvest, Steven Berg (top photo) walks amid the rows of cut grass seed on his way back to assist with the harvest. Above, Nicole Berg monitors the status of the farm's 33, state-of-the-art, computer-controlled center pivot irrigation units from her office desk.

lease an additional 20,000 acres of land to their north.

It is a vast operation that requires an enormous amount of management, oversight, work, savvy and – above all – stewardship. And stewardship is an important component in their operation as well as their personal philosophy.

Giving back to the land through stewardship

"We always like giving back to the land," Ms. Berg says. "You take something from the land in order to make a living, so it's

"You take something from the land in order to make a living, so it's important to give something back."

Nicole Berg
Berg Farms LLC

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In addition to producing a range of agricultural products, the Berg farm also helps produce a variety of wildlife species. At right, a visitor to one of the Berg's food plots – a mule deer buck – is seen fleeing across the range.



“Conservation is a good way to help ensure that our wonderful way of life will be there for future generations.”

Nicole Berg
Berg Farms LLC



Above, Nicole Berg checks the water level at one of the wildlife “guzzlers” the family has installed across their farm.

important to give something back,” she says.

One way the Bergs are “giving back,” is through their stewardship of the farm’s resident and migrating wildlife. “We have 2204 acres of land enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP),” Ms. Berg says – quoting from memory, the precise number of CRP acres. In addition to the CRP land, the family installed numerous wildlife watering “guzzlers,” and have established food plots for the sole purpose of providing food and shelter to wildlife on the farm.

Additional conservation stewardship practices like precision weed control, soil moisture probes and soil erosion control practices, help ensure the farm’s natural resource health.

In addition to “giving back to the land,” Ms. Berg has made a commitment to give back to her community as well. Despite her busy schedule as a key business partner, Ms. Berg is the chair of both the Benton County Conservation District and the Local Work Group. In addition, she’s a member of the Washington State Technical Advisory Committee – a state-level group that provides advice to the NRCS’ state



Bluegrass seed is transferred from the combine to an awaiting bank-out wagon during a recent harvest at the Berg farm.

conservationist on federal conservation activities and programs. She has also served as the president of the Benton County Wheat Growers, and as a board member of the Benton-Franklin Chapter of the American Red Cross.

She’s an energetic, committed ambassador for conservation and agriculture, as well as for her family’s farm. “Farming is a wonderful way of life,” Ms. Berg says – her bright blue eyes alive with energy. “When you grow up on a farm, it’s hard to get it out of your blood. Conservation,” she says, “is a good way to help ensure that our wonderful way of life will be there for future generations.”

And while Art continues to place his witty and creative inscriptions upon the farm’s fence posts along the highway, all three generations of the Berg family likewise scribe their signatures – of conservation – upon the land.

*Written by Ron Nichols, NRCS
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