

# PCCA COMMENTATOR

PLAINS COTTON COOPERATIVE ASSOCIATION | WINTER 2019-20



FROM HUMBLE BEGINNINGS, KANSAS COTTON  
STAKES ITS PLACE IN THE U.S. COTTON INDUSTRY

CRAIG HEINRICH HONORED BY CASNR

HE WALKS WITH ME – CLINT ABERNATHY

WHEN INNOVATION MEETS PASSION:  
THE VARDEMAN FAMILY

# COMMENTATOR

VOLUME 50, NO 1 | WINTER 2019-20



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**Craig Heinrich Honored by CASNR**



**He Walks with Me – Clint Abernathy**



**When Innovation Meets Passion: The Vardeman Family**

## In other news...

**1 Letter From the President**

**6 The Future is Now: Understanding and Reaching the Next Generation of Farmers**

**14 Farm Stress: Help and Hope**

**16 TACC Schedules 2nd Annual A.C.E. Program**

## On the cover...

*PCCA's newest board member, Clint Abernathy, is proud to follow in his father's footsteps to carry on the family tradition. Read his story on page 9. Photo by Jayci Cave.*

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## Letter *from the* President

As I write this letter, most of us are wrapping up the Thanksgiving holiday. Personally, Thanksgiving is a time of reflection over the past year and all of the many blessings of life such as faith and family. For many, the next few months will be reminders of how economic conditions over the past few seasons have created a tremendous level of stress for our farmers and their families. Much of that stress is related to the financial condition of the farm economy. In addition, farm-related businesses are also feeling the pain.

To help anyone affected by these factors, PCCA has created a page at [www.pcca.com](http://www.pcca.com) that discusses this problem and provides practical tips for anyone dealing with stress and where to go for help. The page is titled **Farm Stress: Help and Hope** and can be found as the top link on our site. Related information can also be found on page 14 of this issue.

A significant level of pain has been inflicted by the trade war tariffs that have reduced access to the largest market in the world. As of today, it has been reported that trade negotiators are “millimeters apart” from reaching a phase one deal with China. Alternately, President Trump said he may wait until after the 2020 election. If a deal is completed, it’s likely that it will take some time to restore normal trading patterns with China and win back market share lost during the trade war. It is our expectation that U.S. cotton will become competitive again with a trade deal.

As we look ahead to 2020, the world will still be a difficult place. However, we encourage you to stay positive and think about the many obstacles that have been overcome by those that came before us. Perhaps future generations will look at our actions in this moment and overcome their own circumstances.

Lately, I have been reminding our producers that the projections of cotton use 10 years from now are dramatically higher than today. I like the position of our farmers to supply that cotton in 2030.

We can take encouragement from PCCA grower-owners like the late Bill Thomas of Haskell, Texas. Bill was a long-time member of the West Texas/Oklahoma/Kansas Marketing Pool Committee. Bill’s positive outlook was ever-contagious as was his huge smile. I know Bill experienced hard times, but his faith and attitude encouraged everyone he encountered.

Sincerely yours,

Kevin Brinkley  
President and Chief Executive Officer



FROM HUMBLE BEGINNINGS,

# KANSAS COTTON

*Stakes its Place in the U.S. Cotton Industry*



## GENE LATHAM AND REX FRIESEN PLAYED A MAJOR ROLE

Like many of his fellow Texans, Gene Latham believed cotton could not be grown in Kansas, but once he visited with farmers there in 1999, he quickly changed his mind. Since then, he has witnessed and contributed to the phenomenal growth of the Kansas cotton industry.

Latham grew up on a dryland cotton farm near Paducah, Texas, and became interested in cotton and insects through 4-H. After high school, he enrolled at Texas A&M University to study entomology.

"It was the only school in Texas that had an entomology department at that time," Latham explained. "I was in the corps, so after I graduated with my bachelor's degree I served four years in the U.S. Army flying helicopters in Vietnam until I was wounded," he said.

Following his service, Latham returned to Texas A&M to get a master's degree in entomology. After graduate school, Latham accepted a position in Hale County, Texas, running a grain sorghum pest management program for the Texas Agricultural Extension Service.

"Of course, cotton was still my love, so I started working with cotton, corn, sunflowers and grain sorghum," he explained.

BY JOHN JOHNSON • PHOTO BY JAYCI CAVE

After four years with the extension service, Latham became a private consultant working primarily with cotton and corn. To supplement his income and have something to do during the winter months, he began working in the office at Edmonson Co-op Gin in the fall of 1976. Five years later, he became the co-op's manager while continuing his entomology consulting after hours and on weekends. In 1993, Latham began a six-year stint as manager of Hale Center Co-op Gin.

"By 1999, small gins were consolidating with larger gins, and there were more managers than gins. I was wondering what I was going to do until Dick Cooper at PCCA suggested I take a look at Kansas," he recalled. "I was somewhat skeptical, but I agreed to meet with the board of directors of Southern Kansas Cotton Growers, a co-op gin at Winfield. I was taking my granddaughter back home to Minnesota and would be driving through Kansas, anyway."

The SKCG Board was looking for someone to manage the gin and help farmers grow cotton. With his management experience in Texas and expertise in entomology, Latham was the perfect candidate. He also realized the lush vegetation in Kansas provided habitat for "bothersome pests" including thrips, cotton fleahoppers, tarnished plant bugs and bollworms to name a few.

"I agreed to stay five years, then return to Texas," Latham explained.

That was in 1999, and he still lives in Winfield, Kansas, and is still amazed by the growth of the state's cotton production.

"When I arrived in 2000, we rebuilt the gin and started ginning cotton in October," he added. "I also started a program where we were checking cotton fields for pests. My effort has always been to help the producers that own this co-op because without producers, you don't have a co-op."

That first year as he sat at his desk reviewing the first 4,000 grades through the system, Latham realized all of them were premium micronaire.

"Conventional wisdom is you don't grow premium mic with short season varieties," he said, "so I started looking at different varieties to recommend to our producers."

Latham also soon realized he needed someone to run the pest management program for the co-op when he heard about Rex Friesen, a native of central California with a Ph.D. in population biology, an interdisciplinary program that involved entomology. Like Latham, Friesen had developed a love for cotton and entomology and was working as an integrated pest management agent in southwest Texas.

"My wife is from Kansas, and her father was a Kansas farmer," Friesen said. "He would send us newspaper articles anytime cotton appeared in them. Over the years, I told my wife if there ever was a job in cotton in Kansas we would go."

When Latham offered him a job at SKCG, the decision was easy.

"I think my position is unique, and I can credit Gene for bringing me in here because I think it was truly revolutionary," Friesen said. "To have their own entomologist, agronomist or whatever in house that is dedicated to the producers is a significant asset. So, we spent a lot of time beating the bushes trying to convince people to try growing cotton. We had to do a lot of promotion and held a lot of grower meetings, doing everything we could to convince them to at least try it."

**"MY EFFORT HAS ALWAYS BEEN TO HELP THE PRODUCERS THAT OWN THIS CO-OP BECAUSE WITHOUT PRODUCERS, YOU DON'T HAVE A CO-OP."**

In addition to the information meetings, one of the first things Friesen did at SKCG was review 50 years of weather data which showed an average of 100 heat units per year more than Lubbock, Texas, and twice the rainfall.

"You don't have to be a genius to figure out that if you have more heat units than the cotton capitol of the world and you get twice the rainfall, you can grow cotton," Latham said with a big smile. "We started out hoping for a bale per acre, and now we are disappointed with anything under two bales."

For the 2018 crop year, SKCG farmers averaged almost 2.5 bales per acre on dryland production, according to Latham. He also noted the co-op delivered the most bales, more than 163,000, to PCCA warehouses from the 2018 crop year.

"There was one field that yielded 1,880 pounds per acre, and I know one producer that averaged 1,400 pounds on 2,000 acres," Latham noted.

Many farmers in the Winfield area utilize no-till cultivation with cotton as part of their crop rotation because it makes other crops better.

"I think our cotton growers are the progressive farmers of Kansas," Friesen added. "They're cutting edge to grow dryland, no-till cotton which is ahead of the game for so many. They have also told me their neighbors thought they were crazy."

"Most of the cotton fields that are harvested today will be planted in wheat tomorrow," Latham said, "and the wheat will average 10 more bushels per acre when it follows cotton."

After eight years as SKCG's manager, Latham decided to take a step back and spend his time as a private crop consultant for a group of farmers he considers friends.

*Continued on page 4...*

**“THERE ARE A LOT OF GOOD GUYS AND GALS COMING UP THAT WANT TO FARM AND ARE BRINGING NEW BLOOD, NEW IDEAS AND NEW ENTHUSIASM TO THE AG INDUSTRY. I DON’T KNOW WHAT IT IS LIKE IN OTHER PLACES, BUT WE HAVE SOME REALLY GOOD YOUNG FARMERS COMING UP.”**

*...continued from page 3*

“I help them grow cotton,” he said, “but other farmers know to call me for help or advice whether I work for them or not.”

Like Latham, Friesen has made some transitions in his role at SKCG.

“I was originally hired by Gene to come up here and run a scouting program,” Friesen explained. “What I initially did was train scouts and put them out in the field to look for insects and weeds. They would report back to me, and I would make recommendations to the farmers. I don’t remember how long we did that, maybe six or seven years. Today, I am kind of a consultant-at-large and not responsible for anybody’s particular acres which makes me a better asset for the gin.”

Friesen added, however, that he will visit any farmer’s field if called on, and he publishes a newsletter to alert farmers of any problems or issues in their fields. He also serves as SKCG’s public relations representative which means he gets to work with many farmers and the general public, a role he said he really enjoys. On any given day, Friesen may be at a meeting in Topeka, working with Ag in the Classroom or working at the Kansas State Fair promoting cotton and educating the public about cotton and giving gin tours.

Meanwhile, Friesen and Latham continue to work as a team to help cotton farmers in south central Kansas succeed. Both are quick to point out the area’s environment, weather-wise, presents many challenges. There have been other challenges, too.

“I think a lot of it is helping farmers change their mindset about other crops that are low maintenance, low management and low input to a crop like cotton that is just the opposite,” Friesen explained. “It is management intensive, expensive and somewhat risky. I tell them cotton is a headache to grow, but when they get their checks the headache usually goes away. I try not to candy-coat anything when I talk to farmers about cotton so they know exactly what they are getting into. Now, we can look back and say we have some guys that can grow cotton as well as anybody can.”

Latham and Friesen also have their eyes on the future.

“I’m getting old, and some of these farmers are wondering what they are going to do for a consultant when I am gone,” Latham said. “So, we are working with Cowley County Community College’s agriculture department to make sure they have cotton in their curriculum.”

They also are working with current consultants to educate them about cotton and give them good advice. Friesen also is encouraged by the number of young farmers in the area.

“Over the years, I have seen a good number of farmers’ kids that have returned from college with degrees in agronomy or agricultural business and want to farm,” Friesen said. “There are a lot of good guys and gals coming up that want to farm and are bringing new blood, new ideas and new enthusiasm to the ag industry. I don’t know what it is like in other places, but we have some really good young farmers coming up.”

Kansas cotton farmers harvested 22,200 bales in 2000, and the state’s largest cotton crop was 341,000 bales in 2018. Production in 2019 is estimated at 280,000 bales, according to USDA’s November WASDE report.

“With the good soil we have and the high rainfall areas, we are going to see more and more cotton grown in Kansas,” Latham said.

Farmers there currently are served by four co-op gins that have increased their capacity.

“We are still upgrading our gins so we can handle this potential for the tremendous increase in planted acres in the coming years,” Friesen added. “It is really an exciting place to be. The ride is not over with yet, and I’m glad I have been here long enough to see it grow.”

Neither man appears ready to leave Kansas any time soon.

“I still have a pretty dear place in my heart for SKCG, and PCCA was a big part of my life for a long time,” Latham explained. “I didn’t intend to be a gin manager, it just happened.” Latham also credits PCCA for the advent and growth of cotton production in Kansas.

“Cotton wouldn’t be in Kansas without PCCA,” he said. “The marketing services provided by PCCA, especially the marketing pool, has been so beneficial to our farmers. They don’t have to worry about selling their cotton, and the dividends paid by PCCA and the co-op gins here make a lot of difference,” Latham continued. “So, it’s pretty obvious I’m a PCCA man, a co-op guy. I miss Texas and my friends there, but like I tell people my granddaughters are in Minnesota so I’m 500 miles closer to them than I was in Texas.”

Friesen also appreciates the co-op system.

“As far as I can tell, it is just the best way of doing business,” Friesen said. “The co-op is owned by the farmers, and that is pretty crucial. It gives them a stake in the game, and they get the benefits and the dividends at the end of the year.” When asked about his fondest memory at SKCG, he said “I don’t know that I could nail it down to just one because it has been a journey, and I have really enjoyed it.” 🍌

# Craig Heinrich Honored by CASNR

BY JAYCI CAVE

**Each year, The College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources at Texas Tech University honors individuals with the Gerald W. Thomas Outstanding Agriculturalist Awards.** This award was established in 1969 and recognizes people who “contribute immeasurably to the general good of the agriculture industry.” According to CASNR, to be eligible to receive this honor the individual must be successful in his or her chosen profession, have demonstrated substantial contributions to the agriculture industry and have been recognized by their peers for such efforts.

This year one of the South Plains cotton industry’s own, Craig Heinrich, was presented with this award at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Annual TTU CASNR Pig Roast. Craig is a third-generation farmer from Slaton, Texas. He and his wife, Melinda, have been married since 1999 and have two children, Emily (19) and Holt (16).

Throughout his farming career Craig has been devoted to serving his community and the cotton industry. He has served on the Board of Directors at Slaton Co-op Gin since 1997. Through the gin he became involved with Plains Cotton Growers, Inc. and has served on the PCG board since 1998. Within PCG he is a past president of the board, current chairman of the PCG PAC and is active with the Plains Cotton Improvement Committee. He also serves on the board of the Southwest Council of Agribusiness.

Craig is a member of PCCA’s delegate body and current chairman of the cooperative’s Marketing Pool Committee. Since 2003, he has served as a delegate to the National Cotton Council, and he is active with NCC’s American Cotton Producers where he is one of three Texas State Chairman for the organization. Craig also serves as a director for Cotton Council International, which is NCC’s export promotion arm. Through CCI he has had the opportunity to be involved with special trade missions around the world where he visits with cotton textile executives and manufacturers.

His service to the cotton industry doesn’t stop there. He has served on Cotton Incorporated’s board since 2003. At CI he has served on the following committees: Chairman’s, Government and Pension, Agricultural Research, Global Supply Chain Marketing, and Research and Development.

Craig believes in using his voice to be an advocate for agriculture and his fellow farmers. He frequently travels to Washington, DC, to visit with congressional staff and representatives to help shape farm policy

His dedication to sustainable farming practices earned him the award of Slaton Farmer of the Year in 2015. This is selected on the criteria of farming practices, weed control, conservation and yield production.



Craig Heinrich (left) and CASNR Dean William F. Brown.

**“The example you set helps us keep improving ourselves and helps us keep going through life’s challenges.”**

“Craig is a natural leader and I know that because he offers to help even when the job is pretty difficult,” sa Kevin Brinkley, PCCA President and CEO. “There are a couple examples of that in things that he has really stepped up on. One is the Plains Cotton Growers Political Action Committee, which involves a lot of fundraising. He also serves as chairman of our Marketing Pool Committee here at PCCA. That’s where you have to take a lot of input from a lot of different areas of the cotton production in Texas, Kansas and Oklahoma. He leads with great skill and does so enthusiastically.”

Brinkley said Craig is an authentic person who betters those around him.

“He challenges me every time he sees me to do more and better things for our producers, and he is there to help me do that. Most of all I think Craig has an optimism that lifts everybody around him. It’s no secret that agriculture is going through some pretty tough times right now and it would be easy to get down about it and down about the future, but Craig’s positive attitude really serves to lift those around him and help us keep that resolve to keep going. All of these things I think make Craig an outstanding choice for this award. Craig, I want to thank you for your servant leadership and what you mean not only to PCCA but to the agricultural industry in West Texas in general. The example you set helps us keep improving ourselves and helps us keep going through life’s challenges.” 🍷

# The Future Is **Now**

## Understanding and Reaching the Next Generation of Farmers

By Blair McCowen | Photo by Jayci Cave



Research Conducted by Erica Irlbeck, Ph. D.  
Texas Tech University, Department of  
Agricultural Education and Communications

### Tradition or Forging New Paths?

“Well, that is just the way we’ve always done it,” a seasoned father responded to his curious son/business partner in training on the topic of doing business with cooperatives.

“Why is that dad?” responded the son.

As his father named off the numerous benefits he had received from the co-op over the years, the young farmer continued to diligently work. Even so, repairing the equipment did not take his mind off of the business side of his new operation. Thoughts swirled in his mind as he worked to make sense of everything, and almost nothing at the same time. While he respected his father’s traditional methods, he also had a desire to make innovative business decisions that would propel his business into the future. He kept asking “why” not out of disrespect, but simply to ensure the way things had always been done was still applicable today.

The young farmer previously introduced is an example of a member of the millennial generation and their common approach to decision-making. The millennial generation includes individuals born between the years 1981-1996. These men and women currently make up the largest part of the U.S. workforce (USDA, 2019). According to the USDA 2017 Census of Agriculture, the number of farmers and ranchers under the age of 35 is increasing rather than decreasing. The census reported 321,261 young producers in 2017 compared to 214,106 in 2012 (USDA, 2019).

Erica Irlbeck, Associate Professor of Agricultural Communications at Texas Tech University, conducted research commissioned by the Texas Agricultural Cooperative Council on this matter. The study examined young producers attending the TACC's Academy for Cooperative Excellence in January 2019, and was conducted using a survey and focus group. The purpose of the study was to learn more about the millennial generation and how co-ops can work to best understand and meet their needs going forward, as they are the future of the industry.

"The reason why I was approached to do this study was that the co-ops feel like they can't reach millennials," Irlbeck said. "I think millennials are reachable, it's just a little different. So, the approach to communicating with them would be a little different than what is traditional. The number of young farmers has been decreasing for years, but in the last Census of Agriculture, it showed an increase. More people are wanting to get into farming and ranching and that is positive."

What this fact means for the industry is learning how to reach the next generation of farmers effectively and provide for their unique needs is of utmost importance. This begs the question, what makes a millennial different from their Generation X parents or their Baby-boomer grandparents, and how can cooperatives use this information to stay relevant to the up-and-comers?

## Getting to Know the Millennials

While millennial farmers have strong work ethics taught to them by previous generations, they may have different methods of conducting business or running the farming operation than their parents and grandparents.

"They just go about things differently," Irlbeck said. "This younger group, and I am talking about younger people in general, not just millennials, they're more involved with their kids, they're more involved in other activities, so they may not be out working while it is daylight. They may go to their kids' activities and put them to bed and then go out and work some more. So they work differently, but they still work very hard."

Debt and education levels also make this generation unique. Debt accrued from student loans and credit cards contributes to the generation's reluctance to make major purchases, while having a higher level of education opens the door for other employment opportunities.

"Younger farmers, they may have another job," Irlbeck said. "A lot of them came of age during the debt crisis so they are very leery about incurring debt, which means they may not buy a farm or house or equipment. I would say do everything you can to keep them farming and ranching because they have options," she said. "Most of them have a college degree, so they can always do something else. So, do what you can to help them stay in business."

According to Irlbeck, this generation also prefers to communicate digitally and is reliant on technology, but does have a place in their lives for traditional forms of media such as radio, newspapers and magazines. Simply put, diverse methods of communicating co-op related information would be most beneficial to agricultural businesses working to reach millennials

"Be open to new ways of doing things and try to involve and reach those younger farmers and ranchers," Irlbeck said. "There's not a blanket way to communicate. You're probably going to have to do some different ways of communicating to make sure you reach everybody."

## A Working Relationship

"Young farmers and ranchers, they like to be in the co-op," Irlbeck said. "They like the sense of community that it brings. They like knowing they're going to be able to pool their cotton or grain or whatever it is they are selling. They like knowing their cooperative can buy in bulk, and usually give them a better price than they could get anywhere else. From the people I talked to, they want to be part of that, they want to see it continue, and they want to see their cooperative flourish."

The research from TACC's ACE meeting indicated millennials tend to look favorably upon cooperatives when making business decisions and appreciate the advantages and benefits they receive from them

*Continued on page 8...*

**"The number of young farmers has been decreasing for years, but in the last Census of Agriculture, it showed an increase. More people are wanting to get into farming and ranching and that is positive."**

**“They really enjoy being a part of a cooperative, and while some participants were members of a co-op because it was their father or grandfather’s decision, the majority made the choice to be in the cooperative on their own. There were other places they could take their crops, but they preferred to go to the cooperative.”**

...continued from page 7

“They have ownership in it, and that came through probably louder than anything,” Irlbeck said when referencing the focus group discussion. “They really enjoy being a part of a cooperative, and while some participants were members of a co-op because it was their father or grandfather’s decision, the majority made the choice to be in the cooperative on their own. There were other places they could take their crops, but they preferred to go to the cooperative.”

Even so, it is important to note that while the cooperative is the preferred business model, such preference does not guarantee business.

“They’re well informed, and also, they aren’t afraid to shop around. That is what this group said – they’re like, ‘most of the time, the cooperative beats any price out there, but I am going to shop around.’ So, they kind of preferred to support and buy from their cooperative as often as they could, unless there was something drastically cheaper to get somewhere else.”

It is this simple fact that urges the need for cooperatives to continuously work to meet the needs of the younger generation in as many ways as possible. One such way is co-op involvement. Through her research, Irlbeck found that the younger producers had a desire to be involved in cooperative boards and other participatory roles outside of basic membership.

“I would say they want to be involved more than they are truly involved,” she said. “Part of it is an intimidation factor. So, ‘oh I am not old enough or experienced enough to be on our co-op’s board, so I’ll let the older guys do that.’ They also said they’d like to find some ways to be involved rather than jumping right into the board.”

### Going Forward

Irlbeck’s study helps provide a greater understanding of millennials and gives insight into how cooperatives can better meet the needs of the next generation of farmers. Some key takeaways about young producers from this research can be useful tools for co-ops of all sizes, and are as follows:



#### BUSINESS

- » Relationships developed with the young producers are key
- » Young producers like to know that the co-op is going to handle their crop marketing
- » Longevity, consistency, quality and value of the co-op are important. They want the co-op to last
- » Value transparency in business dealings
- » Have a desire for the co-op to increase brand awareness to improve levels of membership (promote advantages of the business structure, promote the gin itself, etc.)
- » They feel like the co-op and its employees are their business partners and have their best interests in mind



#### COMMUNICATION

- » Preferred communication sources include text messages, apps, social media, email and websites
- » Traditional communication such as magazines, newsletters and ginning reports from the co-op are still utilized
- » Do not always socialize at the gin because it might be out of the way to stop by



#### GENERAL

- » Many have young children, so they try to finish their work quickly to be available to their children
- » They are proud to be affiliated with the co-op and appreciate its effort
- » Many would like to participate more, but are not sure how to get involved

This research clearly indicates that while co-ops are on the right path to keeping their younger members in the fold, there is always room for improvement. The future will be here in the blink of an eye, and the time to prepare for those that will be leading us then is now. 🌱



# He Walks With Me

## CLINT ABERNATHY

**“Whenever I follow in my father’s footsteps I know I am on the right path.”**

Many children look up to their father with admiration, but for Clint Abernathy his late father, Charles, was his mentor and best friend. He looked up to his dad in so many ways and put it very simply when he said he was the best.

“My dad would give you that confidence,” Clint said emotionally. “He was always uplifting and always had my back no matter what. If I was making a mistake, or whatever, he always knew what to say to make me feel better.”

Today, Clint is proud to carry on the family legacy of farming while working closely with family, and raising his three children and eight grandchildren to have the same values his father taught him. He is the fourth generation of his family to farm near Altus, Oklahoma. Clint’s great-grandfather first settled the family’s land. When his father returned from serving in World War II he began farming with the help of his father. Today, Clint continues to farm this land alongside his two sons, Justin and Jarod, and his son-in-law, Evan Coppock.

“I think the most rewarding part is just being able to come out here and do what my dad and granddad did, and just take on that responsibility,” Clint said. “My dad, of course, was my mentor. Now it is my turn to be a mentor and it is just a great family thing. I take it very seriously. I want my grandchildren to have the opportunity to farm if they want to, so I really enjoy doing that on a daily basis.”

The Abernathy family farming operation is truly a team effort. Each person plays a unique role in helping things be successful. Clint, Justin, Jarod and Evan all work very well together and split up the day-to-day duties of the farming operation to best fit their personal talents and strengths. Clint said his wife Kim, daughter Jordan, and daughters-in-law Amy and Jill are all willing to help whenever needed.

For Clint, there is nothing better than getting to do what he loves and be with his family every day. He said while there are challenges in farming, they just enjoy being together as a family.

*Continued on page 10...*

**STORY AND PHOTOS  
BY JAYCI CAVE**



*...continued from page 9*

"Well the most challenging part of farming is dealing with the uncertainties, and we always have to do that. The weather has always been unpredictable," Clint said. "My dad would have told you that exact same thing. We never have two years alike. In fact, the only certain thing we know is that next year will be completely different than any other year we have had. The markets are the same way. The markets are so volatile, and I think it is more so now than they used to be."

Through all the highs and lows of farming, Clint said he learned many valuable lessons from his father, including to not put the farm before family.

"From dad I learned a lot about work ethic," Clint said reminiscing. "You know if you work hard, you will gain from it. He just taught me about being honest in your dealings and taking care of your family. That was always number one with him."

Clint is the newest member of PCCA's Board of Directors serving District 1. For him, having the opportunity to serve on PCCA's board holds an extra special meaning.

"I wanted to serve on PCCA's board just to give back to what PCCA has done for me over my whole career," Clint said. "I've always been a member of PCCA. They have done a good job and I can trust them. Now I get the chance to help with that, and it is just really an honor and privilege for me to do that. The other thing is my dad had this position. Twenty-four years ago, he was elected to this same District 1 position. Whenever I follow in his footsteps I know I am on the right path. I am just thrilled to be able to do that."

In his role, Clint said he hopes to help PCCA continue to be a strong company and serve its grower-owners.

"Well I want to make PCCA, I know it is a great co-op, but I want to make it even better. I think we need to connect with our younger farmers," Clint said. "I know that is being done, but we need to expand on that. We have to have our younger people involved in our co-op or it won't be sustainable. So that's one thing I would like to see. I know it is being run well, and I would like to add just a little bit to that and keep it going strong. We need these co-ops. They are very valuable to our farming operation."

Along with serving on PCCA's Board of Directors, Clint is very active both in his community and the cotton industry. He is a member of the First United Methodist Church in Altus. He serves on the board of Cotton Growers Cooperative and Producers Cooperative Oil Mill, and currently serves as an alternate to The Cotton Board. He serves on the board of the Western Trails Historical Society and is currently serving on the board of the Oklahoma City Branch of the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City. Clint said it is important for farmers to be involved because it is up to themselves to be their own voice.

"We have to be involved and get our word out," Clint said. "Nobody else is going to do that for us. That is why we need to really stay strong on that. It is easy not to do that. It is easy just to stay out here and do what we are trained to do, and what we love to do is just take care of these farms. We have to expand on that and let others know what we are doing and how we are doing it in a safe and sustainable way."

The Abernathy family, like many in the cotton industry, take great pride in caring for the land.

“I want people not in ag to know that we are good stewards of this land and we are working hard to be better at it all the time.”

Clint said he hopes everyone knows how much they do to help ensure future generations will be able to follow in their footsteps and farm.

“I think everybody needs to know that we are out here to protect this environment because our families and our employees are out here every day,” he said. “The last thing we want to do is destroy it in any way. We feel like we are doing what we need to do to make it sustainable. To me sustainability is to leave my grandkids the same opportunities I had out here. So, any way we can use technology and conservation practices to make that happen, then that is what we need to do.”

Clint said they implement multiple conservation practices in their operation. All of their farmland is either no-till or minimum-till, and they continue to expand their use of drip irrigation each year to conserve water. He said they also use variable rate fertilizer, which involves taking soil samples and grids, then combining that with variable rates on the fields to benefit the soil

“I want people not in ag to know that we are good stewards of this land and we are working hard to be better at it all the time,” Clint said. “We are using modern technology. We are utilizing conservation practices that will save the land and save this water for generations to come.”

There are many decisions to be made when managing a farming operation. Clint would encourage young farmers to find a mentor to learn from and to be their guide.

“I think what young farmers should always realize is all years are not going to be good,” Clint said. “You have good years and bad years, but you learn from the bad years and you try to make the most out of your good years.

Always try to find some mentors out there that you respect, and watch them and see how they do things. You might not necessarily need to do things exactly like they do it, but that is certainly what I did in my career.”

Without a doubt, Clint said one of his teachers was his father. Even today the wisdom and experience Charles passed down impacts the decisions Clint makes on a daily basis.

“Of course, I had my dad and I had others in the area that I really watched closely, and there’s no need making mistakes that you don’t need to, so always put a big value in that even after they are gone. My dad passed away seven years ago, and I still think of him and when I make decisions I can hear his input. It is a really special thing, so don’t ever think you are too smart to learn more. It’s okay to look back and see how things used to be done. We can’t do everything the same as we used to, but it is very valuable to have those relationships.”

From farming to being trustworthy in all things and raising his family with the same values he was taught, Clint Abernathy is proud to follow in his father’s footsteps. 🌱





Keith, Buzz and Dean Vardeman.

# When INNOVATION Meets PASSION

## The Vardeman Family

In the fall of 1927, Buzz Vardeman was born in San Saba County, Texas. The son of a cotton, peanut and peach farmer, Buzz had agriculture instilled in him before he even took his first steps. What he did not know as he grew up on the farm in Central Texas, though, was that one day he and his sons would help change the face of the cotton industry forever.

By the time he was a sophomore in high school, Buzz already had five original inventions he used on the farm. As a very bright and innovative young man, he was the one the neighbors called for help on their farm equipment – not the local dealership.

“During World War II, there wasn’t anyone left in the farming part of the world except the older guys and the people that were younger than me,” he said. “I wasn’t old enough yet to go to the service, so anyone that had trouble with their tractors came to me.”

On one such occasion, Buzz had gone to the local John Deere dealership in his hometown to gather some parts. It was there he encountered “the John Deere block man” – a meeting which would ultimately change the course of his life years later.

“The John Deere dealer said ‘I want to introduce you to this young man. Y’all need to take him and make an engineer out of him,’” he said. “So that started our conversation. Every time he would come through, nearly once a month, he’d ask me if I had any new ideas. That’s how we got started with John Deere.”

After moving to Lubbock at age 20, Buzz played major roles in some of the farming company’s most known implements. In 1947, he had the privilege to run and critique the first John Deere cotton stripper the company put on the market. Later, he would help develop the module builder, the module truck, and progress the mechanics of harvesters to add more headers to cotton strippers and pickers. He would also entertain individuals from countries all over the world, such as Australia, South Africa, and South America, looking to grow and harvest cotton in methods based on his success. Fast forward to today, where he and his sons played a key role in developing the famous John Deere CS690, the stripper baler, and the CP690, the picker baler.

“Every day you let your cotton sit out there, it is costing you money,” Buzz said. “For instance, we started out with a two-row stripper, then the four-row, and then we built the first eight-row. That was all built because of what I learned in 1950. We pulled one bale of cotton each day for 20 days straight to see what would happen, and that is where I learned that when cotton gets ready to go, that is the best it

*Story and Photo By Blair McCowen*

# “To me, I guess sustainability means the ability to continue what we have begun here.”

is going to be that day. You lose weight first, then quality. Either one costs you money. In other words, that is what motivated me to make these changes.”

Along the way, Buzz would meet and marry the love of his life, Joyce, and have sons Dean and Keith, who play a vital role in the farming and ranching operation today. Never forgetting that family was the most important thing, Buzz and Joyce brought up their children in the best way possible – right by their sides.

“Mom and dad were both extremely sharp individuals and very systematic in how they approached things,” said second oldest son Keith. “They did things in an orderly manner and always shared with us what they were thinking and talked about what their goals were. Watching them display those things growing up certainly influenced us all in a good way. Mom and dad never led us off on a path that wasn’t a good one.

Speaking to his father’s natural knack for innovation and progress, oldest son and PCCA Board Member Dean echoed his brother’s praises.

“He is always looking for a better idea or a better way to do things,” Dean said. “He has been that way all his life. A lot of good things have come to pass because of that. He wanted to improve things and make them better, so he just undertook them. It is very rewarding, yet it is a very educational process and dad has been good to show us how that works. He gave us an opportunity a long time ago to work with him, start with him, and stay with him, and it has been good.”

Even Buzz’s grandchildren play an integral role in the farming and ranching operation today and get to learn from the three men who have helped shape the industry in insurmountable ways. Dean says working with his children and his nephew is a great joy.

“It has been a real joy and asset for me to have my children want to be involved in the farming and ranching operations that we have,” he said. “They are just the best help. They are willing to learn and put in a lot of effort and I have been really lucky to have that happen. All three of my children are just tied to helping here day to day among the other things that they do. Of course, Keith has a son that is farming here with us, too, and it is really good for us to work with him. It is a really close-knit group that way, and we all rely on each other a whole lot. It is really a rewarding time to work together, and we are together pretty much all day every day. Another rare opportunity I feel like that we have to participate with each other.”

In addition to sending the family farming legacy to the next generation of Vardemans, the family also has a source of strength in the cooperative system. In fact, when Buzz lived in San Saba County, his father helped start a peanut cooperative. Recognizing the business advantages of cooperatives in one commodity, they decided to stay with the business structure when they started farming cotton in West Texas. Today, Dean and Keith run the business the way their father always has.

“We have been doing co-op business all our lives,” Dean said. “It is an extension of your farming operation. It gives you control and ownership of more than just your farm. It allows you to work with like-minded people and all for a common goal of bettering the process of carrying your commodity on

through the supply chain and to be able to receive some benefit financially, and otherwise from doing business together. I think it has added a lot of strength to the farming communities and farming culture out here in this part of the world.”

Keith agreed with his brother and noted how deep the benefits of the co-op run in agriculture

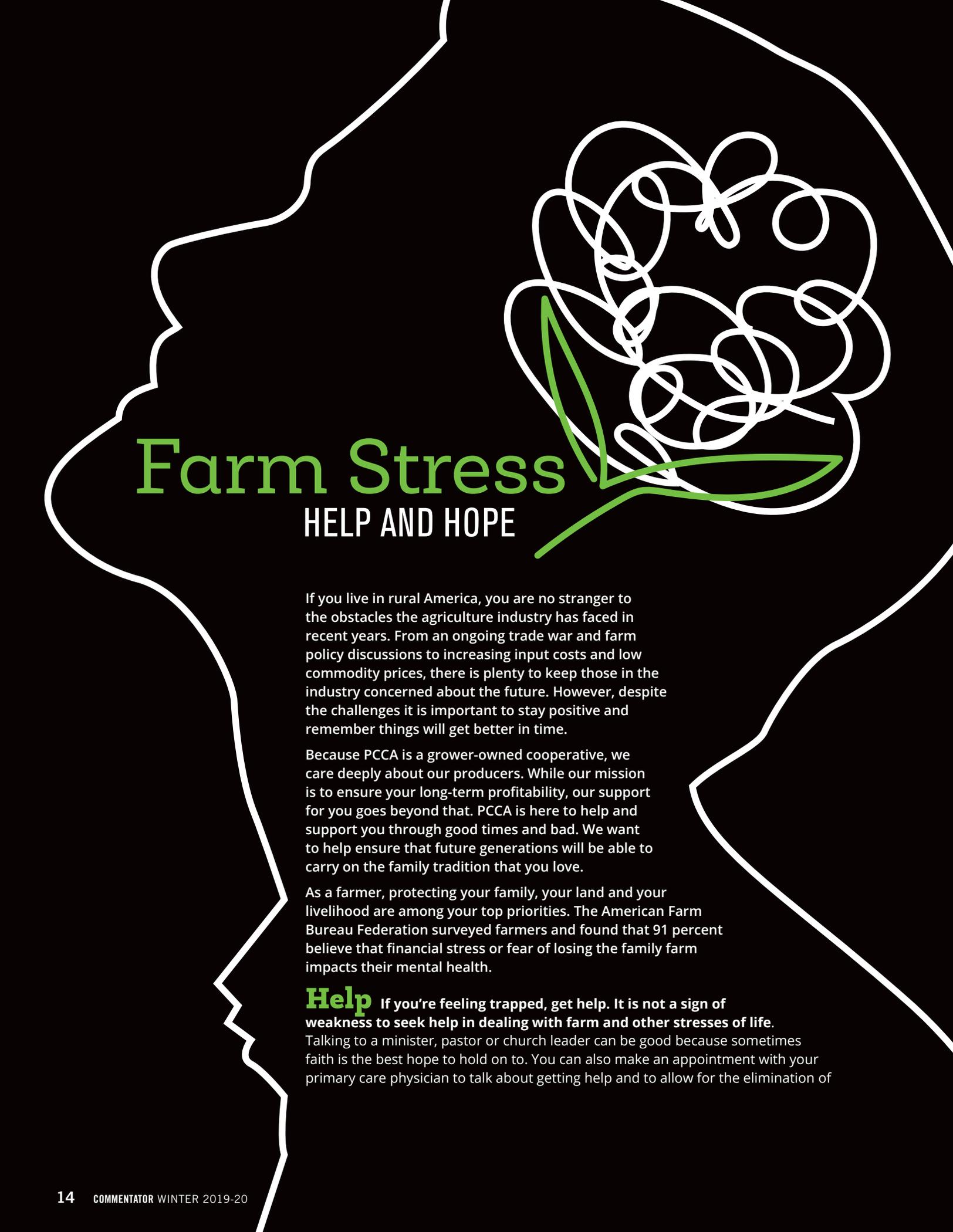
“You know, that is really why you want to be in a co-op, is to help your individual operation,” Keith said. “Even though it involves a lot of people, it goes back to the family farm and that is where the main benefit comes back to you.

From farming innovations to strong family ties and unique business models, one thing is for certain – the Vardeman farming and ranching operation will be sustainable for years to come.

“To me, I guess sustainability means the ability to continue what we have begun here,” Keith said. “To be able to use and maintain the resources we have here, all of the natural resources as well as the things we use to grow a crop and produce a product that benefits mankind and be able to do that over the long term, and remain viable from an environmental standpoint and a financial standpoint as well. This is where we grew up and our livelihood, and we certainly have benefitted from it. Even more than that, we want to see it maintained. It is the willingness to look at, adopt, and evaluate technologies and practices so that future generations can sit where we are today and report that they have been successful, and plan to keep doing so as well.”

At 92 years old, Buzz knows the value in making sure future generations of agriculture, especially those from his bloodline, have ample opportunity to keep living the same way of life he has.

“It’s like when they are growing up, you sometimes wonder if they are going to know how to catch on and follow through on things,” Buzz said as tears glistened in his eyes. “Dean and Keith have always been there when we were building parts and through changes – they have been a part of it all their lives. It’s then you realize that if something was to happen to me today, these guys could carry on for sure.” 🌱



# Farm Stress

## HELP AND HOPE

If you live in rural America, you are no stranger to the obstacles the agriculture industry has faced in recent years. From an ongoing trade war and farm policy discussions to increasing input costs and low commodity prices, there is plenty to keep those in the industry concerned about the future. However, despite the challenges it is important to stay positive and remember things will get better in time.

Because PCCA is a grower-owned cooperative, we care deeply about our producers. While our mission is to ensure your long-term profitability, our support for you goes beyond that. PCCA is here to help and support you through good times and bad. We want to help ensure that future generations will be able to carry on the family tradition that you love.

As a farmer, protecting your family, your land and your livelihood are among your top priorities. The American Farm Bureau Federation surveyed farmers and found that 91 percent believe that financial stress or fear of losing the family farm impacts their mental health.

**Help** If you're feeling trapped, get help. It is not a sign of weakness to seek help in dealing with farm and other stresses of life.

Talking to a minister, pastor or church leader can be good because sometimes faith is the best hope to hold on to. You can also make an appointment with your primary care physician to talk about getting help and to allow for the elimination of

medical problems as the primary source of the change in mood as well as an opportunity for the consideration of treatment with medication, counseling or both. If you are concerned about a loved-one, it is usually best to accompany that person to the appointment in order to ensure the physician gets an accurate account of their condition. Often, family members or friends have a clearer awareness of the changes than the distressed person has.

Also, people often are more open to talking with a trusted friend about their problems than they are to discussing them with family members. We were created to live in community—the very worst thing is to not talk to anyone.

When someone you love is struggling with stress, depression, or suicidal thoughts, they may think their feelings are too much to burden someone else with and keep to themselves. When you ask directly about their mental health and intentions, you are telling them it is not too much and that you care about them. **Asking a person if they are contemplating suicide has not been shown to cause the person to consider suicide if they were not already.** And if someone is already considering suicide, asking them about their thoughts about taking their life has not been shown to make the person more likely to make an attempt. Talk to them privately and summarize why you are concerned about them, but do not promise secrecy.

Take seriously jokes or hints about suicide or the belief that everyone would be better off without them, and take special note if they seem to be tying up loose ends or giving away personal items. It is advisable to remove guns, knives or other potentially lethal items from the home as well as to limit the availability of medications and other substances that could be abused as well as to monitor their use. Should a person appear to be imminently dangerous to self, call 911 or take them to an emergency room as soon as possible.

**Hope** It is true that the current state of the farm economy and the unique stresses that come with living in a rural area are difficult. However farmers and their families are known for creativity and finding ways to weather the storms of life. It is often true that it's darkest right before the dawn.

**It is important to remember that things will get better with time:**

- Although current conditions are dim, a growing world will need American farmers for food and fiber
- The world will add billions of new people over the next few years that need food and clothing.
- Analysis by Cotton Inc. predicts that cotton consumption could grow globally by more than 20% by 2030. Southwest U.S. cotton farmers are in the best position to meet that demand.

**You are not alone. It is imperative to avoid self-blame for things that are beyond your control.** There are very few farm families that have not been affected by the recession in agriculture. We would all do well to remember that we are loved and highly valued by family and friends.

**We are all in this together. Check on your friends and neighbors during these difficult time** 🤝

**IT IS IMPORTANT TO STAY POSITIVE AND REMEMBER THINGS WILL GET BETTER IN TIME.**

## Signs of a mental health crisis include:

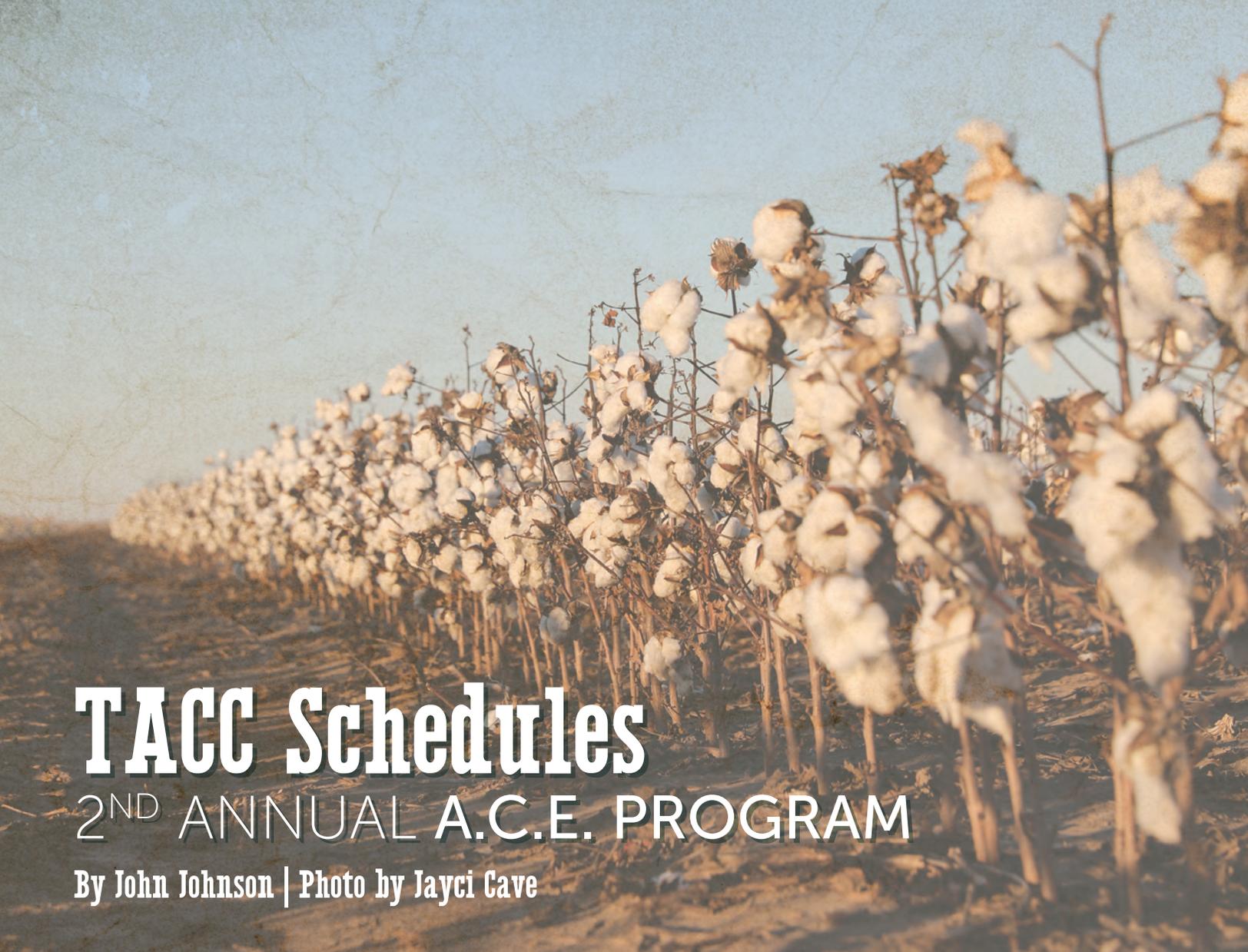
- Decline in care of crops, animals and the farm in general
- Deterioration of personal appearance
- Withdrawing from social events, family and friends
- Change in mood or routine
- Increase in farm accidents
- Increase in substance abuse
- Feeling anxious or worried
- Emotional outbursts
- Problems sleeping
- Dramatic changes in weight or appetite
- Feelings of failure
- Talk of being better off dead or thoughts of suicide

## Seek Help:

The **Crisis Text Line** also is available. **Text HOME to 741741** to be connected to a trained counselor 24/7.

The **Farm Aid Farmer Hotline is 1-800-327-6243**. Staff will answer calls Monday-Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Eastern time.

The **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 1-800-273-8255**. The call is free and confidential, and they will connect the caller to a counselor in their area.



# TACC Schedules

## 2<sup>ND</sup> ANNUAL A.C.E. PROGRAM

By John Johnson | Photo by Jayci Cave

The Texas Agricultural Cooperative Council has announced its 2<sup>nd</sup> annual Academy in Cooperative Excellence will be held January 31-February 2, 2020, at the Inn on Barons Creek in Fredericksburg. The first academy was held in January 2019 in San Antonio and was attended by 45 farmers/ranchers and four co-op employees who heard from and interacted with 14 speakers.

The A.C.E. Program is designed to “cultivate a new momentum and connect the dots for the next generation of farm families and co-op leaders by introducing them to alternative business structures with a special emphasis on the co-op business model,” according to TACC.

“The target audience for this conference are those up-and-coming, emerging leaders within the co-op industry around Texas who have a long-term impact in their communities,” said Christy Lewis,

TACC’s Director of Administration and Member Services. “This may include but is not limited to younger or emerging farmers, mid-level/new employees that are newer to the co-op business model and potential directors,” she said.

TACC began hosting an annual “Young Couples” school in the 1980s because even then co-ops had difficulty engaging young farmers. The school continued until 2004 when it was decided most all eligible young farm couples had already attended, according to Lewis.

“If your co-op had an attendee at one of the recent Cooperative Producer Orientation meetings in Lubbock held by the three Lubbock regional cotton cooperatives, they are particularly encouraged to attend the A.C.E. conference as it will act as a ‘Phase II’ training of the cooperative business model,” said TACC Executive Vice President Tommy Engelke when the conference was first announced in November 2018.

“We were asked to revive the young couples school, thus the A.C.E. conference was born,” Lewis said.

“The TACC Board of Directors enthusiastically endorsed this effort,” Engelke said, “because co-ops still share the common problem of getting younger

# 2020 A.C.E. Agenda



Photos Courtesy of TACC

members involved. "We also need to explain the value of co-ops to the community and encourage younger farmers and ranchers to run for their co-ops' board."

Some of comments received from attendees of the first A.C.E. conference included

*"I feel that I will personally appreciate my co-op more and try to get more involved."*

*"Every young member of a co-op needs to attend this meeting."*

The 2020 conference again will feature interactive panel discussions and a tour of local wineries. Conference sponsors are Plains Cotton Cooperative Association, Farmers Cooperative Compress, Gulf Compress, PYCO Industries and Valley Co-op Oil Mill.

A registration fee of \$595 per single/couple is paid by the local co-op. This includes lodging, most meals and the Hill Country wine tour. Incidentals and travel to and from the A.C.E. Conference are not included in the registration fee.

For more information, call TACC at 512-450-0555. 📞

## FRIDAY, JANUARY 31

Noon	Registration
1:30 p.m.	Welcome & Introductions
2:10 p.m.	"What Are the Economic Challenges Facing Today's Farmers?"
2:50 p.m.	"What It Takes to Be a Competitive Farmer" Dr. John Park, Roy B. Davis Co-op Chair, Texas A&M University, College Station
3:15 p.m.	"What If One of the Ag Businesses You Rely on in Your Community Went Away?" Tom Engelke, CEO, Texas Ag Co-op Council, Austin Dr. John Park
4:00 p.m.	"Why Farmers Did and Still Do What They Do" Gary McLaren, Attorney, McLaren Law Firm, PLLC, Lubbock Tom Engelke
4:50 p.m.	Summary & Conclusion
5:00 p.m.	Adjourn
6:00 p.m.	Dinner "Friday Night at Wursthfest"...the Fredericksburg Brewing Company

## SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 1

7:00 a.m.	Breakfast at the hotel
8:00 a.m.	Call to Order
8:10 a.m.	"Accelerating Your Investment in a Co-op" Greg Taylor, CPA, D. Williams & Company, Lubbock
8:40 a.m.	"The Most Asked Questions About the Farmer-Owned Business Model: A Panel" Gary McLaren Dr. John Park Greg Taylor Seth Stephens, CEO, Producers Cooperative Elevator, Floydada
9:40 a.m.	Break
10:15 a.m.	"How I Made the Co-op Work for Me" A.J. Kresta, Board President, United Agricultural Cooperative, El Campo Jon Jones, Board President, Producers Cooperative Elevator, Floydada and Director, Floydada Co-op Gin
10:45 a.m.	"Spotlighting Co-ops for Co-ops (and Farmers) --the Regionals" Robert Lacy, CEO, PYCO Industries, Lubbock Robert Swize, CEO, Gulf Compress, Corpus Christi Cody White, Relationship Manager, CoBank, Lubbock Tim Akins, Key Account Manager, Land O'Lakes, Lantana Eric Wanjura, Vice President, Farmers Cooperative Compress, Lubbock
11:30 a.m.	"Secrets and Shortcomings: Valuable Legal Lessons Regarding Your Wishes" Gary McLaren
Noon	Texas Hill Country Winery Tour and Lunch
6:30 p.m.	Dinner on your own

## SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 2

7:00 a.m.	Breakfast at the hotel
8:00 a.m.	Call to Order
8:15 a.m.	"The Immediate and Long-Term Marketing and Demographic Impacts on Ag Commodities" Kevin Brinkley, CEO, Plains Cotton Cooperative Association, Lubbock
9:00 a.m.	"An Ag Co-op--It's a Business Too" James Deatherage, CEO, Producers Cooperative Association, Bryan
9:45 a.m.	Summary & Conclusion
10:00 a.m.	Adjourn

# *Marketing Pool* West Texas | Oklahoma | Kansas Sign In/Sign Out Period | March 1-31, 2020

## PCCA'S POOL DELIVERS

PCCA's Most Popular Marketing Option • Integrated Risk Management  
Superior Long-Term Results • Ownership and Cooperative Marketing Power  
Expert Marketing Team and Global Sales Network • Acre-Based Production



### *PCCA's Mission*

*To ensure the long-term profitability of our grower-owners through value-added marketing programs and through services to their gins.*