

A man with glasses and a mustache, wearing a blue and white checkered shirt and blue jeans, stands in a large warehouse. He is smiling and has his hand on a stack of cotton bales. The bales are wrapped in clear plastic and have "HIGH CALIBER" printed on them. In the background, there are more stacks of bales on metal shelving units.

# PCCA COMMENTATOR

PLAINS COTTON COOPERATIVE ASSOCIATION | SUMMER 2018

A CAREER DEDICATED TO COTTON AND THE FARMERS WHO GROW IT:  
LONNIE WINTERS

AGRICULTURE CALLED HIM HOME: JIMMY ROPPOLO'S STORY  
UNCERTAINTY VS. SECURITY – THE IMPORTANCE OF FARM POLICY

"DON'T DO WHAT LOOKS GOOD, DO WHAT IS RIGHT."  
– THE MANDUJANO BROTHERS



# COMMENTATOR

VOLUME 48, NO 3 | SUMMER 2018

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Meet Jimmy Roppolo, manager of United Ag Co-op in El Campo, Texas. A revered man in the industry, Roppolo has added value to his farmers' crops in more ways than one. Read his story, *Agriculture Called Him Home*, on page 4. Photo by Jayci Cave.

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## Letter *from the* President



As I write this letter, I am certain about only one thing when it comes to international trade—by the time you read this, the world will have changed significantly.

Rather than use this space to debate the benefits and costs of any one approach to trade policy, I believe it will be helpful to review what trade means to the cotton industry.

**FACT #1:** Cotton grown in Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas and New Mexico will be exported in large part to Vietnam, China, Turkey, Indonesia, Pakistan and Mexico. Trade and political risks related to many on this list are covered in the news daily. These six countries purchase 70% of all U.S. exports.

**FACT #2:** Cotton exports are the primary driver of value for growers. U.S. consumption of cotton equals 3.5 million bales annually. Without exports, cotton prices would not sustain production on 12-13 million acres in the U.S.

**FACT #3:** There is no revenue replacement for exported cotton. The value of the cotton crop in the export market exceeds \$5.5 billion annually. The gap created by the loss of even a portion of that total creates a negative economic impact on growers and handlers of the crop.

Cotton growers and merchandisers have worked diligently for decades to build markets for U.S. cotton around the world. Essential to developing those markets has been time (i.e. patience), reliability and trust. Trade actions that unravel those elements pose risks to the structure of farming and related businesses. The capacity to gin, store and ship the crop has been growing based on the belief that our export markets will be healthy for years into the future. Trade actions that erode confidence in those markets will undoubtedly slow capital investment in gins, warehouses and infrastructure.

Trade policy changes need to be considered in light of their impact on the entire supply chain starting from the farm and continuing downstream. It is important for growers to communicate the value of exports to their communities and the policy makers that represent them. Let us hope that we won't easily surrender what has taken years of hard work and investment to build.

Sincerely,

Kevin Brinkley  
President and Chief Executive Officer

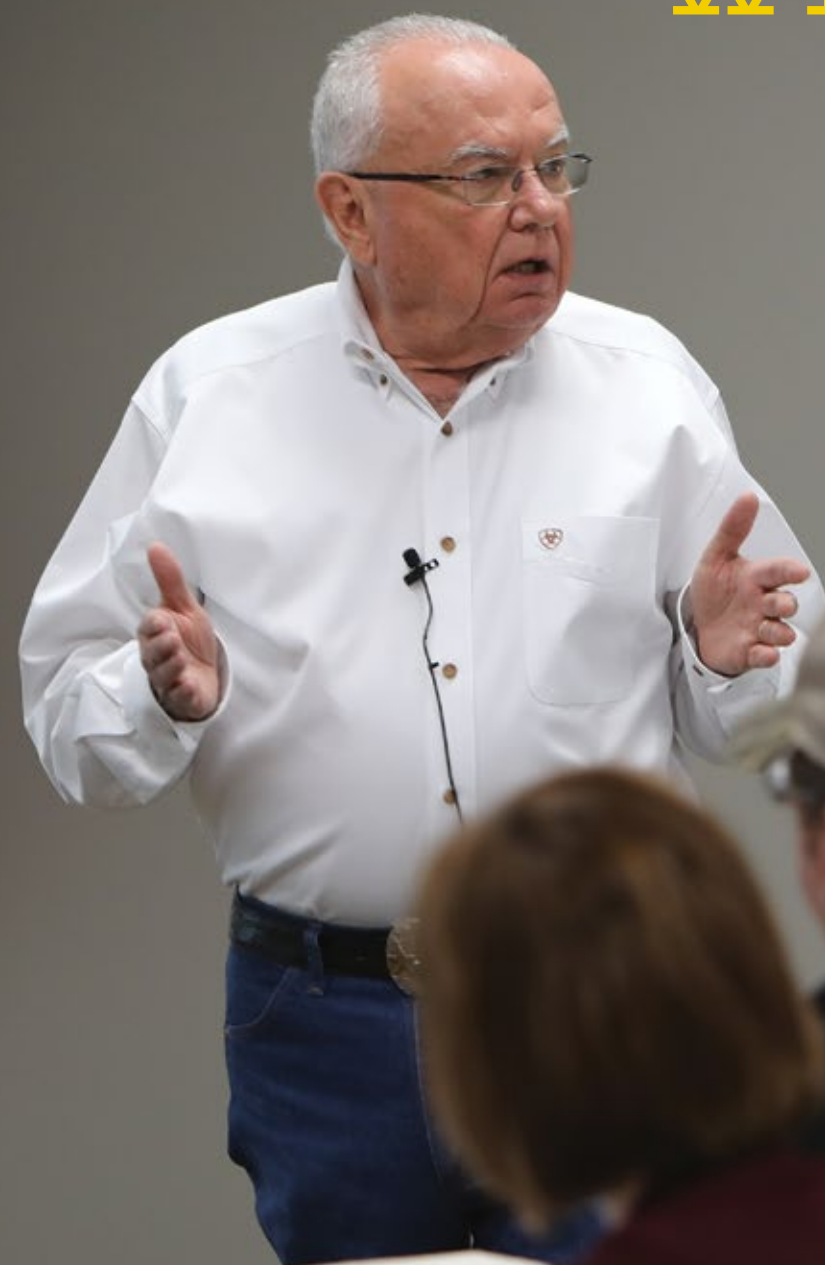


A CAREER DEDICATED TO COTTON

AND THE FARMERS WHO GROW IT:

# LONNIE WINTERS

By John Johnson  
Photo by Jayci Cave



One of the most trusted and respected individuals in the cotton industry, known for his honesty, integrity and dedication to cotton farmers is retiring this year. His outgoing personality has been a perfect fit for his 47-year career in the cotton industry. His last 25 years at PCCA will come to an end on Aug. 31 when the co-op's Vice President of Marketing, Lonnie Winters, retires. Raised on his family's farm near Lone Wolf, Oklahoma, where he learned his work ethic, Winters began his cotton career in 1972 working in the office at Granite Farmers Co-op Gin eight miles west of his hometown.

"The cotton industry had always intrigued me," he said, "and a couple of years later I was named manager of the co-op."

At just 22 years of age, Winters became the youngest gin manager in Oklahoma. Little did he know he would stay in the industry or have such a positive impact on so many farmers. After working at the co-op gin, Winters worked for the W.R. Moore Cotton Company buying cotton in Oklahoma and Texas before moving to Lubbock to work for Hohenberg Cotton.

"I thought I would only be in Texas for six months, but I never left," he said.

In 1993, Winters was hired as PCCA's Sales Manager, selling cotton in domestic and export markets.

"I came to PCCA because of the staff and friendships I had built here," he said, "and because I knew this co-op was respected and trusted around the world which made my job easy. PCCA has the best employees and most loyal grower-owners in the industry."

Winters was promoted to Vice President of Marketing at PCCA in 2004 and briefly served as the co-op's Interim President and CEO in 2015.

It would be safe to say he has seen it all, the highs and lows of the cotton market, trade issues, attacks on farm policy, bad legislation and regulations to name a few. Even in the worst of times, Winters was a compass that helped keep PCCA on the right path. At times, Winters said he had sleepless nights, but his dedication and loyalty never wavered because he loves this co-op and its grower-owners.

"Our sales staff wakes up every morning knowing that we have the livelihoods of our grower-owners in our hands," Winters said.

Throughout his career at PCCA, Winters has always been accessible to gin managers and growers, travelling countless miles to make personal visits and attend meetings in Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas. Almost every day, at times even on weekends, he has taken phone calls from growers, landlords and bankers to answer their questions about the cotton market.

Winters also represented the co-op's grower-owners by serving on the boards of directors of the National Cotton Council, Cotton Council International and The Seam. He also served as president of the Lubbock Cotton Exchange and on the Board of Directors of the Texas Cotton Association. He said one of his most cherished memories is being named Cooperator of the Year by the Texas Agricultural Cooperative Council in 2015.

"So much could be said of our winner, but quite simply he does not cherish the spotlight," said Texas Star Co-op Manager Buzz Cooper at the awards ceremony in Galveston. "Bottom line, his main goal is to adequately give the greatest return to his members. It's not in his DNA to sugarcoat the situation and certainly not to overstep reality. His intent is to deliver the best return to those who are the bedrock of our society."

Kevin Brinkley, PCCA President and CEO, said PCCA is a better company because of Winters.

"Of all the many things I have learned from Lonnie, the value of discipline and consistency may be the most important. His approach to his job has been a bedrock for this cooperative and the way it serves its membership. It's no accident that our farmers look to us for reliable solutions in a world filled with uncertainty. Lonnie's impact on this company will be felt for generations to come," Brinkley said.

In retirement, Winters and his wife, Donna, will spend some time travelling to visit their four children and eight grandchildren.

"It will be tough to leave PCCA, but wherever I go I will take with me all the friendships that have been built throughout my career," Winters said. PCCA employees, grower-owners and their gin managers and employees will miss Winters' standard work uniform, a long-sleeve white dress shirt, starched Wrangler jeans and black boots. 🌱



Lonnie Winters pictured with family when he received TACC's Cooperator of the Year honor in 2015.



# Agriculture CALLED HIM HOME:

## Jimmy Roppolo's Story

STORY AND PHOTOS BY  
BLAIR MCCOWEN



Years ago, a young sleepy-eyed Jimmy Roppolo rose before the South Texas sun to help his father tend the family farm in High Bank, Texas. From changing the cotton irrigation water to caring for the cattle, horses, pigs and chickens before most other children were starting the day, Roppolo learned the value of a honest day's work early on. Roppolo said one of his biggest promotions on the farm was getting to do the egg gathering, a not-so-small feat for a youngster just beginning his agricultural career. Little did he know that later on in life, he would soar to new heights in the co-op world, become a fightin' Texas Aggie, weather spirit-strengthening storms, and finally find his way back home.

"I wouldn't take anything for that upbringing," Roppolo said, reminiscing. "It really kind of led me to what I do today – being a part of agriculture."

Much of Roppolo's childhood reflected that of a small-town farm kid: working the family farm and helping carry his football team to the state championship his senior year. Upon his high school graduation, Roppolo began to think about what his future might hold and found himself at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas – a school that he grew up an hour away from but was unfamiliar with. In an effort to get involved on campus, Roppolo joined the Corps of Cadets.

"It was really challenging to have a sophomore yelling in your face, but finally I got to the point where I couldn't smile outwardly but I could smile inwardly and say 'just keep hollering bud, you aren't hurting me a bit,' and it has helped me out in life a lot," Roppolo said.

The first in his family to attend college, Roppolo majored in chemical engineering and agricultural engineering before finding his true fit in agricultural economics.

"Ag economics ended up being the key to me being where I am today," he said. "I went to an ag eco meeting one night and there was a speaker there from Farmland Industries. He came in and started talking about co-ops at the meeting and I didn't even know what a co-op was – never was raised around one. When he started talking about how when a co-op makes a profit the members are going to get money back I thought wow, this is the deal. That is what I want to do, I want to help farmers."

### THE JOURNEY BEGINS

The agricultural economics meeting during Roppolo's undergraduate career proved to be a pivotal moment that would set the course for the rest of his professional life.

"I made the decision that night, actually, that if I was going to manage a co-op it was going to be in a small town and then hopefully one of these days I could have my horses again and have some cattle and not have to worry about fighting traffic," Roppolo said. "That is really what led me here to the cooperative side. I got out of A&M and really pursued working for a cooperative."

After graduating from Texas A&M, Roppolo entered into Farmland's management training program in Bryan, Texas. Living life to the fullest for a year near his alma mater, he later filled an assistant manager position at a co-op in Baird, Texas, then earned his first management position at the age of 23.

After six years, Roppolo returned to Farmland Industries and worked as a field representative centered in El Campo, Texas. Having dealt heavily with the farm supply store side of the co-op business, Roppolo began to venture into field crops in the industry.

"I knew if I was going to be in co-ops that cotton ginning was pretty important. West Texas was booming with gins, co-op gins everywhere," Roppolo said. "I knew that I needed to have cotton ginning somewhere in my resume if I was going to move on down the road somewhere, so I asked a gin manager for a job."

Working as a field representative during the week and a gin hand on the weekends, Roppolo successfully added cotton ginning experience to his resume, a skill that would come in handy in the not-so-distant future.

In the midst of the Danish community of Danevang and one of the largest farming areas in South Texas at the time, Roppolo worked primarily in the farm supply, agronomy, cotton gin and grain elevator areas. After working at Danevang for four years, he became their manager. Not long after in 1985, he began his long-term commitment of serving the agricultural producers of South Texas at United Ag, the El Campo-based cooperative he calls home.



### UNITED WE STAND

By 2012, a total of four cooperatives from the El Campo area came together to form United Ag, a name that Roppolo was very mindful of selecting in order to unite the surrounding communities rather than divide them.

"I felt like saying Farmers Co-op of El Campo and Victoria was not a good deal for Victoria," he said. "I thought if we ever acquired something at Wharton, which is one of the biggest football rivals of El Campo, it would be hard for those folks to stomach Farmers Co-op of El Campo in Wharton, so that is when we changed the name to United Ag."

In December of this year, Roppolo will celebrate his 33rd anniversary at United Ag. He attributes the co-op's success to surrounding himself with good friends and quality employees, even going so far as to hire a young man he met in a restaurant once because he gave a good first impression.

"I met a guy in a restaurant one day and hired him because I liked his attitude," Roppolo said. "He was fixing to go to work for Monsanto as an intern. I just happened to see his Aggie ring and I introduced myself to him. We got to talking and I said if you are really serious about working in agronomy I would like to hire you. I just really try to find those types of people that care."

Surrounding himself with good people does not only apply to employees. Roppolo said his 12-member board of directors votes on business decisions unanimously most of the time, showing that they too are united in upholding the best interest of their cooperative.

United Ag also has a desire for staying on the leading edge of technology. In 1987, Roppolo became concerned about specific moisture and trash levels of cotton coming through the gin. This led to the introduction of the Uster IntelliGin System to the co-op.

"The IntelliGin system basically monitors the moisture of the cotton as it comes in and turns the heaters up or down to make sure the cotton is at a set point at the gin stand," Roppolo said. "It takes samples of the cotton, knows what the grade is coming in and how much trash is in it. At the end

*Continued on page 6...*



...continued from page 5.

of the ginning process, the IntelliGin system also shows what the grade of the cotton bale should be, including color and leaf grades."

"About 95 percent of our producers use it and it is a cost, but I feel really good that our cotton has been ginned right and that we are getting the best quality," he said, beaming with pride. "Our gin turnout has been about 42.5 percent and I think that stands up to any gin in the country. I think the IntelliGin system is what is doing that for us."

The system also takes the risk of human error out of the decision making process when it comes to dealing with gin trash.

"It looks at the cotton loan chart and decides if it is better to leave a little bit more trash in the cotton bale and get more pounds of lint or if it is better to go through a second stage of lint cleaning and lose precious pounds of cotton. It makes that decision on the fly and surpasses a second lint cleaner if that puts more money in the producer's pocket," Roppolo said. "It makes that decision for us."

The business ventures of United Ag do not end with the gin's IntelliGin system. The cooperative is currently expanding its Danevang gin location, and has even put in a boutique, the Blue Creek Market, in its old El Campo farm supply store building. The cooperative has two cotton gins, four grain elevators, four farm supply stores, its own cotton warehouse location, a deer corn bagging plant, and is a certified Purina dealer with a feed mixing plant. All of the profits from these business ventures go back to benefit United Ag's members.

## MORE THAN A JOB

Roppolo has also taken his work well beyond the four walls of an office. In 2004, Roppolo was recognized as an Outstanding Alumni of Texas A&M College of Agriculture, and in 2011 received the Ginner of the Year award from the National Cotton Ginners Association.

"That is like over and beyond the Heisman Trophy deal," Roppolo said, grinning from ear to ear. "I have this big problem, it is hard for me to tell people no so I am pretty busy most of the time. I get millions of phone calls, but I take pride in answering every phone call just as fast as I get it. I want our people to feel like they are important."

Keeping his producers top-of-mind is a business trait that came in handy when the hurricane of all hurricanes, Harvey, pummeled what was supposed to be a record cotton crop for South Texas growers. Despite the wreckage the storm left behind, United Ag continued to persevere. After finishing ginning Harvey cotton in January, the cooperative was able to send out its insurance checks to farmers in June.

"We aim to please our producers in every way and we listen," Roppolo said. "I think that is the biggest thing – knowing that we are a cooperative owned by the producers and we are here to serve them and pay them back profits. With the year we had here locally and with the year Gulf Compress and VALCO added to our ginning season, we are going to have an excellent financial year which is totally surprising, you know. I nearly get tears in my eyes thinking about all the effort that went into it and it went really well."

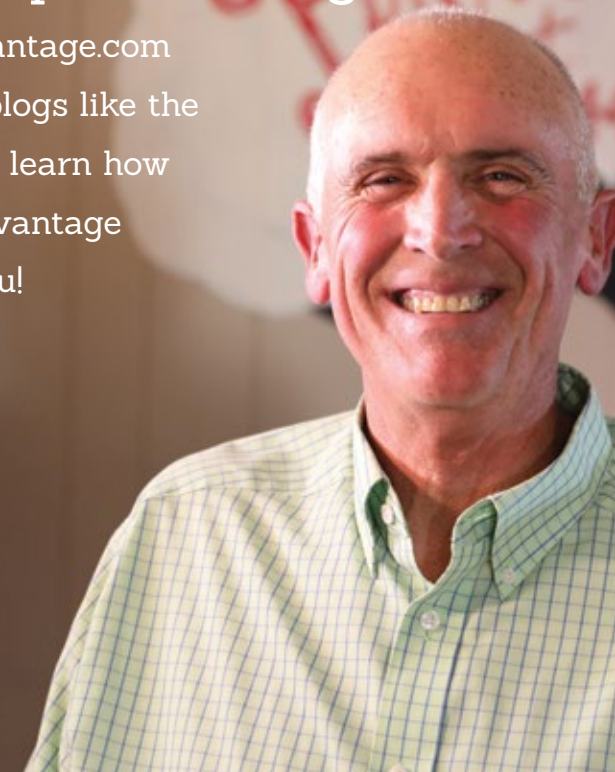
## HOME SWEET HOME

After all the years and challenges Jimmy Roppolo has faced, his desire to take care of farmers has never wavered. The sleepy-eyed young boy who grew up working on his family farm before sunrise turned into the fightin' Texas Aggie who was always at the ready to serve, and then became a revered professional in the co-op world. Today, Roppolo has made his home in the small town of El Campo where traffic is rarely a problem, has horses and raises Registered Brangus cattle in his spare time. 🐾

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## Mark Hegi: Serving One Another

No doubt about it, West Texas farmer Mark Hegi has a servant's heart.

It was taught to him by his father, who taught him to love the land. Hegi has passed along the same message to his own three children – especially his son – who now works alongside Hegi who recently completed his 38th crop.

"We are luckier than we know (as farmers)," Hegi said. "I believe the mark of a good man is leaving the land better than you found it, and recognizing you're always working with God's nature."

A servant to the land, Hegi is also a true believer in being of service to others. Being neighborly, as he puts it, is not only the *right* way to be, but the *necessary* way to be as good farmers.

Hegi points to The Co-op Advantage® and its four regional co-sponsors as examples of the servant leadership provided to those across the supply chain every day.

"Each of the presidents (Plains Cotton Cooperative Association, Farmers Cooperative Compress, PYCO Industries, Inc., and Producers Cooperative Oil Mill) are examples of servant leaders," Hegi said. "We are luckier than we know. They (regional co-sponsors) are all led by outstanding men who are always looking out for the good of those they serve."

True co-ops, Hegi emphasized, are servants in the way that they exist not for themselves but for their patrons. And, he added, being part of a co-op is valuable all times of the year.

"They're always working for you."

Serving one another, as co-ops do for their grower-owners, is something Hegi is adamant about among fellow farmers as well.

"We must always serve one another, as well as our communities. From the way we use water, to the way we protect our land for future generations, to just being neighborly and always, always giving back to our communities in which we live."

Now - with six grandchildren, Hegi beams as he looks to another generation to learn his words of wisdom. Called, "Pops" by the grandkids, Hegi said one of his favorite parts of farming is seeing his grandchildren on the farm as they learn firsthand the workings of combines and tractors, always alongside his son.

All working on the land that was once Hegi's grandfather's.

A man filled with faith, love of family and his career in farming, Hegi is the epitome of a man with a servant's heart.

"Farming is a work with God's nature. You simply can't look at a sunset every week in the fall and not know we have something bigger than all of us." 🐾



United Ag is currently expanding its Danevang gin location to prepare for the next crop.





# UNCERTAINTY VS. SECURITY

## The Importance of Farm Policy

BY JAYCI CAVE  
PHOTO COURTESY OF  
PLAINS COTTON GROWERS

**FARM POLICY.** Two simple words that encompass a variety of definitions. For the consumer, farm policy helps ensure a safe and affordable supply of food and fiber. For the American farmer, farm policy is the safety net that helps them in their annual dance with Mother Nature or many other factors outside of their control. However, no matter what farm policy means to you, one thing holds true: strong farm policy is imperative to the future of agriculture.

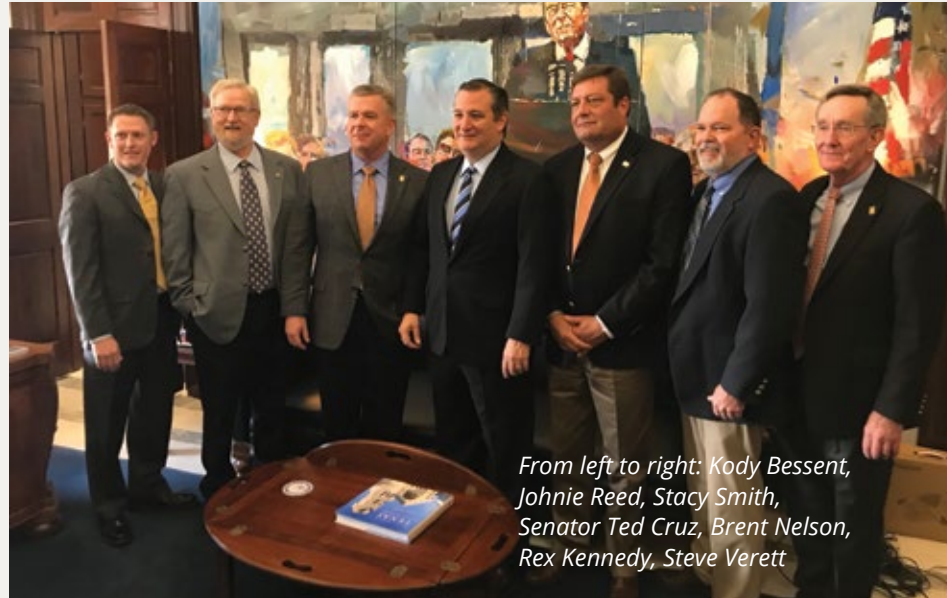
Currently, all eyes are on the 2018 Farm Bill. Will Congress be able to pass a Farm Bill before the current legislation expires? Will farmers maintain the strong, reliable safety net they need? Along with these questions, it is crucial to consider the importance of this single piece of legislation to the nation's farmers. In short, what does farm policy mean to multi-generation farm families? The answer – security.

Following the passage of the 2014 Farm Bill, uncertainty swept the cotton industry. Cotton was removed from Title 1, and growers were left with no safety net to protect against financial and economic hardships. Steve Verett, Executive Vice President at Plains Cotton Growers, Inc., said there is now hope with cotton being returned to coverage under Title 1 of the Farm Bill.

"There is no doubt that the last three to five years have been pretty tough," Verett said. "One was just the uncertainty we had for the first time in many, many years of not having a safety net in the Farm Bill. I would say we have a lot to be thankful for, and we are glad we have that. We are back in the Farm Bill and when prices stay low, we are going to have something that is going to help us there."

Verett said farmers also have crop insurance to help protect against unpredictable weather.

"You can match the crop insurance to exactly what you need to try to provide the best risk management that you can," Verett said. "Now does that solve all the problems? It doesn't, but we have tools today that we haven't had over the last three or four years to help us get through some of these times."



From left to right: Kody Bessent, Johnie Reed, Stacy Smith, Senator Ted Cruz, Brent Nelson, Rex Kennedy, Steve Verett

Farm policy was started in the 1930s and was widely driven by suppressed economic times. Kody Bessent, Vice President of Operations and Legislative Affairs at PCG, said farm policy also has evolved over the years to adapt to where we are today. He said along with crop insurance, farm policy has slowly evolved to look more at price or revenue driven mechanisms as a safety net.

"It is important to have those tools because it allows us to compete in a global market where we see a lot of shifts in price, revenue, and supply and demand," Bessent said. "It allows producers to compete in that market on a level playing field with other countries. It is important to be mindful of that."

Despite its name, the Farm Bill serves more than just American farmers. It supports consumers as well. Without sound farm policy, consumers would not have the safe and affordable supply of food and fiber they are afforded today.

"It is a small amount of the budgetary expense, I would say, it takes to afford us the ability to spend the least amount of our disposable income on food and fiber," Bessent said. "There is a very strong reason why we have the ability to do that - because we have farm policy that allows us to be a very large global exporter of our products rather than being reliant on other countries or markets to import, which could be at a detriment or a greater cost to us. That is one of the big reasons from a consumer-driven standpoint why they should have a greater appreciation for farm policy, because it does provide us the ability to use the least amount of our disposable income on food and fiber."

### PCG Advocates For Cotton Growers

Individual farmers are not alone in their efforts to advocate for strong, effective farm policy. There are many local, regional, state and national organizations leading the way. At each of these organizations are people who are passionate about the future of agriculture. Verett said at PCG, they have a vested interest in their work because of their personal, direct ties to farming.

"I am not saying that somebody can't do this job that hasn't been on the farm or have a farming background in it, but I can tell you for me it is personal," Verett said. "It makes it very personal. And the fact that I am not there on a daily basis anymore – none of us here are, this is our full-time job, but whether it is our brother or our son or whoever it may be, our parents that are directly involved in it, it is more than just a job. We believe in this industry. We know the importance of it, we know the struggles, we know the challenges farmers face and so that is what we think about when we come to work every day. How can we do the best job we can of representing those folks and telling their story and also talking about the economic importance of what our folks do for this region, our state and our nation as well?"

Bessent said his farming background gives him a greater understanding of what producers are going through.

"Having a good base of my farming background as well as the implications of our actions allows me to speak in greater influence whether we are in D.C. or Austin working on state and federal issues," Bessent said. "It allows me to have a full understanding of what is taking place versus learning about it off the cuff or from a different avenue. It allows me to be more passionate about it too because it allows me to speak from true experience."

### What Can You Do? Get Involved

Verett said no one is more qualified to tell agriculture's story than the farmers who live it daily. If you don't tell your story, someone else will, and they may tell it wrong.

"We have the ability to do some of that for them, but the fact of the matter is, it is necessary for them to be able to say it as well," Verett said. "We as staff members here, when we go to Washington to lobby, we can be effective but there is nothing like having those actual producers in the rooms when we do that. That is what our organization is for. Every producer can't pick up and fly or go to Washington or go to Austin, but that is why we need active producers in our organization as well. Our organization is only going to be as good as our leadership."

Getting involved does not have to be an instant thing. Bessent said to start out small by getting involved in your local community and learn more as you go.

"Especially as a young producer and kind of seeing how this whole process unfolds and works – sort of dip your foot in the pond before jumping in head first," Bessent said. "As you grow with that, becoming more involved with organizations like Plains Cotton Growers and the National Cotton Council and other regional organizations is helpful. Also, just be mindful of time. A big aspect of effective policy and advocating is having a large front and a large line of members to help advocate and tell their story. All it takes is just a little bit of time, whether it is being engaged with a member of Congress by calling their office or showing up at a town hall and telling your story there. Talking about issues here and giving just a small amount of your time not every day, but when it is needed, is a big factor that not just young producers but producers all across the board can do."

### Be the Voice

"One of the things we have to consider is that the general public wants more information about where their food and fiber comes from, and rightfully so," said Mary Jane Buerkle, Director of Communications and Public Affairs at PCG. "It is up to us as the ag industry and up to the growers to be able to communicate that information and talk about what they do – get real with people."

Simply put – Tell your story. Buerkle said a farmer telling his or her own story can be more effective than a similar message coming from an organization or business.

"People want to hear from those producers, boots on the ground, people who are actually in the field doing this work day-in and day-out," Buerkle said. "It is so vital that our producers are willing to share what they do on a day-to-day basis because it is important to help people understand their challenges and what it is like to be a family farm operating under conditions that are beyond their control."

Buerkle also said that sharing your story can be a family affair. Each member of a family can have a valuable perspective.

"I think that each one of us in a farming family has a role somewhere," Buerkle said. "I would encourage farm wives and farm moms to get involved in some way. We are always looking for good leadership in organizations like the Cotton Board, the National Cotton Council, Cotton Incorporated, and I know there are some opportunities through PCCA to get involved. It is essential that farm wives and farm moms, that everybody in the farming family has an opportunity to tell their story and how different situations impact them because again that creates that connection to whoever is asking the question. It creates the connection between a farming family and somebody who might not understand the importance of a family farm or would just like to know more, so it is important that we are all ready and willing to tell our own part of the story." 🌱



The West Texas Young Farmers Association actively works to provide a voice to young producers and to further the message of agriculture. Board members and scholarship recipients pictured (left to right) are Barrett Brown, Secretary; Hunter Cudd, scholarship recipient; Kirk Martin, member; Lexi Floyd, Treasurer; Jon Williams, member; Rhett Green, Vice President; Mason Becker, President; Tanner Hogue, Reporter; Reese Rowden, member; and Bradley Franke, scholarship recipient. Not pictured: Stetson Hogue, member.



## DO NOT LET ANYONE LOOK DOWN ON YOU BECAUSE YOU ARE YOUNG: WEST TEXAS YOUNG FARMERS ASSOCIATION

When people think of farmers, they think of people who are well-established with years of experience – those that have handled everything mother nature can throw at them for decades, all the while coming out of the storm stronger than before. Yes, farmers are those people, but there are also those just beginning their careers with clear eyes and full hearts that still have many things to learn. Young farmers who have families of their own forging a path in agriculture different than that of generations before them. Farmers who often have their voices disregarded in political circles because of their age. Young farmers who want to affect change and are doing something about it.

STORY AND PHOTO BY BLAIR MCCOWEN

### FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF AGRICULTURE

A revitalization of the Terry County Young Farmers Association that was active in the 1970s and 80s, the West Texas Young Farmers Association is a group of young farmers from Terry, Yoakum, Gaines and Lynn counties keen on advocating for agriculture. Crops represented in its membership include cotton, peanuts, wheat and milo, bringing the advantage of different agricultural experiences to the association. The three main goals of the organization are community involvement, political involvement and educational efforts, all overseen by a nine-member board and senior advisory committee.

"As young producers, we have different challenges that older producers may not necessarily have," said Mason Becker, president of the WTYFA. "In the downturn of the economy, we are looking at a bunch of us younger guys not only financing our livings and our operations, but we are also financing equipment and a lot of challenges that we haven't had the opportunity to grow out of. We want to focus on getting that message out and how the political side of things affects what we do as younger producers. It is no secret that there are less younger producers than there ever has been. If we are going to have a future in agriculture, we are going to have to start shaping that future ourselves."

The WTYFA works to make sure their membership is actively involved and reaps every possible benefit from the seeds they sow.

"As far as our membership base, we just want people to be actively involved in what we are doing," Becker said. "If we have an event going on, anybody and everybody is welcome to come join. If you want to promote the positive

things about agriculture and be involved, that is who we want."

Tanner Hogue, reporter for the association, also said anyone looking to become a member ought to have a passion for agriculture.

"You have to have a passion for what you are doing, what you want to accomplish, and what you want to see agriculture do in the future," Hogue said.

Among the younger farmers in the group, board member Kirk Martin said he has the opportunity to learn from those that are even just a couple of years older than him as well.

"Well, like me being younger than most of these guys, I don't understand a lot of the political stuff or the insurance," Martin said. "I am getting the grasp of it, but having these guys helps me be able to understand what is going on and just learn about it in general."

### START 'EM YOUNG

Helping others does not just happen within the WTYFA. The group also works to grow its roots into the surrounding communities. Lexi Floyd, treasurer of the organization, heads up the educational outreach efforts. After joining the board just last year, she recognized the need to provide children and teachers with some agricultural education. With an educational background in agricultural communications, she was the perfect person for the job.

"This board is very proactive in getting the message [of agriculture] out there, trying to get connected with people, trying to get ahead of the game a little bit," Floyd said. "I have been going into schools doing the Texas Farm Bureau Planting the Seed program and going into kindergarten through junior high classrooms basically teaching plant life cycles, basic science as it relates to agriculture. If we can help the teacher give them the correct perspective and correct mindset and the facts, our roots just go out exponentially after that."

Floyd has also been working with Texas Farm Bureau to expand its educational programs in the WTYFA's area. In addition to visiting schools around the Texas High Plains area, the WTYFA also provides scholarships to high school juniors with an interest in agriculture. Money to fund the scholarships is raised through local community events the association hosts and donations from sponsors. This year, the association was successful in raising \$15,000 for three scholarship recipients, Hunter Cudd, Bradley Franke and Gilbert Perez, who must also complete a job shadowing session as well as a resume and cover letter session with Floyd before receiving their awards.

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**"I THINK WE REPRESENT THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF AGRICULTURE, AND WE ARE TRYING TO BE THAT POSITIVE VOICE. MORE THAN ANYTHING, I THINK AS A WHOLE THAT IS WHAT THE WEST TEXAS YOUNG FARMERS STANDS FOR."**

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When first considering the implementation of a scholarship program, Becker said the decision of whether or not to donate time to the kids' professional careers in addition to money was an easy choice, as the WTYFA provides scholarships to applicants not only interested in attending universities, but vocational schools as well.

"It was almost a no-brainer," Becker said. "Rather than just putting forth the money, why wouldn't we share some of the experiences that we have learned and have others do the same?"

Scholarship recipients Bradley Franke and Hunter Cudd were grateful to have received such a generous award from the association and said it would greatly benefit their futures in agriculture.

"I plan on staying in this community and staying in agriculture," Franke energetically said, "whether it be farming or cattle or what, and this job shadowing does help you decide what you want to do because I have no clue if I want to do ag communications or ag engineering or just ag business, so hopefully this job shadowing will help kind of narrow it down and help me decide."

"We can learn a lot from people who are older than us who have learned from people who are older than them and how the industry works and be able to better communicate that to our friends," Cudd said. "I want to go learn more to help our community, you know, to be better educated about what we do around here."

### ALL THE WAY TO WASHINGTON

Any chance the WTYFA gets, the group is politically active in helping make sure farmers are protected. No matter if at the local community level, on Capitol Hill in D.C., or at agricultural summits across the state, a member of the association is present making sure young farmers have a voice.

Board member Jon Williams said the association's political activities stemmed from the group's desire to have its voice heard when it came to farm policy, crop insurance, and any other program farmers need to survive a downturn.

"We wanted a voice and we didn't feel like, I guess in a similar situation, that we were getting that," Williams said. "We have made a lot of contacts with congressmen and other people and some organizations like the National Cotton Council and the Southwest Council of Agribusiness. As this grows, that voice gets larger and they are beginning to contact us. We also contact them and tell them here is what we need and what we are going through."

Rhett Green, vice president of the association, leads the charge on political action. As the nephew of a farmer from Meadow, Texas, who rode his tractor all the way to Washington to advocate for agriculture, Green has been led by family example to understanding how important Washington's support of farmers is.

"When Tanner, Stetson and I went to an ag summit in Fort Worth, people actually listened and wanted to talk to us," Green said proudly. "They were actually excited that young guys really cared and wanted to do something about it. In all honesty, whether we get something done or not, if we just sit on our tails, you can see what happened when cotton got kicked out of the Farm Bill."

Echoing the importance of sharing the struggles and needs of young farmers with political leaders, Becker said that sometimes advocating can be difficult, but once a person finds people do care about the struggles of others, it makes it worthwhile.

"For a long time I didn't think my voice was worth hearing," Becker said. "I thought that I was the younger guy and people didn't care about what I was saying, and I was wrong. People in higher places do want to know what it is like for us. It just takes speaking up, having a voice and being willing to kind of let them know what we are going through."

Lightheartedly, Becker further expanded on his views about farm policy.

"Farm policy is kind of like a good wife, you take it for granted until it is not there," Becker said with a chuckle. "People take farm policy for granted because if we don't take care of our ag producers now, if that farm policy goes away and we can no longer compete against our foreign competition, we will go out of business and nobody will notice until their food and clothing prices skyrocket. People think it is a scare tactic used by farmers but it is a reality. We compete in a free economy, not a fair economy. There is a difference."

Dan Jackson, senior advisory committee member to the WTYFA, said farm policy and other farmer support programs are pertinent to allowing the next generation of agriculturists to confidently continue their operations.

"These guys do more with less than anybody else in the world," Jackson said. "They aren't subsidized, their fuel isn't bought for them, their implements aren't purchased for them. They do more with less, they have embraced technology and it shows. If we don't have good sound farm policy, we could lose a whole generation and you can't get that back."

Reese Rowden, WTYFA board member echoed Jackson's comments, saying that the amount of money it would take for an individual to start sustainably farming from scratch would be in the millions. On the same token, board secretary Barrett Brown said others will never understand the struggles of farmers unless someone from within the industry is willing to meet them where they are and educate them on such issues.

### THE FUTURE OF THE INDUSTRY

"Just to put it simply," Becker said, "I think we represent the present and future of agriculture, and we are trying to be that positive voice. More than anything, I think as a whole that is what the West Texas Young Farmers stands for. You are never going to move forward - you are never going to progress - if you don't have a group of people moving in the same direction." 🌱

**"DON'T DO WHAT  
looks good, DO WHAT  
is right."**

- THE MANDUJANO BROTHERS



Mando Mandujano



Tony Mandujano

**Photos and Story  
By Jayci Cave**

### Family. Hard Work. Dedication. Strong Values.

The Mandujano brothers and their siblings were raised with these principles at the center of focus. Mando, Tony and Beto Mandujano, in Coyanosa, Texas, have a diversified farm in West Texas that allows them to not only raise crops, but their families as well. Along with producing cotton, they raise cattle, own a restaurant/store, and grow onions, watermelon, cantaloupe, pumpkins, alfalfa, and hay. Their farming operation is deeply rooted in family values as the Mandujano brothers try to live by the foundation of morals and hard work created by their parents, Alvaro and Cecilia Mandujano.

Tony said farming runs deep in his family's heritage. He said his grandparents farmed in Mexico and when his dad came to the United States that is what he wanted to do. In 1977, Alvaro moved his family to Coyanosa to take advantage of an opportunity to work for a farmer. Later, he had the chance to buy land of his own and begin building his business. In 1993, three of the 11 siblings formed a farming partnership, Mandujano Brothers, around the time they graduated from

Angelo State University. They have since grown their operation into what it is today covering thousands of acres of land. Tony said without their parents they would not be where they are today.

"My dad has always said if you can help somebody, then help somebody," Tony said. "Be fair. Don't do what looks good, do what is right. That is what we always try to do, we always try to be fair to our employees and customers. Believe it or not, there might be times that we are wrong and if we are wrong we will admit it. Hopefully, I will teach that to my kids, to be fair and don't try to make a dollar. Do what is right and at the end of the day you are going to be better off."

Mando agreed with his brother, Tony, and said their parents were very honest and tried to raise them right.

"None of us fell too far off the deep end," Mando said. "Mom and Dad, it was always really important to them for us to learn how to work. We grew up as kids working on the farm at a very young age

*Continued on page 14...*





JUST WATCHING THINGS GROW,  
AND THERE IS ONE THING THAT  
WE NEVER QUIT DOING HERE -

**we never  
quit  
learning.**

*...continued from page 13.*

and that is part of the reason we love it. Nowadays, there is a lot of work still and Mom says, 'Son you are working too hard, don't work too much,' and it's like I told her, I said, 'Mom you taught us this,' and she said 'Well I wish I wouldn't have been so hard on you.' But there are no regrets from me. I love what I do and I love what they taught me."

The Mandujano brothers work well together. Each plays their own role in making sure every aspect of the operation runs smoothly. They have around 20 full-time employees and employ between 130-150 people during harvest depending on the year. Mando said they not only enjoy working with family each day, but they also have a deep love for farming.

"I just enjoy farming," Mando said. "Just watching things grow, and there is one thing that we never quit doing here - we never quit learning. There are always new things you can do to improve things and there are always new varieties that come out so farming is kind of a challenge. It is never the same every year. You always have to tweak a little here and there."

Tony echoed Mando's comments and said being happy is the most important thing.

"Well you know, it is a lot of hard work, but there are a lot of rewards to it," Tony said. "You get to make your own schedule and see the progress. A lot of times people look at it and say, 'These poor guys, they are doing this and doing that,' but everybody has to do something. As long as you are happy and enjoy what you are doing, and make a little profit, that is even better."

Mando also said managing such a diversified farming operation requires extensive planning.

"We have to manage and plan for the following season because we are basically planting all year long," Mando said. "We start planting in September and every two weeks we are seeding onions until February. Shortly after that we are seeding melons



and it is every two or three weeks we are seeding. Of course, the cotton window is really short. It is mid-May to early June and then we are done, but we start up with the fall melon and the pumpkin programs. It is kind of interesting."

Out of all the crops they grow, each brother has their favorite. Tony said he enjoys onions because they are only harvested once, while Mando said his favorite would have to be watermelon.

"I get a little excited about the onions and cantaloupe, but I like the marketing side of the watermelons a little better," Mando said. "We have a lot of good, higher-end customers such as Kroger, Walmart, HEB, Safeway, United and Albertsons. So, I personally like the melon a little better. Onions are really demanding because you harvest it one time and you are done, but it is a big one time, whereas melons are a little more forgiving if you get behind. You don't have to harvest everything at one time. There are pros and cons to everything and I would consider that a pro. And, of course to eat too, melons are my favorite."

There are ups and downs to farming, but Tony said to him being sustainable is making it through each and coming out on the other side.

"Sustainability to me would be saying there are going to be some tough years, some bad years, but you have to be able to hang on so when the good years come you are ready to go," Tony said. "Most of these farms that we farm, we grew up planting onions in them for wages, picking cantaloupes and doing all that, so we know the farms inside-out. I tell people there is no such thing as luck. Luck is when opportunity meets preparation. You have to be prepared. Sometimes you have a rough year and sometimes you have a good year, and just because you had a good year doesn't mean it is going to be like that every year."

The Mandujano brothers are members of Cayanosa Co-op Gin and PCCA. Mando said cotton co-ops are valuable to their operation even though their cotton acres vary year to year. He said both co-ops help add value to their operation whenever possible.

Mando said he enjoys having his family close and getting to farm with his brothers and parents each year. He also said he loves seeing his daughter grow up in agriculture.

"I only have one little girl and she says she is going to be a farmer when she grows up," Mando said. "She loves animals, she loves going out to see the crops once they are done. She especially loves the vegetables. She gets excited about the little baby melons and all that. She is a little young right now and I'm not sure which way she is going to go. If she wants to be a farmer that would tickle me to death, but if she doesn't, of course that would suit me fine too."

Surrounded by the fruits of their labor and the love of their family, for the Mandujano brothers the cantaloupes they grow aren't the only thing that makes their life sweet. 🍉



# Internships Open Doors to Future Co-op Employment

BY JOHN JOHNSON



Tommy Engelke,  
TACC Executive Vice President



DeLynn Butler, Communications Manager  
at Ag Producers Co-op

Many managers believe there are few substitutes for experience for job applicants. Less training is required, and new employees quickly become productive. Internships available to college students can provide valuable, hands-on experience while enabling companies to identify future employees. Since 2010, 53 college students have gained such experience through summer internships coordinated by the Texas Agricultural Cooperative Council.

"Our Education Committee conceived the idea and presented it to our Board of Directors," TACC Executive Vice President Tommy Engelke recalled. "They said 'We need to do our part to bring labor into

the agriculture community,' and I admired that," Engelke said. "It was not because the committee saw other organizations and companies offering internships."

The TACC Board, at that time, included two agricultural economics professors, one from Texas Tech University and one from Texas A&M University. Thus, it was logical to search for intern prospects at those universities. The first year, one student from each university was selected and placed at co-ops in El Campo and Olton, Texas, but interest among other co-ops quickly grew, and students at additional universities were considered. The second year, five interns were selected and placed.

To help generate interest and identify prospective interns, Engelke has visited nine universities since 2010 where he serves as a guest lecturer for agriculture classes. During his lecture, Engelke explains the co-op business model.

"The students, as well as some professors, often are surprised to learn farmers and ranchers can participate in the entire supply chain through cooperatives and add value to their crops and livestock," Engelke said. "In some cases, they are shocked to learn companies like Sunkist and Welch's are farmer-owned co-ops." All internship applicants are guaranteed an interview with a panel of judges consisting of Engelke, professors, co-op managers and former interns. Whitney Curry, TACC's Manager of Marketing and Communications, helps coordinate the internship program.

"We thoroughly screen the applicants to ensure a good match with the host co-ops," Engelke explained. "We want to set this up for success, not failure," he added. Thus far, 18 former interns found full-time employment at co-ops after graduating from college, and 11 continue to work for co-ops. One of those is DeLynn Butler at Ag Producers Co-op's Bushland, Texas, facility. Butler attended West Texas A&M University and earned a bachelor's degree in Agricultural Media and Communications.

"I spent my summer internship at Spade Co-op Gin plus two weeks at TACC's office in Austin," she said. "The experience I gained absolutely led to my job as Ag Producers' Communications Manager, and I encourage college students to apply for the TACC internship." The South Region of PCCA's Warehouse Division started hosting a TACC intern in 2017.

"It's a really good program because it focuses on the younger generation," said PCCA South Regional Manager Danny Helms. "They do everything an hourly employee does here at the warehouse, and it gives us a chance to identify future employees," he added.

For 2018, almost 30 applications were received, and six students were chosen. The interns are paid, and some form of housing is provided by the host co-ops. They also are invited to two TACC events; the annual Managers Conference in Ruidoso, New Mexico, and to Austin where they learn about the legislative and regulatory processes of state government.

"During their visit to Austin, they participate in a comprehensive mock interview," Engelke said. "If they can pass this interview, they can pass any interview," he said. "This internship program is a great investment for TACC and our members, and we treat each intern like they were our own children." 🌱



## Let's Get Social

### SOCIAL MEDIA'S PLACE IN AGRICULTURE

BY BLAIR MCCOWEN

**#Yes!** Believe it or not, social media has many uses in the world of agriculture. Yet another tool that allows people to share their stories with the masses, there is a platform for everyone and every need. Think of social media as a networking tool that takes the effort out of physically building connections – an effective agricultural message can reach thousands of people within minutes, whereas meeting thousands of people would take a lifetime.

Share the story. Educate others about agriculture. Bring a different way of thinking into the 21st century. Will it work – better yet, does it work? Yes.

In recent years, researchers have begun to look into how people interact with social media content as well as why some posts reach more people than others. Researchers from Stanford University found posts that are relatable, have personality, and are highly visual stand out among the rest, proving that with these characteristics any message can transcend generations and cultures. Further, researchers in the United Kingdom specifically looked into social media use in their agricultural realm and found the following:

"Increased information flow is important if the industry is to survive and communicate with suppliers, customers and consumers. This is partly in response to public and political pressures for quality control, but also because of the need for sustainable intensification of agribusiness in response to a growing population, resource utilization and environmental impacts."

Though in a different climate, the findings of this research still hold true for American agriculture. As members of society desire to learn more about the sources of their food and fiber, agriculturists are presented with a unique opportunity to provide them with such and to tell their story on their terms. Researchers also said social media has revolutionized the way businesses communicate with consumers, and agriculture must follow the trend in order to achieve maximum transparency, engagement and trust with the public. The proof is in the pudding – social media has a place in agriculture.

Many agricultural businesses are already utilizing social media to communicate directly with their audiences and alleviate concerns about genetically modified organisms, lack of sustainable farming practices, pesticide applications and much more. All that is left to do is for producers to take to social media and do the same – debunk myths, share the triumphs and trials of farm life, and educate those outside the industry, but most of all, affect change in a way that is quite literally at our fingertips. 🌱

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