

Mayville Grower Putting Business Degree to Work

The long, cold, wet spring is finally behind Brent Kohls. He is caught up with crop spraying, and harvest still is a few weeks away, so on a warm summer day, the first-generation farmer is sitting in his farm office north of Clifford catching up on bookwork.

The desk part of Kohls' job is what he expected to be doing after he graduated from college. It's the farming part that he did not anticipate for his career.

"My dad was an elevator manager in Minnesota," Kohls said. "I kind of grew up around elevators." During high school, he helped his father, Orval, load trains, clean bins and keep books at the Wheaton (Minn.) Dumont Co-op.

After he graduated from high school in 1992, Kohls attended Mayville (N.D.) State University and earned a business degree. In 1996, he moved to Minneapolis to be a broker for American Ag Co.

Kohls married his wife Jennifer in 1997 and then, for the next 10 years, farmed with Jennifer's brother, Mark Newman, and her father, Rick Newman. Kohls also marketed corn and ethanol for the former Alchem plant in Grafton for about the first 10 years he was farming.

When the ethanol plant closed several years ago,



Kohls has hosted several international trade teams on his Clifford, N.D. farm. This team from Asia sampled soybeans for quality.

Kohls began farming full time. As an elevator manager's son, marketing and brokering grain were familiar to him. However, farming was not.

"I didn't grow up on a tractor," Kohls said. During the last 17 years since he began farming, he's learned that the capriciousness of Mother Nature's weather, iron chlorosis in soybeans and weed resistance are just some production challenges that farmers

face.

However, learning to operate equipment is the easier part of farming, he believes.

"The production isn't the challenge; it's the marketing. Marketing still takes bushels, but you've got to know how to protect yourself and that it is a business." The skills he learned as a grain broker are an asset, Kohls believes.

"It gives you a better understanding of risk

management." Although he exchanges an office chair for a seat behind the wheel of a tractor or truck during some of the farming season, Kohls still spends a fair amount of time behind a desk marketing his grain and managing his business.

He works with his brother-in-law and father-in-law, but each of them operates his farm businesses independently. Together, they grow about 4,400 acres of crops. This year, the acreage is divided about equally between soybeans and corn. Kohls Farm and Newman Farm also sell Pioneer seed and operate a trucking business.

Kohls believes that another important part of farming is to be involved in grower organizations such as the North Dakota Soybean Growers Association. Kohls represents District 5 on the NDSGA Board of Directors and serves on its industry relations committee, helping with events such as the N.D. Soybean Growers Golf Tournament.

He previously served as a member of the executive committee and traveled to Washington, D.C., to talk about issues such as the farm bill. He wanted to serve on the soybean board because he believes it is important for farmers to have their voices heard.

"I understand the

importance of what farmers do. I do it because I believe their voice is heard, and they make a difference in some of the lobbying.”

Although he didn’t plan to have a career in farming, he enjoys it.

Kohls says, “I’m using my degree.” It just is not the way in which he originally expected. He was flexible enough to shift gears and adapt when he was presented with an opportunity to farm instead of being the kind of businessman who goes to an office every day.

One of the things he likes about farming is that things change from year to year.

“Every year is different. You don’t always know.”

For example, this year, the soybean harvest will



likely be later than it typically is because field conditions were wet this spring and because temperatures remained cool after the seed was planted. It has been far

from an ideal growing season, and Kohls acknowledges that, when harvest begins, it will be “push, push, push,” but he is, nonetheless, looking forward to it.

“I like harvest the most. You can see what you’ve accomplished and see what you get in the end.”