

David Albin seeks new alternatives in old crop

By Tony Hooker

David A. Albin, the President and Chairman of the Board of the Longview Capital Corporation, knows a thing or two about agriculture.

After all, the 1981 University of Illinois graduate grew up on a farm Southwest of Newman, where his family ran a diversified Ag operation.

"We had hogs, growing up," Albin said, in addition to corn and beans. "We had cattle also," he added. "And we had sheep. In fact, my dad was the president of the Shropshire Sheep association when I was growing up."

Albin's operation today still has 10-15 head of Hereford cattle, most years. "When my son was in school, we probably had 100 head," he added. Today, the farm's main production centers

around corn and Soybeans. "We raise mostly food grade corn for Frito-Lay and Stine seed beans," Albin stated.

So, when one of the area's Ag leaders tries something new in the world of farming, people take notice.

And that was the case last growing season when Albin and other area producers tried their hand at industrial hemp production.

"We tried about half an acre," Albin said. "I would rate it a learning failure," Albin quipped when asked about his initial foray into the project. "Several of us went into this together, and we got three or four different varieties of seed, and the one I received really wasn't a good variety. I think weeds were more prevalent than hemp," he added.

Hemp has to have a good, solid stand in order to with-



stand pressure from invasive plants, and proper planting is imperative. "We were neophytes and really didn't know where or how to plant it," Albin noted. "We just didn't get a good stand. It is very sensitive."

As noted, Albin learned from his first attempt. So much so, in fact, that he is definitely interested in making another attempt, albeit with some modifications. "We're seriously considering

the plants that produce CBD oil this year," Albin said. Unlike Industrial Hemp, which is drilled as a general rule, the plants that produce CBD oil are planted in rows, like corn. Because weeds are the main nemesis and there aren't herbicides to be used, plastic is often placed between the rows, which is a very labor-intensive process. "I was on Facebook and saw an ad for someone who will come and plant it for you," Albin stated. He also noted that a farmer near Carmi, Illinois had planted using this method during the previous growing season.

Why the interest in Industrial Hemp? According to Albin, basically every product that is made from a tree can be made from hemp, and it is much more renewable than lumber, making it a much more environmen-

tally friendly product. Hemp can be mixed with plastic to make a biodegradable product, as well. "BMW and John Deere use products made with hemp," Albin noted. "There's even a plant in Kentucky that is using hemp to make boards & lumber."

One common misconception that Albin wanted to clarify is the difference between Industrial Hemp and Marijuana. "Marijuana contains the intoxicating agent tetrahydrocannabinol, while Industrial Hemp cannot contain more than .03 percent THC. "Our product is tested as soon as we begin the harvest," Albin noted, "and if it contains more than .03 percent, the entire field must be eradicated."

Even with so much going for it, including an opportunity to make significantly more per acre than traditional

crops in addition to the aforementioned renewability and environmental advantages, there are still significant barriers to it becoming an option for area farmers. China and other Asian markets have a significant hold on the current market, but according to Albin, the biggest barrier is more regional in nature. "We need to get more processing plants in the region," Albin said. "There just aren't enough to handle what could take place."

As for the future of Industrial Hemp and CBD Oil production, Albin remains optimistic. "It could become a real catalyst if we can get industries to invest." Albin stated adamantly. "Farmers are intelligent enough to figure out how to produce it and make it a viable third crop option."

NU AG displaying three generations of excellence

By Tony Hooker

NU AG's Rudy Bergner and his son Mike have over 75 years of experience in the AG industry between them, and now Mike's son Dayton, who has been helping with the family operation for years, is studying at the University of Illinois, preparing to take a more active role in the business. I recently spoke with Rudy and Mike (Dayton was at school at the time) about the business, what it's like to work with family, and a whole lot more.

Since Dayton's not here today, let's talk about him! How active is his role in the company?

<MB> Right now, he's just in school. He helps with plot planting and summer tasks. In the spring he helps with the planting process and then not a lot happens in the summer.

Mr. Bergner, when did you start the company?

<MB> We started the company together in 91, and then became incorporated in 92.

What was your background prior to starting NU AG?

<RB> I had been with Cargill for 20 years, and I worked for Funk's G as a district sales manager for five years before starting the company.

What was your impetus to start it?

<RB> Mostly, I wanted to start my own business. I had a good clientele following me when I changed companies once before, so I thought it would be a good time to start a business and bring Mike into it, working together and keeping it in the family.

Now you've got Dayton getting involved as well, right?

<RB> Yep, Dayton's been around us every summer. He pretty well understands what we're doing, and he's ready to come in when he graduates out of Ag school at the University of Illinois.

Mike, what was your background prior to coming to NU Ag?

<MB> I went to the U of I, also, graduating in '88. Then I went to Chicago and sold for Ernest and Julio Gallo. We worked through distributors. I worked with Romano Brothers, selling Gallo wines. After that, I went to work for a printing paper company in California for about two years, out in LA. I was single and having fun.

How much has the industry changed in the nearly thirty years that you've been in business?

<MB> It's huge. The technologies have changed so much. When we first came into the industry, it was conventional hybrids, conventional beans. There were no GMO's in any of the seed that we sold at the time. Then they came out with Roundup ready beans in the mid-nineties. That was the first genetically modified seed. We started selling those varieties around 1996.

So, are these modified products a good thing? Have all these changes been for the best?

<MB> Yes, I think they are. When we first started, we had customers who wanted 175-bushel yields, and now days if you get less than 200, it's a crop failure. Now days, a lot of our growers are averaging 220-230 bushels per acre for their whole farm.

<RB> When we started NU AG, we were selling seed corn for about \$60 a bag, and now days it's about \$200 a bag more, and the yields have come up, specifically because of the technology. The yields have come up markedly for both Corn and Soybeans.

For someone like me with very limited ag experience, they make seed that is pest resistant as well as roundup ready, right?

<MB> Yes, they make both pest and herbicide resistant varieties. There are Rootworm, Corn borer, Earworm resident varieties. The good thing about it is the health factor is built into the plant, so we don't have to spray pesticides on our fields, because it's built into it. People don't have to eat or breathe those pesticides like they did back years ago. It's really an excellent situation for everyone. We don't have to put on the pesticides and herbicides that we used to have to use.

In general, what happens to the corn and beans that your growers produce?

<RB> It goes to the local elevators and is shipped out to different locations. Generally it goes south for poultry feed. It generally becomes feed for livestock.

Do you have any food grade varieties?

We do. Newman elevator takes in food grade and they clean it and bag it for places that make tortilla chips and that sort of thing. Yellow food grade hybrids, not the white. We don't have the white food grade hybrids that Frito Lay takes in. Most of your stuff is going to feed livestock. It's for cattle, hogs and poultry, mostly.

Where do you see the industry heading in the future?

It's going to run more and more into the biotech industry, although it's starting to come back to the non-GMO varieties. There's a market for organic, and there's a market for non-GMO products that is expanding and growers like the premium that they're paid for those products. The biotechnology, I believe, is here to stay. It's going to rotate around pests and the herbicides that we're going to use. It used to be just Roundup ready beans, then they came out with a Liberty bean, which is another product, and now they have a Liberty-Roundup bean and a 2,4-D Roundup bean and they also have an extend

Roundup bean. There are several different platforms of beans that you can spray Roundup on all of them and then spray other chemicals as well. I think that there will be four different platforms in the future.

<RB> Weeds are the battle.

Mother nature tends to fight back and make roundup resistant weeds, right?

<MB> Exactly. Yes. That's why they have to keep changing. The weeds can adapt and eventually produce a seed that doesn't get bothered when its sprayed with Roundup or 2,4-D.

How about your future? How long do you see yourselves being part of the business?

<MB> We'll be here as long as we can. Dayton will be around so he can learn the whole thing. He'll have to take several years to learn what he needs to know. The business has changed a lot, for us. Servicing our customers is still the most important thing to us, to advise our customers with any sort of agromonomical advice we can give them. Then there's the day to day operation of our business. Our customers still like to see us, and I don't know what else we'd do, so we'll just be here. <laughs>

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omous tractor and I always show a video to my classes and a lot of them say that they can't see it happening, because if you're a farmer, you love to drive your tractor. Some of my fondest memories of my grandfather are

crawling up in his International Combine after kindergarten class. He had a roll of paper towels behind his seat, and I'd use that as a pillow and take a nap. My grandma was a stay at home mom, but he considered her an equal partner in their farming operation. She would drive the grain to the elevator and sometimes I would ride along with her. I was with a farmer

up here, and he asked me to ride to the elevator with him, and when I got in, it smelled just like my grain truck back home! I almost cried. My husband says that if he could make a candle that smelled just like that, he'd make a fortune! <smiles> There's nothing like being in a piece of machinery.

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