## Organic Farming

## Season 1, Episode 21

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**Olivia Amundson**: Alright, welcome back to another episode of Cattle HQ. Today I am joined with my colleague Kiernan Brandt as well as an organic farmer out of Madison, SD, Aaron Johnson. Aaron would you mind just giving us a brief introduction of who you are and a little bit of what you do before we get this episode rolling.

**Aaron Johnson:** I appreciate it Olivia, Aaron Johnson I'm an organic farmer from Madison, South Dakota we farm south of Madison and from what I'm told it's been organic since 1976 before I was even born. I guess the way it started was that my dad and his brother, Uncle Bernie decided that they were going to give organic farming, a try. My dad was a little wishy washy about the whole organic thing he saw that a guy could go out there and spray some chemicals and the weeds would die he thought that was pretty neat. And now, mind you like, I said 1976 there were some pretty harsh chemicals out there some really bad synthetic fertilizers, that are quite caustic. So my uncle Bernie solve that problem in one saying he told my dad morally you don't have a right to put that on the land, and then right then in there, my dad said okay we're organic. So my dad recalls, one of the last chemicals they ever sprayed was Furadan and if anybody knows anything about Furadan it's an oxygen inhibitor and also can break down your nervous system, so they would go out there and spray Furadan over the top of a cornfield with an airplane and find dead birds, dead raccoons let alone the microbial life was suffering from it and it still was only about 75% effective so that was one of the major reasons why they decided to become organic. We've learned a lot of things, since the 1970s and again like I say this was way before I was born. And we've got a pretty good handle on things. I guess I can give you a quick overview of what our normal crop rotation is there, unless you got other questions?

**Olivia Amundson:** No, absolutely go ahead and you can just continue to tell us a little bit about yourself and yeah well we'll get questions from there.

**Kiernan Brandt:** Yeah just tell us a little bit like kind of what how you guys rotate when you guys do with the stuff that you produce. I'm stoked to have you on because, as our listeners are quite aware, I know, absolutely nothing about farming and just blatantly trying to do my best at scraping by so I'm always intrigued to learn a little bit more.

**Aaron Johnson:** Well I'm glad you mentioned that Kiernan a little shameless plug we do a Johnson farms tour every about every August, the end of July/August time so keep your eyes and ears open for that we've had traditionally around 50 to 60 people such as yourself that are interested in organic farming and how we do it. Now what we do doesn't always work for the next guy and in the next area, so you really got to develop what works for you what your work efficiencies are and equipment available to you so there's a lot of pieces that are involved in that so again little shameless plug there. We're happy to take people on our Charter bus, we rent the Charter bus and show them the fields and granted it's a snapshot in time at that time, so it is it's a season long it's a multi season faceted, you know type of operation that we have. So getting into the operation itself, if we were to take over a piece of ground first thing is that it takes 36 months from the last known prohibited substance to be called or again a gap in farming organically, and you have to abide by the organic standards which are set forth by the Federal Government. And once you reach those guidelines and after 36 months, then you're able to sell your product as organic otherwise it's subject to the conventional market. I like to say that our field’s year number one season number one we plant oats under seeded with alfalfa. After we harvest the oats off of that in the fall of year number one the alfalfa is waiting for us in your number two and we keep it there in year number three as well. So that's the first three years of our of our six year crop rotation. On the fourth year we raise soybeans on that ground. And then, after the soybeans are harvested will sprinkle some winter rye out there and chisel plow that in as green manure cover crop. And now, year number five rolls around in the springtime we'll incorporate that winter rye crop using a field cultivator and plant our corn on those acres and then in year number six is back to soybeans. Now we're at year number seven we start the process over. So we have a six year crop rotation and we raise four cash crops on there, and the winter rye is a cover crop. So, this process has been developed by my cousins with great success. Now there is still some hand weeding that still needs to be done it's not perfect, but neither is anything else out there, that I know so. There's a lot of benefits to this type of rotation. All of our fields are broken up into one sixth of this rotation so it's not like all of the entire farm is in oats this year, the next year it's not all in alfalfa. So it's all divided equally into the six year rotation, so the beauty of that is that well there's a number of things and I'll probably forget some things I kind of wish my cousin Charlie was here with me to help explain it as well, but it really is spreads out your work load throughout the entire season you're not so much in a time crunch with everything getting done all at once, when it's time to plant, when it's time to sow, when it's time to harvest. So all summer all spring summer and fall long you're busy with doing something, and it spreads things out. It also is has a great impact on reducing weeds and diseases and insects here you're constantly keeping those pests at bay by keeping things guessing.

Another aspect of it is that in our situation we have small fields and small equipment which is a good advantage to us. Some of our largest fields, there might be a handful of them at 65 to 70 acres but I bet if you took a calculator to it, on average, our fields are around 40 acres. So in one quarter of land, you could have four different fields, so you have 40 acres of corn right next to it, you have 40 acres of alfalfa and 40 acres away you got soybeans 40 acres away you got oats. The looting to that six year rotation as well you know I'd said that we have oats, alfalfa, and alfalfa well the first three years of that crop is all solid seeded crops. So when the erosion or water erosion is greatly reduced by having 50% of our acres in solid seeded crops and a good chunk of that is there in the winter time as well to prevent any of that wind erosion during the during the winter months when years like this year there isn't a whole lot of snow cover in our area to hold the hold the soils in place. And then the last three years are enrolled crops so which requires a little more tillage as well as a mechanical work there, but in all of our soil tests were able to maintain and increase organic matter we're roughly around 5% plus in our organic matter, so we have healthy crop residues saw the microbes in the soil, the earthworm has plenty to eat and thrive and I would say the correct balance of pests available, we're not 100% pest free but they just don't surpass thresholds. You ask anybody you go out there with a sweep net and start counting insects that you gather in a sweep net they just don't get out of control in our fields.

**Kiernan Brandt:** Does that fluctuate from year to year, or does that stay relatively consistent, you can keep them pretty controlled through that type of management?

**Aaron Johnson:** This process this six year rotation has been in effect for 25-30 years, if not longer and it doesn't really change with the what the markets, the only thing that really changes is the field sizes, as the as the years go through, we may have a couple of fields, some larger fields that may happen to fall into a soybean production, so we have a few more bushels of soybeans to harvest a few more acres but otherwise we really stick to the crop rotation schedule.

**Kiernan Brandt:** I imagine yeah that rotation had to come with a lot of trial and error to get that kind of dialed in and figure out what was the most ideal, especially when you sounds like you guys were reclaiming some stuff and getting it certified as organic. Is that, like a is that a third party process that they have to like come in and audit that and make sure that everything is up to snuff.

**Aaron Johnson:** Yeah, so there is a national organic standard and then there's private companies that administer these organic certifications. So I have to pay on my farm, I have to pay just about $2,000 a year to go through all of the paperwork in have a third party person come out here to prove that I don't use chemicals on my farm so seems a little backwards to me but I'll digress.

**Kiernan Brandt:** there's always hoops to jump through yeah that's for sure. So you mentioned that you start with rye and alfalfa was that right?

**Aaron Johnson:** Oats and alfalfa.

**Kiernan Brandt:** Oats and alfalfa. And so, how is that really streamlined your guys’ rotation in maintaining I guess when you're converting stuff to that organic production system in really setting it up to be successful and then just kind of transitioning it into being a productive functioning portion of your farm I guess.

**Aaron Johnson:** Sure, if we were to take over some conventional land we look back on their history and depending on what they've been growing in the past, if it was a corn and soybean rotation we don't automatically say we're going to plant, all of this to oats and alfalfa we look back, maybe they had alfalfa on that ground, maybe it was a CRP ground. Traditionally CRP ground that comes out of the CRP contract the conservation reserve contract, a lot of those acres are already certified organic because they've surpassed that 36 month threshold unknowingly. So some of this ground they decided not to renew their conservation reserve program acres in and decide to farm it again, well that's a great opportunity to consider organic farming, so it now your previous crop was grass so maybe you want to consider as a broad leaf crop like soy beans. So I kind of forgot your question I got a little sidetracked there.

**Kiernan Brandt:** No that's pretty thrifty I hadn't even thought about that that's a that's a good I guess that's a great way to have some unmolested, undisturbed acreage that is ready to go out there and be productive if it's done nothing but how's duck nests and roosters for the last decade. No, I am I was really just wanting to get on so I mean I guess one advantage of doing things in this type of rotation is probably, I guess, like, for me, being a young guy with limited farming experience and not having a farming operation to return to at any point. The idea of having to purchase expensive equipment to have to go out and deliver nutrients to the field is a pretty daunting concept to me, so how I guess how does this doing it, the way that you guys do it through your rotation how does that set you guys up better to manage the long term health of that ground.

**13:55 Aaron Johnson:** Yeah I got distracted because you, you were saying a young guy it's yourself. I don't have a good answer I'm sorry I'm digressing from your question again, but I really don't have a good answer for an individual that has a real desire to come and farm I feel terrible because it is really expensive to farm, the land values the equipment values. Especially now, the used market on equipment is astronomical and the land is with it as well, I wished, I had a better answer for you. But I honestly I really feel like royalty, I really feel like I had the right last name and I was born into a kingdom I it was I hate saying that I don't want to say that stuff because I know there's better farmers out there and they may live in the cities and they may not have the capital, but they got the time and the talent and the energy to do it. I really feel like I was put into a good position here and I don't know if I really deserve it honestly. I think that there's others there's the other organic farmers that are way better than I could ever be and I'm not trying to be self-deprecating or anything like that either I just is this terrible that things are so expensive and the money that it takes, the capital so um so anyway, I get I apologize.

**Kiernan Brandt:** That's why we do it on this type of platform is we have time to digress and talk about whatever we want.

**Aaron Johnson:** Yeah, so I guess if someone does have a burning desire, the best thing to do is build relationships with the with the landowners and just work your hardest and get involved in that way, so it's not impossible, but it's going to take some good hard work and some good luck on your side, and you know with, with luck, is when opportunity meets the experience and it's just those opportunities that evolved from all of that so.

**Kiernan Brandt:** That's right and being able to capitalize on it, no, I think I think you raise a great point, I think one of the themes that we're going to be able to observe over this next generation and agriculture is really kind of some segmentation, some separating of the men from the boys and who can adapt on the fly and be innovative and creative and stay relative in their production practices and do it in a way that keeps them profitable and yeah it's definitely going to be an interesting uphill battle for those that are coming into it with without some of those resources that make it easier to transition and get stuff off the ground.

**Aaron Johnson:** You know earlier you're talking about our rotation as well, I believe this kind of answers your question. So the beauty about the rotation, is that the physical characteristics of these crops that we raise if you were to draw it out on a map I realize it's a podcast, but if you were to draw it out in the graph not a map, but if you graph it out, say you put your crops on the left hand side and then across the top you put some of the characteristics of a like a cool season grasses versus warm season grass, cool season legumes, broad leaf crops the solid seeded versus the row crops. Once you graph that out, you can start checking off a lot of these boxes and the more boxes that you check off wherever say oats intersects with solid seeded crop you put a check box there soybeans is a legume crop and it's a row crop you put another check mark in that box and the more check marks that you can get the better off you are. Oats under seeded with alfalfa you can plant that very early in the season, so when we feel like it's fit to go we're going to put that oats alfalfa in the ground it's a cool season grass, it can handle, it wants that those cool nights to stimulate its growth. We've learned that with corn and soybean planting you really just got to wait we don't like putting anything in our area until after mother's day so my cousin says his best advice on planting organic corn and soybeans during the month of May is to don't do it go take a fishing trip, just get away it's really hard seeing the neighbors flying up and down the field but we've learned that corn is a warm season grass and soybeans they do well with the heat as well. We've learned waiting for that soil temperature to get nice and warm and have good warm days ahead of you that the crop will outcompete the weeds and we've tried planting before where it's cool or you think it's going to be warm but it ends up turning cool and the crop just stalls out and the weeds just keep on going that gets real frustrating.

**Olivia Amundson:** Well you had mentioned that you what percentage of organic matter, did you say you have?

**Aaron Johnson:** We're hovering that 5%.

**Olivia Amundson:** So you've already you've done some of the work to get some of that moisture retention in that soil and so waiting until it does get warmer is probably beneficial as well to at least in my mind and to me it's really interesting to see how yes, you guys farm organic, but you really gotten into this kind of rotational or not even so much cover crop, but just almost, I guess, in a way cover crops, maybe, maybe I'm getting way in the weeds there but to start building that organic matter in the soil health and I don't know it's almost like you're combining, that it's not even that you're combining the two worlds, I think everybody should be thinking about that but I think there's benefits both ways.

**Kiernan Brandt:** And you guys are eliminating inputs by combining those things and making one crop tie into the next crop to benefit the soils resiliency to winter to benefit the soil microbes presence that following spring, you know it's that systems, thinking that we always love to circle back to when we're when we're talking about extension things but really that that forward thinking and setting not thinking about that snapshot in time but thinking about what the snapshots going look like next season.

**Olivia Amundson:** Yeah and I'm just like just more recently dabbled in cover crops and soil health, and you know organic matter and it's like the more you learn the more questions you have and the less you really know about it all, and so it's just fun like talking to you and hearing how you organic farm but you're really truly taking care of the soil as well in this whole entire process and so yeah like Kiernan said it's this whole systems, thinking that all just kind of comes together it's really it's really fun to listen to. Honestly when you were going through your years and I had to write all these down, you know you have your oats and you're under seeded alfalfa and then you go to two and three, I thought we'd come to year seven and you'd be like we give it a rest, you know, like going back to some of those Biblical times you know you give that seven year rest, but I think this is really, really neat the setup that you guys have going on, so.

**Kiernan Brandt:** All they do give it that rest because you've let that alfalfa established for a year right And then take it off in year two.

**Aaron Johnson:** The alfalfa is there and your number two and again and your number three yeah it stays there, there is crops on the on the acres every year, you know, barring flooding or drought.

**Olivia Amundson:** Sure Kiernan, I don't know if you have any more questions relating to the crop rotation.

**Kiernan Brandt:** um I was going ask about fertilizer. So do you guys, are you guys taking fertilizer out there are you managing that through grazing on residue or what does that look like.

**Aaron Johnson:** We do we do supplement with pelletize poultry manure, and so we get that from a broker and it comes in, on semi loads and we spread it out with a dry fertilizer spreader so it's not a completely closed loop system, so we do supplement with that and then also our non-certified cattle we don't have organic certified cattle, but the manure produced from those cattle can go out onto our fields so.

**Olivia Amundson:** That okay, so sorry to interrupt you so how does that work per se so they're not certified organic, but you can put them out on the fields for natural fertilization, so do you have to like is that a process to or I guess how does that work.

**Aaron Johnson:** No, though they're just simply not in our certification for our organic for our organic label, so they are asked when might fill out I just got done filling out the paperwork for my organic certification and I submitted it. Now, if I made mistakes or if there's other questions, I still have to go through that so I'm still in the middle of getting that done but they asked about the livestock that is raised on your operation and whether you want that certified organic or not any product that comes from livestock, whether it be my own, or the neighbors or some other place they need to know information about that, if that gets applied to my ground so that gets to be I don't I don't get involved in that part of it, I don't take anything from the neighbors and apply it to my stuff but the certified organic composted poultry manure that I use that’s certified organic as well.

**Olivia Amundson:** So if you were going to be a certified organic beef, what kind of I guess what would that look like?

**Aaron Johnson:** Yeah I looked into it a little bit and it just didn't seem to fit my operation and my strengths I'm more crop guy than I am a livestock guy. Now I may be way off on this, you'd really have to ask somebody that is a certified organic with livestock whether it's chickens or beef or pork, I think you need to do some micromanaging on their feed and you also need a lot of room for them If they are in too confined of an area disease can spread through them quite quickly and again I'm kind of talking over my head this so I really shouldn't say but I just know that I think if I were to have herd of certified organic beef they would all be in quarantine. They would all be getting treated and I know that's one of the things that you, you need to do as a good cattlemen and as a certified or organic beef producer that, if anything, does show any diseases or any problems, you need to quarantine them and treat them ASAP so which I think is standard procedure for anybody raising beef, but we take a more proactive approach and do preventative medicines, and so, but one thing we don't do is we don't do any hormone injections in our cattle so, but we do things like the 7-way and 5-way shots. Dectamax pour on, prevent any skin diseases lice.

**Kiernan Brandt:** Parasites, yeah some of that some of that topical control, and you know I think a lot for folks that are considering going into the organic side of the livestock production. You really just have to put a lot of consideration into being set up for it on the front end to avoid those problems. So, like for organic cattle production like you want to make sure that they're not running you're not running into issues with a lot of hoof rot or pink eye breakouts where you have to where you're putting a situation where you have to make that judgment call well do I compromise my program and mass vaccinate, mass treat the pen or do I let these animals kind of sorted out on their own, and I, in my experience, avoiding those problems rather than having to make those judgment calls is always a lot better. But also being in a position where going through those additional steps of verification and documenting where you're getting your feed from and pen requirements and all those things, making sure that you're set up to capture the value on those animals, once you go through all those additional costs. And that can require some modifications to how long you're keeping your cattle, to the facilities, not only for your cattle, but for your feed stuffs I mean there's a lot of variables that go into that because typically if you're going to be paid a premium for organic you're either backgrounding those calves to 800-900 pounds or hanging on to them and feeding them out and direct marketing somewhere where you're being rewarded for those additional steps and that takes some time, and some planning to transition to but you know I never I never discouraged guys from trying to from thinking about it but yeah there's definitely some more work but, just like, just like the farming side of things I'm sure once that method of production has been in place and all the kinks have been trial and error doubt after 20 something years of doing it, it just becomes the way you do it, you know.

**Aaron Johnson:** Yeah and our area is really good for crop production as well pasture is kind of hard to come by in our area we don't have a whole lot of hills and draws and river bottom or anything like that it's nice relatively flat, rolly hill prairie pothole that works out well for crop production. os space gets to be an issue when you say the land values are high, and you can do a little better on raising crops, then raising cattle on those acres, unfortunately I got land payments to make so.

**Kiernan Brandt:** Something that I was curious about so with no spraying, no herbicide and pesticide management have you guys seen just an increased amount or I guess that's probably relative since you've been doing it for so long, but and an abundance of wildlife and some other of those things that come along with kind of letting Mother Nature just run its course and those little micro habitats.

**Aaron Johnson:** In our operation, I have about 720 acres of land that I either own, rent, manage whatever 530 of that is terrible land and then 83 acres of it as pasture ground and then the remainder is you know the house, the bin site, the farm yard, trees, meadows, whatever else have you. So my cousins are even larger farmers than me they I think they are about 1800 acres of tillable land and I don't recall how many acres of pasture they are, but in that operation there's four families, working together to make that all work, and if you put all of our acres together you're well under 3000 acres and that might be in our area that would probably be enough for a father and a son operation. We farm those acres organically and we're able to have five families on that operation, but so when Kiernan and asks things about increased wildlife at everything thrives on our farm, including the families that work the land as well, so, whether it be the desirable things on your ground the crops that you want, and even the undesirable things and fortunately the undesirable things that thrive on our ground they always stay in check and don't completely wipe us out whether, and I’m referring to diseases and insects and weeds so they always stay in check and they're not perfect don't get me wrong, nothing is on any farm but it all does stay in check.

**Kiernan Brandt:** I remember going to grazing school this last summer and I learned so much, I mean I haven't been in that arena sense range management camp back in the FFA days, but just a really, really great learning experience and being able to appreciate all of those all of those plants for what they are, whether they be desirable or undesirable and I remember one of the takeaways that I took back from grazing school was that whether it be a cow or a sheep or a goat or a deer there's, regardless of the plant type there's typically, at least one day a year that they'll eat that plant and those plants out there can tell you a lot about the condition of that field, the condition of things consuming that feed that's available in that field, the overall health of your soil and things like that, and just being able to not necessarily get freaked out when you see a weed out there and I'm sure you guys have to do a lot of that if you're out there hand weeding but being able to just kind of assess what that means is an overall indicator for that that patch of ground.

**Aaron Johnson:** Definitely, and something that we deal with a on a year to year basis and depends on what Mother Nature throws at us, we had a tough 2021 with the drought, our crops didn't do a great job of canopying over and we pressure was it was enough, it was enough. So I spent a spend some money on hand weeding those things and spending time with the road cultivator and rotary hoe doing the best we can make that better years and controlling weeds but fortunately, like I said, 50% of the acres are in solid seed crops, so those two are really good job of choking everything out we didn't have 100% of our crops and row crops didn't canopy so that really spreads your risk out and your exposure out to inclement weather years.

**Olivia Amundson:** I have kind of a dumb question so do you really truly get out there and hand weed?

**Aaron Johnson:** Oh yeah.

**Olivia Amundson:** Okay and I guess like what does that look like, how often do you do it, who gets to do it.

**Aaron Johnson:** Yeah. If anybody wants to come and experience it.

**Olivia Amundson:** Well, I'm not opposed I just um you know I don't know if we always think about that, when we think about organic farming.

**Aaron Johnson:** Yeah, whenever we plan to our row crop so like I say we try to do it when the soil is nice and warm and we're going to have some warm temperatures ahead of us and we typically will rotary how those crops, this is mechanical tillage now well rotary hoe those crops, probably within five to seven days of planting and then kind of keep on that cycle 10-15 days apart rotary hoeing and then, once the crop gets large enough about two or three inches tall, maybe four inches tall then we'll be out there row cultivating and we'd like to row cultivate at least twice. So in all of our row crops are row crops are 30 inches apart well when every row gets walked so there's a human footprint every 60 inches so you have a row in your left in a row and you're right and then, those are the two rows that you, you hand row and then, when you get to the end of the field you turn around and you jump over, and you have a row on your left in a row, on your right so literally every row is going to have a human footprint decided whether it's whether it's corn or soybeans the oats and the alfalfa, the alfalfa is such a good crop that chokes out the weeds and the weeds that we clean up during the row crop years really reflect in the oats years you just don't see oats being very weedy at all and so the oats are really clean weed wise and then in the alfalfa years we take three cuttings a year typically. So there isn't a whole lot of weeds that survive when you take three cuttings each year, and you take that times two years, so you got six cuttings out there and you bail those up and remove those any potential weed seeds, if anything, does develop you know within three cuttings over a year, so and those get those get put into a round bale and run through a cow and so isn't a whole lot of weed seeds that survive that.

**Olivia Amundson:** Just another question, so in my YouTube rabbit hole endeavors that I get myself into I was watching this YouTube video on like a no till garden, and they had made a comment that you know they'll pull all these weeds and they'll pull them from the you know from the root or they’ll pull the root up because those weeds won't come up the following year, so if you're pulling these weeds from year to year, do you have less weeds from year to year, or what I guess what does that look like.

**Aaron Johnson:** yeah I don't know where these weeds come from that's one of the great questions in life, where do these weeds come from we've.

**Kiernan Brandt:** Canada, with some of that wind we've had lately.

**Aaron Johnson:** Yeah it's like that field was so clean last year, where the heck is all this coming from, that's Mother Nature, though, for you, whenever there's a scar on the land, whether you do tillage on the ground that's mother nature's way of covering up that scar with a scab and weeds are so good at covering up scars like that, and so it's trying to learn to work with Mother Nature in that regard that weeds can tell you a lot about what's going on in that field.

**Olivia Amundson:** That's a really neat way to look at it too.

**Kiernan Brandt:** Yeah, I like that.

**Olivia Amundson:** Yeah you know that Mother Nature, you know if we listen to Mother Nature she can tell us exactly what's going on it's just being willing to listen but I think when we do then we're going to be able to kind of reap the benefits of that land that we know we're taking care of so I really like that.

**Kiernan Brandt:** And Olivia has three Rugrats at home that I am sure she would be happy to loan you for the entire summer to go out there and do some hand weeding.

**Olivia Amundson:** Yeah I'm not opposed, so Aaron you let me know that's going on, and in fact I would just like to see it being done like I know I sound very naive, and all this, but I have never seen somebody walk a field and pick weeds.

**Aaron Johnson:** Yeah doesn't get a whole lot of attention, it's, no yeah, it's not something that I get to advertise very well, but kind of like rock picking out in the field since that my dad says it's only as much fun, as you make it.

**Kiernan Brandt:** Someone's got to do it.

**Olivia Amundson:** I remember rock picking when I was a kid so like I said I'm not opposed to weed picking and in fact I would I'd bring my three munchkins out there because it'd be good for them, but yeah I think it's just one of those aspects of organic farming that doesn't always get that much attention like you said and but it's a very real part of the whole organic and organic farming endeavor so.

**Aaron Johnson:** Yeah we try to do a we can from the tractor side and with the crop rotation as well to minimize those hours in the hot sun in the in the cool mornings, with all of the wet soy beans rubbing up against you getting you all wet.

I'd like to give another plug to Northern Plains Sustainable Ag Society they put on an organic conference every year up in Fargo. It was an Aberdeen for years, but then they moved it up to Fargo bigger venue a larger area there. That is usually at the end of January every year, and then the granddaddy is for organic conferences is called MOSES I might get the acronym screwed up here but it's MOSES Organic Sustainable Education Society, I believe, and they just had their annual conference in La Crosse, Wisconsin so if there's any interest I highly invite you guys to check out those organizations and find a diverse group of organic farmers out there, you might find somebody that's somewhat in your area that's got a good advice, a good crop rotation and even maybe some opportunities to acquire some land to rent or own and equipment options as well, livestock possibilities there with pasture and livestock numbers as well, so they're pretty tight knit group and there isn't a whole lot of organic guys in the country, I should say guys and gals, there isn't a whole lot of organic people in the in the country, but they converge on these conferences and it's nice to hook up with these like-minded individuals and in you know stranger things have happened, you might learn something.

**Kiernan Brandt:** Yeah and I think it's um it's invaluable that, as you go through this process of kind of carving off your niche of what works it's always just absolutely essential to have those mentors and those people that that you've been to their place and had those conversations with them and seeing how they do it effectively, I mean that's really where we're learning takes place and we'd be happy to put both of those association pages in in the show notes for today's episode and we'll have to stay in touch for your guys's field day this year because we'll have to we'll have to collaborate and figure out a way to knock two birds out with one stone on that.

**Aaron Johnson:** Yeah if I can add a little bit more to this one question that we get a lot is with our organic grains where do we take them from market you know, obviously, our local elevator is conventional so we won't be able to get conventional or we wouldn't be able to get organic price for our organic grains if we sent them to the conventional market. So we have small grain bins which work out well for us because, like I say one out of every six years is our corn crop, so we only need, we don't need these huge 90,000 bushel grain bins so we're able to use a number of small organic certified well, they house organic grains so they don't need to be cleaned every year, so you have to have your own grain bins situation set up and then in my case we use a marketing agent called NFO or National Farmers Organization and they line up the buyers and the trucking and I just need to be in contact with my marketing agent, and we just got off the phone with them here this morning, had an hour long conversation with them and talking about selling my soybeans. I got a contract for organic soybeans for $36 a bushel and my oats were at $7 a bushel corn is $9 plus haven't gotten all my corn contract yet so I don't mean to say those numbers, just to get people excited either, so if you want to be an organic farmer don't do it because you want to get rich because it's probably not going to happen do it because you love it so, but I want to say that, working with NFO is got to be one of the top priorities, if you want to be an organic farmer, working with a marketing agent, not necessarily NFO, I like NFO we've been with them, since 1961 and they've treated us so good over these 50-60 years. So the benefits of working with a marketing agent, they are on the job for you eight to five, maybe even seven days a week. This is their job, you can focus on what you do best which is growing crops and raising cattle and dealing with your family and let the professionals market your grain so that's another plug I wanted to put in there.

**Olivia Amundson:** I appreciate that because I thinking about that too I'm talking about some of those prices, so I appreciate you bringing that up. Kiernan anything else.

**Kiernan Brandt:** No, that was good, I was going to ask that earlier and it slipped my brain but I imagine that's an important part is just you know you're going to be supplying a niche product that I mean obviously you guys have found strong demand for that product but yeah it may be more abstract marketing than just taking stuff to your local co-op so definitely making sure that that if folks are considering that, being aware that that is going to be a component of having to line up that steady demand for the value added product that you're producing.

**Olivia Amundson:** This is a really fun conversation. Thank you Aaron for being with us today on today or today's cattle HQ podcast. Thank you to all of our listeners will have some of this information up on today's show notes and we'll catch you on the next Cattle HQ.

**[Music]**