



Perennial Promise Growers Cooperative provides marketing and technical support to farmers who grow Kernza

By Lisa Holm

Editor's note: This is the fourth and final article in a series highlighting the projects of Minnesota Farmers Union Foundation's "Co-ops for Climate" pilot grant recipients from 2023.

Perennial Promise Growers Cooperative, incorporated in 2021, represents more than 30 farmer members from throughout the eight states of Minnesota, Nebraska, Montana, Wisconsin, North and South Dakota, Iowa and Wyoming.

Perennial Promise Growers Cooperative (PPGC) provides collective marketing and technical support to a network of farmers that grow Kernza, a climate-smart perennial grain that is harvested from intermediate wheatgrass. Technical service projects include creating a set of comprehensive board policies to govern the co-op, an updated business plan to address financial requirements for management and a roadmap addressing possible expansion to a second crop.

PPGC was created as a vehicle to commercialize Continuous Living Cover (CLC) crops resulting from the Forever Green program of the University of Minnesota, with an initial focus on Kernza. Kernza is now the first commercially available perennial grain. It is most often used as a blended ingredient in flour, tortillas, crackers, puffed snacks, cereals and beer. PPGC is dedicated to helping farmers generate income by cultivating CLC crops, through finding markets for Kernza grain and ecosystem services.

CLC crops deliver substantial ecosystem services by minimizing soil disturbance, which reduces soil carbon oxidation.



Ben Penner, vice president of PPGC and owner and operator of Ben Penner Farms, held a field day on his farm to talk about Kernza.

These crops also enhance water infiltration, prevent runoff and capture excess soil nitrogen. As a perennial crop, Kernza provides living cover over two to three seasons, sequestering carbon in extensive root systems.

In addition to working with Cooperative Development Services (CDS) on a new business plan to attract new members and capital, PPGC's board has been working with Leslie Watson, a local co-op governance consultant affiliated with Columinate, to provide governance training and policy development support.

The PPGC board brought their insights to their annual meeting in January 2024, where they engaged members in strategic discussions about the future direction of the cooperative. The PPGC board and membership is optimistic that the technical assistance and business development support provided by this grant will enable them to capitalize on other funding opportunities.

Many cooperative members are engaged in educating the public and promoting the

adoption of perennial crops. Founding farmer Carmen Fernholz, of A Frame Organic Farm in Lac qui Parle County, and Anne Schwagerl, of Prairie Point Farm in Brown County, are actively involved in media interviews and speaking engagements.

Learn more at PPGC's newly launched website at www.perennial-promise.com.

Questions with Ben Penner, vice president of PPGC and owner and operator of Ben Penner Farms in south central Minnesota. These responses have been edited for length and clarity.

Q. Why a cooperative model?

A. It is a democratic model that also provides value to the individual grower and the community. No other model can do that. We've taken on a big project - environmental stewardship takes collaborative effort and is a system-wide challenge. The cooperative model puts growers in a strong and empowered position.

Q. Challenges thus far?

A. How can the Kernza enterprise work together more. Understanding Carbon Intensity scores and how they fit in with CLC crops.

Q. What will success look like?

A. Success will look like selling out our current inventory and having a direct path to scaling the supply of Kernza with the projected demand. This is a very critical couple of years for PPGC.