

# Changing climate leads VanDerPols to change their farming practices

By Jada Csikos-Monroe

Jim and LeeAnn VanDerPol share Pastures a Plenty farm in Chippewa County with their son, Josh, his wife Cindy, and Josh and Cindy's children Jake, Kirsten and Andrew. They raise cattle, hogs and chickens for meat in addition to growing grain and hay for their cattle. They direct market their meat.

Jim and LeeAnn were delegates at the Minnesota Farmers Union state convention in November 2024, and LeeAnn is the Chippewa County secretary/treasurer. Josh is the Chippewa County President.

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

## Q. What is the background of your farm?

**A.** The farm was purchased by my parents, and my wife and I started farming in 1977. For the first 20 years it was almost all annuals- corn, soybeans and wheat, as well as a small hog operation. After 15 years we added sheep. Later we switched from sheep to cattle and saw how that could fit with organic certification. That's when we started growing perennials and winter annuals, which we use to feed the livestock.

The meat business was quite small when we started, then my son and daughter-in-law took on the role of focusing on the meat sales and it grew. My wife LeeAnn also plays a central role in the meat business. And my grandkids have always worked and contributed to the farm as well. My grandson Andrew has experimented with Kernza as a grain option.

## Q. How have the shifting weather patterns from climate change affected your farm?



*The VanDerPol family includes Jim and LeeAnn, Josh, Cindy and their children, Jake, Kirsten and Andrew.*

**A.** Too much rain has always been a problem because our soil drains poorly, but more than anything else what's been hard to deal with is the unpredictability. We know about climate change in a general sort of way, but we don't know what the weather will be like next week. It could be way hotter or colder in the wintertime, or there could be a tremendous amount of rain.

## Q. How has climate change informed your plans for the future of your farm?

**A.** We started to see early on that things were changing on our land, like longer growing seasons. The weather also became more unpredictable, like rain coming when it didn't before, and extended drought periods. We decided something's afoot here and we should see what can be done to make the farm safer. We've tried to focus on what we can make a living on, which is perennials, so we don't have to be using diesel fuel and open the field to erosion by constantly tilling to plant annuals. We still plant some corn and grain annuals now, but over 20 years ago we switched half of our corn acreage to hay perennial plants for our pasture.

This last year in western Minnesota we had a very wet spring, not just

the amount but the fact it rained around every fifth day from April till June which makes it harder to plant corn in a timely fashion. We claimed that loss with the crop insurance that we carry. In August we took half the acreage and seeded it to hybrid rye which is a winter crop, and it looked pretty promising this fall and better than I thought it would with dry conditions. It's used for livestock feed in Europe and can be a substitute for corn.

## Q. How have you seen your farm impacted by changing practices?

**A.** When we replaced corn, which was half of our farm's production, with alfalfa, clovers, orchard grass and fescue, it changed the soil. We've established about 100 acres of pasture on the lowest part of our farm. In time our soil tests have become high in organic matter across the whole farm. We have five to six percent organic matter across the farm in our soil on average, but in the pasture we're looking at a percent or two higher- that's how pasture production has changed the soil. It's difficult to deny that farmers have an impact on the soil based on what we ask it to grow.

## Q. How has your farm operation remained resilient?

**A.** Unlike most farms around us, we don't depend on the sale of one product, and we sell out of the field what the livestock don't eat. We sell both hogs and cattle for meat as well as hay. We produce eggs and market them to schools. This year we started broiler chickens. Overall, our income intake is pretty diversified.

**Q. How do you see marketing fit in with climate-smart agriculture?**

**A.** For those of us that are direct marketing, we communicate how the animals are raised and what we do and don't do. If you are direct marketing, you control who you sell to. Then you can talk about the way you raise your crop and livestock, and the way it impacts the climate. My approach is that we raise our crops and livestock the most responsible way we can, and that should be part of every discussion with a customer.

**Q. What are people missing in the conversation around climate?**

**A.** The reality of it. With the discussion around the January fires in California, people are using what happened as political football and that's shameful.

We're talking about a major change precipitated by climate change. It shouldn't be politics as usual - it's hateful that it is.

It's important to recognize that just as we were unable to plant our corn, similar challenges can occur on a larger scale. Take wheat, for example, and how the world depends on wheat. There's a strong possibility of massive crop failures and I think we're looking it right in the face. As farmers, we can't outfox the challenges that climate change brings all the time. People need to be aware that what we've expected as predictable, like food in the grocery stores, is going to be less predictable.

**Q. If you could tell Congress to do one or two things that would help your family continue to farm in the next**

**generation, what would it be?**

**A.** What the government and society need to do is make it easier financially for people to participate in farming. I can't think of anything that would do more to diversify rural populations and encourage people to focus on sustainable farming than removing the burden of healthcare costs. What you have now is both parents in a household working just to provide health insurance, and that's time away from the land. I would tell Congress that lifting up the working population would really help farming. The eagerness to do it is there. I meet many young people at events who are passionate about farming, but they are held back because they have to focus on earning money for necessities that should be guaranteed by the government.

