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## **New Hope For Sugar Beet Growers?**

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# Biofuels Company Brings New Hope To Local Sugar Beet Growers

By Dianne Swanson

After American Crystal made the decision to close the Sidney Sugars beet processing plant last spring, multiple companies reached out with ideas to revive the industry. But according to Jeff Bieber, one company really stood out from the rest and is now actively exploring a renewable energy plant near Fairview that would create biofuel from sugar beets.

Greenwood Renewable Ventures (GRV), a Colorado company, was formed in September 2022 as a wholly-owned subsidiary of Pulse Energy Partners, which had been formed to invest in strategic energy development projects. GRV's mission is to advance energy transition in biofuels. With several years of experience in renewable natural gas, and contacts made with existing plants to purchase their beet pulp, the company started looking at building their own biofuel plant. Co-founder and CEO Jason Gaines was raised in Dillon, married a Sidney native, and has multiple ties to the area. When the Sidney Sugars plant closed, he understood the devastating impact that would have on the community. Since American Crystal took the sugar allotment but not the beet acres, he and his partner, president and COO Casey Korejwo immediately began looking into the feasibility of turning sugar beets into biofuel, creating an avenue for local growers to succeed, as well as providing an environmentally friendly fuel alternative.

Turning sugar beets into biofuel is not new. Although there are currently no plants in the U.S., beet ethanol has long been a fixture of Europe's bio-energy mix. The process is relatively simple, requiring less purification to get to the finished product. Beets are sliced, then run through a diffuser. The sugar water is fermented into alcohol, which is distilled into full ethanol. The pulp undergoes an anaerobic digestion process, which produces a renewable natural gas comprised of methane and carbon dioxide. Finally, the remaining compost goes back on the growers' fields to help with the next crop, replacing traditional chemical fertilizers.

GRV was persistent enough that Bieber and his son, Justin, agreed to take their proposal to the MonDak Beet Growers Association board. After hearing the proposal, the board gave the idea the green light and a meeting was set up between GRV and growers, bankers, fertilizer and seed companies, county commissioners, and other interested parties. The MonDak board then re-met and determined there was enough interest and excitement to move forward. Volunteers were then requested to form a new board and a new association.

Two Rivers Energy Growers Association was created with the name representing all the growers in the area. The board consists of president Bieber; Brandon Hoffman, vice president; Adam Cayko, secretary-treasurer; and members Phillip Hurley, Ryan Bell, and Allen Ollerman. Bieber explained that it took a while to come up with the new name. They wanted something catchy but not MonDak. Two Rivers was chosen to represent everyone on both the Yellowstone and Missouri rivers. Two Rivers is a completely new organization with no funding from the MonDak Beet Growers Assn. They have worked with Daniel Stenberg and the McKenzie County Job Development Authority in Watford City to get a grant to get the new board up and running and have connected with Yellowstone Township as well.

"GRV is incredibly excited to be working with the leadership of the new association to advance this strategic partnership. We are committed to a long term and mutually beneficial relationship that will provide certainty and value to the community. We view this as a wonderful solution to the difficult situation of the Sidney Sugars closure," Gaines stated.

Negotiations with GRV began, with a term sheet executed on June 2, 2023 for the long-term purchase of sugar beets. "We are thrilled to have taken this significant step with the association, deepening the partnership. We look forward to working with the growers on the SBPAs and moving this project forward. This is a critical step in bringing this project to market," Korejwo said.

Bieber said they were the most refreshing negotiations he had ever been a part



of. "It was a breath of fresh air," he said. After negotiating with American Crystal for the past 20 years as a board member and president where it was always a fight to get a fair contract for growers, and a particularly ugly fight a year ago, he and the rest of the board were delighted to be working with a company that was open to suggestions, and looking to negotiate a fair contract on both sides. Bieber explained that the side benefit of all those American Crystal negotiations was that they knew what the growers wanted, particularly eliminating the risk with storage issues. "GRV wants the beets to deteriorate so there's no storage issues," he explained. "It's much more relaxed."

"GRV is changing the way we will deliver beets at harvest, traditional slow beet pilers will not be used," Bieber said. "They won't be dictating every action in the field. The farmer farms and they process the beets." Additionally, the growers will not be asked to be financially responsible for any processing issues. They will be asked to raise the crop with contracts secured by proof of funds before the crop is planted. Korejwo explained that their interest is in buying beets with high weights and sugar content, not dictating what can be grown or how. There may also be a need for additional crops. The plant will need at least some wheat stalks and there may be an opportunity to turn crop residue or waste into value at the facility. GRV will be working closely with the growers to identify these potential crop additions.

GRV has an agreement in place for 120 acres just north of Fairview as a plant location. They don't want growers to have to haul more than 20 miles so they will also have dump sites where needed. They plan to sell the biofuel to the west coast market where various states have incentives and pay premium prices for biofuel. They have partnered with Mast Capital Advisors (MCA), looking for private investors at this time, as well as possible state and federal incentives. Korejwo said they are pushing to have the plant completed for the 2025 growing season but realistically looking at 2026. "Hopefully, it will all go quickly," he said. The plant is expected to cost between \$225 and \$240 million. In addition to the value to the growers, the new facility will create 75 new fulltime jobs plus an additional 200 seasonal jobs.

GRV is also in active talks with Prewitt Land & Livestock to use manure from their feedlot to help power the plant.

Over 9,000 acres have been committed so far with 10,000 being the goal as the board continues to visit with potential growers. Peak acres in the past were 47,500 so there are still lots of potential growth with traditional beet ground. Term sheets and purchase agreements will need to be signed with growers committing to a number of acres for a number of years, determined by them. "For example, growers can agree to 100 acres for five years, or 500 acres for 10 years, whatever

(Continued on page 10)

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# Feeding Corn Silage To Cattle Can Add Value

## Corn silage could make up 40% to 60% of diet dry matter and still be economical.

By NDSU Agriculture Communication

By now, corn silage harvest has finished across North Dakota. In well-packed, covered corn silage piles, the fermentation process to preserve the silage will be complete after about three weeks. This means that most of this year's silage crop is ready to feed to cattle. While ranchers may be able to calculate the input costs or the price of selling the corn silage to another producer, it pays to consider the value of feeding corn silage to their own cattle.

"Corn silage has significant value for cow-calf, backgrounding and feedlot operations," says Zac Carlson, North Dakota State University Extension beef cattle specialist. "Silage is an excellent energy source, providing digestible fiber while improving the palatability and conditioning of the diet with added moisture."

The tonnage of corn silage harvested and cattle inventory throughout the year often dictate the inclusion level in backgrounding and finishing diets. A survey of farmers and ranchers of the Northern Plains and Midwest reported that the average inclusion of corn silage on a dry matter basis was between 17.1% and 22.2% in backgrounding diets and between 5.4% and 11.4% in finishing diets. However, a summary by the University of Minnesota suggested that corn silage could make up 40% to 60% of diet dry matter and still be economical.

A summary of five experiments by the University of Nebraska evaluated the inclusion of 15% or 45% dry matter corn silage in finishing beef cattle diets. They reported that cattle consumed the same amount of feed dry matter regardless of corn silage inclusion level, but cattle fed 45% corn silage gained 0.2 pound less per day, leading to a 6% poorer feed conversion than cattle fed 15% corn silage.

Corn prices have generally been more expensive in the past few years. Replacing a larger portion of corn in beef cattle diets with corn silage may be an economical solution. However, cattle may need to be fed longer and to heavier weights to reach similar carcass endpoints.

"These decisions should be evaluated as the value of gain versus the cost of gain," says Karl Hoppe, NDSU Extension livestock systems specialists. "The economics can get complicated and should be evaluated by each individual operation."

As with all feeds, managing corn silage to minimize shrink is critical.

"Depending on the storage structure you are using, corn silage should be



Corn silage has significant value for cow-calf, backgrounding and feedlot operations. (NDSU photo)

harvested at 65% to 70% moisture for optimum results," Hoppe says.

Moisture levels that are too low result in less favorable fermentation and poor packing characteristics in the silage, whereas moisture levels that are too high result in silage that has greater effluent losses (loss of nutrients in the water that oozes from the pile). High moisture levels also can result in a "sour" fermentation.

Hoppe also advises packing the silage correctly to ensure oxygen is driven out. Excluding oxygen is a very important aspect of making good-quality silage.

Adequate packing involves a number of factors, including the correct chop length for a particular silage crop and having the appropriately-sized tractor for the amount of silage being placed in the pile. Because wheeled tractors exert more pressure per square inch than crawler or track-type tractors, wheeled tractors are preferred for packing silage.

Poorly managed corn silage that spoils will lose dry matter, requiring the cattle feeder to use additional feed resources to account for lost feed. Making and feeding silage affects shrink, including dry matter at harvest, chop lengths, bunker or drive-over pile filling and packing, inoculation, covering, and feedout.

"Most producers realize the potential benefits of covering silage bunkers and drive-over piles to reduce dry-matter losses and spoilage," says James Rogers, NDSU Extension forage crops production specialist. "Reasons corn silage bunkers and piles are left uncovered usually include a lack of adequate labor and available time for the task. However, often forgotten is the practice of discarding spoiled silage during feedout. This step is critical when evaluating the feeding value of your silage and the cattle's performance."

Only a few studies have evaluated the effects of feeding spoiled silage to cattle. A study by Whitlock and others in 2000 at Kansas State University measured the effect of feeding surface-spoiled (black slime and gray mold material) corn silage to beef cattle. Adding spoiled corn silage to the diet depressed dry-matter intake and decreased crude protein digestibility. Similarly, dry-matter and fiber digestibility decreased with feeding spoiled silage.

"If there is one thing you remember, don't feed spoiled silage," Carlson says. "Even if you think the small amount of spoiled silage will be diluted in the diet, it may cost you more than you know."

# Calendars Available As Fundraiser To Support 4-H Youth Programs

Submitted by MSU News

Bozeman — Calendars featuring drawings by artist Don Greytak are available from the Montana 4-H Foundation as a fundraiser to support 4-H youth programs.

The Montana 4-H Greytak 2024 calendar features the artist's pencil drawings of agricultural life in Montana and has been a traditional fundraiser for more than 30 years.

Calendars cost \$15. They are sold by 4-H members and are usually available at Montana State University Extension offices across the state. They can also be purchased directly from the Montana 4-H Foundation online.

Proceeds from the calendar sales benefit Montana 4-H clubs and their members. Montana 4-H is the youth development program of MSU Extension and serves nearly 20,000 individuals each year.

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*Don Greytak*



Calendars featuring drawings by artist Don Greytak are available from the Montana 4-H Foundation as a fundraiser to support 4-H youth programs. (Submitted by MSU News)

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# What Montana's Independent Ranchers Need To Survive: Customers

By Susan Shain, High Country News

In a squat 1,100-square-foot building on the outskirts of Helena lies a pile of enormous tongues. They are thick and leaden, stacked on a steel table like fish out of water. The bovines from which they came hulk nearby, cold carcasses hanging from cold hooks. Bearded men, their white coats covered in blood, rhythmically chop livers, punctuating the hum of industrial refrigeration.

This small meat-processing facility, which a group of ranchers started under the name Old Salt Co-op, is one of many that have appeared across the country recently. "Small" is an understatement: Old Salt can process the equivalent of 20 cattle per week, while major meat packers butcher thousands per day.

Just four companies process 85% of American beef, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Though the consolidation has long affected ranchers, it was not until the pandemic — when the industry made headlines with bottlenecks, price hikes, and COVID-19 outbreaks among workers — that the general public noticed. Even the White House got involved, pledging \$1 billion to boost the nation's independent meat-processing capacity. In Montana, a state with more cows than people, this helped at least 17 plants open or expand.

But in all the excitement — the ribbon cuttings on shiny new facilities, the feel-good of fighting for the little guy — it's easy to forget: What happens after that local chuck gets wrapped in cellophane? Since most independent ranchers and processors lack the volume to supply major grocery chains, their survival rides not only on how much brisket they produce, but also on how many people buy it.

Without a strong customer base, Rebecca Thistlethwaite, Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network director at Oregon State University, fears that many small processors will fail. She cited a University of Illinois study that suggested success is contingent upon local demand. "It's not a field of dreams situation; it's not an, 'If you build it, they will come,'" Thistlethwaite said. "You can't build supply chains without having that end consumer."

Local meat packers used to be more common. In 1980, the four largest companies processed just 36% of the nation's beef. The authors of a recent USDA report wrote that they "knew of no mature American industry that displayed as dramatic a change in concentration in as short a time."

The cause of that consolidation: economies of scale. "As larger processors have demonstrated lower costs of production," said Eric Belasco, Montana State University professor of agricultural economics, "it's just been harder for a smaller processing facility to compete."

While that created better margins for the "Big Four" meat packers JBS, Tyson, Cargill, and Marfrig (formerly National Beef) — it hasn't lowered prices for consumers. Since the early '80s, the inflation-adjusted cost of ground beef has risen by about 30%.

Ranchers haven't benefited either. Data on net profits is difficult to find, but gross profits are certainly down. Fifty years ago, ranchers got 60 cents of every dollar that consumers spent on beef; today, it's 39 cents, according to the White House, which noted the decline when announcing its \$1 billion investment. While that money supports facility expansion and work force development, it doesn't help build markets for local meat.

Two decades ago, Lisa Wade Mayorga, whose family has ranched in Montana since 1903, abandoned the Big Four and began selling beef directly to consumers. Unlike many independent ranchers, who must travel long distances to process their meat, she had a small facility nearby.

But earlier this year, it went up for sale, putting Wade Mayorga's business in



Credit: Susan Shain / High Country News

jeopardy. So she joined four other ranching families to form the Glacier Processing Cooperative, which is purchasing the plant. Though the co-op has applied for a federal grant for new equipment, its ultimate success depends on whether its members can attract and retain enough customers.

For independent ranchers, major chains — like Walmart, where 26% of America's food dollars go, are basically out of the question. "To get into a chain grocery store, you have to have volume," explained Bill Jones, Montana Premium Processing Cooperative general manager, which opened in January. Since it takes two years and roughly \$2,500 to raise a single head of cattle, Jones said it's "a heck of a challenge" for ranchers to establish enough volume to interest a grocery chain.

Jones said the ranchers in his cooperative sell their meat online, at farmers markets or to local grocers, and restaurants. "And then some are doing all three," he added.

Old Salt, the Helena plant with the tongues on the table, is taking yet another approach. Rather than each ranch running its own marketing and social media and fighting for a sliver of the same small pie — Montana only has 1.1 million people, after all — the company has united four ranches under a single brand.

"There's a lot of cannibalization of each other in local food," said Cole Mannix, an Old Salt co-founder whose family has been ranching in Montana for five generations. "So we decided to try to consolidate that into one kind of regional effort." Old Salt has also gone beyond selling meat online: opening a buzzy burger stand in the heart of Helena, organizing a festival, cookouts, ranch tours, building a butcher-shop-slash-grill that will showcase its products, and host community events.

Mannix hopes those efforts convince Montanans there's a value in local meat — a value that a Walmart rib-eye can't offer. "How can all these breweries survive?" he asked. "Because they're a place for people to hang out. Local food is about human connection."

Zoe Barnard, who lives in Helena with her partner and their four children, be-

Continued on page 11.





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## Biofuels Company... (Continued from page 2)

they feel comfortable with," Bieber stated. "The board tried to put the farmers in the best possible place, not just for income but option wise for the length of the term, plus safety outs with the option to get out of the contract."

The board also negotiated pricing. Bieber said that the 2022 crop would have received 4-8 dollars more per ton under GRV than what American Crystal paid. Price stability was also negotiated, taking the huge swings out of the price scale and making it as even as they could. They developed a floor price that will never go down, but can go up each year based on inflationary costs.

Former beet growers are trying other crops right now, some more profitable than others "I encourage growers who are looking for crop diversity to contact us. It's one more tool for their farms," Bieber said. Two Rivers Energy wants to reach all interested growers and board members are playing a huge role in trying to contact everyone interested in this new opportunity. Please contact GRV, Bieber or any board member if you are interested. "We would love to have a conversation with any grower," Korejwo said. "We're excited and thrilled to be moving forward on the ground."



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# NDSU Extension Getting It Right In Soybean Production Set For Dec. 19

A variety of soybean topics will be discussed during the Getting It Right webinar.

## By NDSU Agriculture Communication

Soybean producers and crop advisers hunting for research-based soybean production recommendations should plan to participate in the Getting It Right in Soybean Production webinar on Tuesday, Dec. 19 starting at 8:30 a.m.

The webinar is organized and will be conducted by North Dakota State University Extension and is supported by the North Dakota Soybean Council. This online-only meeting will be hosted on Zoom.

“This soybean educational event will provide research updates and recommendations that can help farmers with soybean production decisions for the 2024 growing season,” says Greg Endres, Extension cropping systems specialist and organizer of the event.

Topics to be discussed primarily by NDSU Extension crop specialists include: variety selection, plant establishment, soil management and plant nutrients, plant protection (weed, disease and insect management), and soybean markets.

Participants will have the opportunity to ask questions after the presentations. The presentations will be recorded and archived at [www.ndsu.edu/agriculture/ag-hub/getting-it-right](http://www.ndsu.edu/agriculture/ag-hub/getting-it-right). Certified crop adviser continuing education credits will be available for attending the live event.

There is no participation fee, but preregistration is required at [www.ndsu.edu/agriculture/ag-hub/getting-it-right](http://www.ndsu.edu/agriculture/ag-hub/getting-it-right). All who preregister will receive emailed instructions and a Zoom link to join the webinar.

Future Getting It Right crop production webinars are scheduled for:

- Jan. 30, 2024 – Dry bean
- Feb. 27, 2024 – Sunflower
- March 12, 2024 – Canola

## What Montana’s Independent Ranchers Need...

Continued from page 8.

believes that buying locally raised, grass-fed beef is healthier for her family and her community. And, since independent ranchers typically manage their cattle from birth to burger, rather than sending them to feedlots, she also believes it’s more humane and ecologically sustainable. “It’s just such a bizarre thing that you would go to the supermarket in Montana and buy meat that had come from Brazil,” she said.

### Local Food Is About Human Connection

Barnard gets an Old Salt meat box every six weeks. Since it’s more expensive than shopping at the store, she serves red meat only once or twice a week. Barnard has also convinced several of her friends to get on board. “I’m like, this is the best meat I’ve ever tasted,” she said. “I don’t even get into my politics.”

Whether Old Salt can find more people like Barnard is an open question — and a critical one. As Mannix put it: “If customers don’t change their buying habits, local meat really doesn’t have a chance.”

Thistlethwaite, of Oregon State University, agrees. “I don’t think [local meat processors] are going to survive unless we see consumers step up more seriously,” she said. “But that’s not really a message that is easy to tell. I get it: Beef is super expensive right now, it’s a luxury item in my household.” While Thistlethwaite said locally processed meat is often available in bulk — and is usually cheaper per pound than beef from the grocery store — she acknowledged it’s not an option for many families, owing to the high up-front cost and requisite freezer space.

So Thistlethwaite thinks institutions like schools, prisons, hospitals, universities and government agencies should start buying meat locally. “That would make a huge impact,” she said. “There needs to be more than just household consumers purchasing local and regional meat.



A variety of soybean topics will be discussed during the Getting It Right webinar. (NDSU photo)



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## NEW MISCELLANEOUS EQUIPMENT

Danuser Pallet Forks - 48", 4000lb  
Danuser Hydraulic Post Hole Digger  
& Augers  
Garfield 10' drag scraper  
Danuser Hammer post pounder  
Patriot Pivot Track Filler  
Haybuster 2660 Bale Processors

Parma 30' Mulcher  
Danuser T8 & T7 Hornet Post Pounders  
Danuser Intimidator Tree & Post Puller  
Unverferth 2620 Seed Tender  
AGI VRX Grain Vac  
Twin Star G3-7 Rake