

OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND FORESTRY

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Significant Women in Agriculture: Pam Snelson

“I get to feed everybody,” Pam Snelson said on a recent weekday from the office of Snelson Farms near Wann, Oklahoma just south of the Kansas line.

She just finished preparing lunch for seven hungry men before spending time in the farm office catching up on paperwork and answering phone calls. In another four hours she was planning to feed those hungry workers again.

Feeding people is serious business for this Oklahoma farmer. Snelson and her husband of 32 years, Steve, have been co-owners and operators of Snelson Farms since 1988. They currently farm 1,500 acres of hard red winter wheat and 3,500 acres of soybeans with these crops going to the Port of Catoosa for shipment to feed the world.

Snelson says it is important to her to reduce the farm’s carbon footprint. Although the farm isn’t 100 percent no-till, she describes it as minimum till with the benefits of not having to purchase as much diesel fuel for equipment and saving other input costs. The Snelsons use precision agriculture techniques so they don’t put any unneeded fertilizer or herbicide on their fields.

“The less you do to the environment, the better it is for everyone,” Snelson says. “We have always done best use practices. We worry about the environment as much as the next person, and maybe more so. If you’re not sustainable, how can you pass the farm to the next generation?”

Passing this fourth generation farm to her two sons, Steven, 29, and Kevin, 27, is something Snelson thinks about a lot. Three generations of family live on the same county road locally known as Snelson Road. Her husband’s dad, who is 87, still takes an interest in the farm and her son, Steven, works on the farm and makes good use of his OSU soil science degree. Both sons showed cattle while they were growing up and have fond memories of their farm childhood.

Kevin, who lives in Stillwater, frequently returns to the farm on weekends to help with the cattle. “When I get too much of the city, it’s nice to go home and hang out with the cows,” he said.

Their cash grain operation is supplemented by the cow-calf component. They raise Angus/Angus cross cows and sell calves; saving the best to enhance the herd. Snelson confides that her least favorite farm chore is tending sick calves because of the heartbreaking possibility that they won’t pull through. Still, she is a proud member of Oklahoma CattleWomen and is a 2015 graduate of

the Master's of Beef Advocacy program which gives her knowledge about beef issues to communicate to consumers and media.

Snelson grew up in Bartlesville and had an urban background until she married. She worked for Phillips Petroleum Company for 15 years and was an accountant in the International Division before meeting and falling in love with a handsome farmer. Now she lives near Wann, a town of 125 people, surrounded by fields and pasture and counts crops and cattle.

Snelson can run farm equipment and also represent agriculture in Washington, D.C. and around the world. Her degree in business administration from Bartlesville Wesleyan College and international work with Phillips laid a foundation for becoming involved in policy.

“I was married to someone in production ag and thought I needed to know a little more about it,” Snelson said of her decision to enroll in Class VIII of the Oklahoma Ag Leadership Program (OALP). The program develops leaders in agriculture and is open to men and women involved in production agriculture. OALP was the springboard that inspired her to become involved in agriculture at the local, state, national and international levels.

Locally, she worked to instill a love of agriculture in youth by working with 4-H and FFA groups, farm safety groups and on an individual basis with those wanting to learn hands-on at the farm. She volunteered to teach Ag in the Classroom lessons at local schools. One of her favorite lessons was called “Wow That Cow!” and asked students to identify items in a leather briefcase such as a marshmallow, leather purse and comb to decide which ones came from part of a cow. Her point to the fifth and sixth graders was that nothing was wasted. She was the 2015-2016 Washington County president of Oklahoma CattleWomen, Inc. and has been an active member for many years.

Snelson welcomes school groups to her farm. She likes to show them soybean harvest in the fall and give them soy snacks of nuts and candy to show how versatile the crop is. Occasionally someone even rides in the buddy seat on a combine while she drives.

At the state level, Snelson is the Oklahoma Soybean Association’s Membership Chair on the Board of Directors while her husband serves as the state president.

Nationally, Snelson is serving her second year as the only woman out of 46 directors of the American Soybean Association (ASA). She went to Washington, D.C. in March with the group and plans to go two or three times each year to visit legislators, discuss the Farm Bill and raise issues of crop insurance, tax reform, infrastructure, biotech and trade.

In the fall of 2016, Snelson went to Tokyo on a trade mission for ASA. It coincided with the 60th anniversary of U.S. soybean exports to Japan and featured a round table discussion of sustainability, GMO, and supply chain problems.

Ambassador to Japan Caroline Kennedy wanted to highlight women in agriculture and Snelson assisted her by taking part in a dialogue with Japanese women who represented oil seed companies which are end users of U.S. soybeans mostly processed for oil.

She also participated in a trade mission with Deputy Secretary Alexis Taylor in Shanghai, China. Meetings such as these are an important component of producing food commodities because market expansion will help fund farms and feed the world.

Her 2017 appointment to the Field to Market Sustainability Alliance will be Snelson's next challenge. She recently attended her first meeting in San Antonio and learned how the alliance helps retailers of commodities improve profitability while reducing their carbon footprint. The organization also helps producers calculate the amount of energy they use in farming and get ideas for reducing it.

"We go from grower to end consumer showing the best way to use resources and reduce use of natural and energy resources," Snelson said.

Her family is getting ready to make this calculation on Snelson Farms. They will use software that takes into account the number of acres and inputs into their operation. She will also be visiting other farms to see how helpful the assessment is.

Although Snelson wasn't raised as a farmer, she's passionate about the benefits of the lifestyle she adopted by marrying into a farming family.

"Agriculture has provided a wonderful quality of life for the Snelson family," she said. "It has also provided numerous opportunities to share this love of our Oklahoma land and endless possibilities to better serve consumers with abundant, safe, affordable, sustainable food."

She hopes her efforts to educate will be effective and her advocacy for positive policies at the national level will be helpful in keeping agriculture thriving in the future.

Snelson named three things as her most important achievements in agriculture: being a voice for women in agriculture by claiming the only female slot on the ASA board, being recognized and accepted as a speaker on GMO and other important topics and providing future generations with ways to keep farming by continuing to advocate on Capitol Hill.

Snelson said that if she met another woman interested in farming, she would say, "'Bless your heart! What can I do to help you?'"

She believes women have a logical role to play in farming and advises getting a mentor, going to college and learning from someone who is actually farming.

Snelson hopes women she encourages to become farmers will get to enjoy one of her favorite moments at the end of the day when they go out and take the last meal of the day to the field during harvest.

"It's a beautiful time with the combines running and trucks lined up," Snelson said. "Seeing all of it come together – what we've grown, my family all together, the sun setting behind them."

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Photo caption: Pam Snelson has been recognized by the Significant Women in Oklahoma Agriculture project.

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Note to Media:

This is part of a continuing series of stories on Significant Women in Oklahoma Agriculture. The project is a collaborative program between the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food & Forestry and Oklahoma State University to recognize and honor the impact of countless women across all 77 counties of the state, from all aspects and areas of the agricultural industry. The honorees were nominated by their peers and selected by a committee of 14 industry professionals.

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