

Meet: Adam Kolb

AFBF's Entrepreneur Challenge Semi-Finalist



Adam Kolb of Manitowoc County was selected as a semi-finalist of the 2016 Farm Bureau's Rural Entrepreneurship Challenge.

As a semi-finalist he received \$10,000 for his efforts to bring new streams of revenue (custom calf raising, grass-fed beef marketed directly to consumers, crop production and custom field work services) to a fifth-generation family farm.

"I enjoy the mental and physical challenge of farming," he said. "I also like the variety that each day brings and ingenuity it takes to farm."

Kolb was among a diverse pool of more than 165 applicants. The challenge, now in its second year, provides opportunities for individuals to showcase business innovations being developed in rural regions of the U.S. It is the first national business competition focused exclusively on rural entrepreneurs working on food and agriculture businesses.

The names of the four finalists and six semi-finalists for the challenge were announced by the American Farm Bureau Federation in Washington, D.C. Kolb received his \$10,000 check and plaque during the annual meeting of the Manitowoc County Farm Bureau on October 8 in Whitelaw.

Kolb first learned of the competition from a fellow member of the Manitowoc County Farm Bureau last May.

"I thought it would be worth a shot," said Kolb, who works full-time as an agronomist in addition to building his farming business on the side.



When the field work was completed last spring, he spent a week preparing the application that required financial records, a YouTube video about his business and descriptions of his marketing and management efforts.

Upon learning that he was a semi-finalist, Kolb said it validated all of the nights, weekends and holidays that he spent raising calves, planting and harvesting crops and retrofitting an old dairy barn to meet his needs. He plans to invest his winnings into a new barn to house calves.

Kolb grew up on his family's dairy farm, just west of Cleveland where on a clear day you can see Lake Michigan. The dairy herd was sold while he was pursuing an agricultural business degree at the UW-Platteville. After graduation in 2012 he worked for two years as an agriculture credit analyst for Investors Community Bank in Manitowoc. In April of 2014 he was hired as an agronomist for Country Visions Cooperative in Valders. His sales, consulting and crop scouting territory is a 20-mile radius near his farm.

Since December of 2013, Kolb has bought newborn Holstein bull calves from local dairies. He raises them to 600 pounds (which is about six months of age) before selling them at cattle auctions or directly to other farmers. At any given time he keeps a herd of 60 to 80 steers. He has some part-time help on the farm from family and neighbors.

He bought 70 acres of his home farm's cropland and rents another 110 acres from neighbors. Along with his father, Mike, they own a small, but growing, cow-calf herd of Hereford and Angus cattle whose meat is marketed directly to consumers. While his father is semi-retired from farming, he still owns some of the machinery and helps with field work.

"The reason I bought animals was because I could see commodity prices would come down," Kolb said. "I wanted to use the crops that I was growing in a different way that would be profitable. In hindsight that was a good decision."

As beef prices begin to decline, he wants to transition to raising heifers for dairy farms to provide "a more predictable cash flow stream."

As for that new barn, he wants to build one that accommodates drive-by feeding for about 300 young cattle. He said it remains to be seen which will come first, a new barn or the contracts to fill it with dairy heifers.

In addition to his crops, two years ago Kolb started custom planting corn and soybeans for others. Last spring he planted 900 acres for six other farmers. In addition, he provides corn cultivating and no-till planting of wheat and alfalfa for others. If the opportunity is there, he will expand those services.

He sees opportunities off the farm as well. A 2008 graduate of Kiel High School, Kolb was appointed to the Planning Commission of the Town of Meeme in March.

“It’s already broadened my horizons,” Kolb said.

“There are a lot of opportunities (for young people in agriculture),” he said. “I’d encourage anyone to get involved in agricultural organizations like Farm Bureau and use the opportunity to network with people.”

Kolb is a member of Manitowoc County Sail, a local young professionals networking group that recently recognized him as one of its ‘Future 15 for 2015.’

Story by Casey Langan. Original version appeared in the December/January 2015-16 issue of Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation’s Rural Route.