

AGWEEK

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Woman with a variety of jobs prepares to promote US wheat worldwide

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North Dakota sisters look to add value to their family farm's wheat

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Photos by Jaryn Homiston / Agweek
Rhonda Larson farms with her family near East Grand Forks, Minn. She's also a substitute teacher and a national leader of U.S. Wheat Associates. Here, she does late-fall cultivation on the farm. **Cover:** Rhonda Larson is active in all aspects of the farm, particularly marketing and management.

MINNESOTA WOMAN FARMS, TEACHES, PROMOTES US WHEAT WORLDWIDE

By Jonathan Knutson
Agweek Staff Writer

East Grand Forks, Minn.

Rhonda Larson — farmer, substitute teacher and national commodity group leader — tells this story of a classroom experience that gives a taste of her diverse life.

"We were in school, and they had Career Day and one little girl was dressed up and she said, 'What am I?'" Larson answered, "A cowgirl?" No, the girl responded, "I'm going to be a farmer!" Larson thought, "That's cool. Then, Larson said, 'She and I had a conversation about that's what I do.'"

Larson, a veteran East Grand Fork farmer and enthusiastic certified

substitute teacher, also serves as national vice chairwoman of the U.S. Wheat Associates, often known as USW, which promotes U.S. wheat around the world. She's now slated to take over as chair in the summer of 2022; initially she was scheduled to take the top spot this summer, but the coronavirus pandemic pushed back her ascension.

"These are crazy times for everyone," she said, stressing that she enjoys her varied roles.

As Larson tells it, she was born into farming, came late to substitute teaching and assumed the national wheat leader role unexpectedly, at least to her.

Larson, 62, raises wheat, soybeans and sugar beets on the family farm known as

Ralph Larson Farms of East Grand Forks. Her father, Ralph, 92, is retired, but her brothers, Dan and Dean, remain active in the family farm. Her son, Bryce, is part of the operation, too.

Her father's twin brother, Ray, also farmed, and his children — Rhonda's cousins — farm, too. The cousins still help each other with farm work when needed.

Rhonda Larson graduated from the University of Minnesota with a bachelor's degree in public administration and a juris doctor degree in law from the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks. (Grand Forks and East Grand Forks are sister cities, separated by the Red River of the North.) The four-year degree qualified



Rhonda Larson's diverse career includes serving as a substitute teacher, primarily at South Point Elementary in East Grand Forks, Minn. Larson, right, stands in front of the school and talks about teaching with Agweek's Jonathan Knutson.

her to receive the substitute teacher certification, after a background check, in Minnesota.

Larson did legal work for

several years before deciding in 1992 that farming full-time would be a better fit for

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her. "I had to make a choice: law or full-time farming," she said.

Today, she's active in all aspects of the farm, particularly marketing and management.

Teaching 'keeps you young'

A half-dozen years ago, Larson was "looking for something to do in the winter time, and this (substitute teaching) was a good fit for me. I enjoy working with kids, and it's fun. It keeps you young, I think, because they always have a story to tell, and it's always enjoyable to work with them," she said.

About 60% of U.S. farmers have off-farm income, according to the most recent figures from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

She was a substitute teacher for several years in Crookston, Minn., and has worked for the past four years in the East Grand Forks School District. This year, she has focused exclusively on teaching at South Point Elementary.

She's teaching at least one day, and sometimes two or more days, every week. Substitute teachers, typically in short supply, are especially difficult to find this school year because of the pandemic.

The elementary school is happy to have her, said Chad Grassel, principal of South Point Elementary.

"We know her, we trust her. The kids really enjoy her," he said.

Strengthening wheat

Larson is no stranger to leadership in commodity groups, particularly ones promoting wheat.

She was a board



Jaryn Homiston / Agweek

Rhonda Larson is a farmer, substitute teacher and the national vice chairwoman of U.S. Wheat Associates, which promotes U.S. wheat around the world. She'll take over as chairperson in the summer of 2022.

member of the Minnesota Wheat Research & Promotion Council for 16 years, serving as chairwoman from 2010 to 2012. She was a member on the Wheat Foods Council board and is a longtime member of the Minnesota Association of Wheat Growers and the Red River Valley Sugarbeet Growers Association. In the past, she served on U.S. Wheat's Long-Range Planning Committee and Budget Committee.

Larson had been preparing to step back from her roles with the wheat groups when a U.S. Wheat official urged her to join the organization's national leadership track: secretary-treasurer, vice chairwoman, chair and past chair. She agreed.

Once she ascends to chairwoman, she'll spend a year in that role and then another year as past chair.

U.S. Wheat, active in more than 100 countries, is funded through producer checkoff dollars managed by 17 state wheat commissions and cost-share money provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Normally, Larson would be traveling frequently as vice chair to promote U.S. wheat. She's visited a few countries, including

Spain and Mexico, but the pandemic has greatly limited her travels.

"Some of the countries (to which she might be traveling) are even more locked down than we are," she said.

'A face with the crop'

Foreign customers have existing relationships with professional U.S. Wheat staffers, but the overseas buyers greatly appreciate visiting with farmers who actually raise wheat, Larson said.

"They know we're a grower. When we talk to someone from a different country, they want to know what the crop looks like," she said. "It's really a big deal to them for us to come over. . . . They like to put a face with the crop they're getting."

U.S. wheat, which costs more than the wheat sold by many competitors, is valued for its high quality and reliability, Larson said.

"The quality is always there. All of our customers, that's their main thing. If U.S. Wheat says the quality is at a certain level, it's there. And if there is a problem, we're right there and fix it," she said.

Brian O'Toole, a Crystal, N.D., farmer and past chairman of U.S. Wheat Associates, said promoting wheat overseas can



Photo supplied by Rhonda Larson

Farming can be stressful, but East Grand Forks, Minn. farmer Rhonda Larson says it brings satisfaction, too.

be challenging, but is rewarding, as well.

"The most satisfaction I got from being a part of the leadership in USW was simply the knowledge of what the organization was doing around the world to promote U.S. Wheat," he said. "The U.S. farmer needs to know that his customer is not an elevator or even a mill. Our customers are families just like us. They are all concerned where their food comes from. Safety, reliability, consistency, are all questions asked about a product that is grown on my farm."

"These questions are asked in over 100 different countries by housewives that speak 100 different languages. U.S. Wheat is that conduit to overcome these barriers. In my travels for USW, I was always accompanied by a translator. I have heard 'thank you' in many different languages," O'Toole said.

Wheat at home

Though her work promoting wheat, Larson

also has learned from U.S. farmers across the country. Most of them raise types of wheat different from the hard red spring wheat she grows

"It's just amazing. I know people from over the United States, and to learn their farming and how they market as opposed to what we do — you learn something every day," she said.

But farmers in this area can be reluctant to raise wheat because it often doesn't provide as much profit as crops such as corn or soybeans. On Larson's farm, wheat is grown in large part as a rotational crop in conjunction with sugar beets; wheat helps to prepare the soil for sugar beets the following year.

"Wheat is a hard sell around here. It's looked as a rotational crop in Minnesota. On the West Coast, it's their main crop" for farmers who raise it, Larson said. "We're working really hard to get wheat to the point where it's not just a rotational crop, that

you can make a profit off it."

The 2019 crop harvest was one of the most challenging ever on the Larson farm.

Extremely wet weather "made it a nightmare. It started in the grains; we left a quarter of the wheat in the ground. It just never ended" as the harvest moved into soybeans and sugar beets, she said

Conditions were so bad that Larson's farm was unable to harvest any of its beets.

But there was a silver lining.

"You really learn to value your neighbors," she said. As difficult as the harvest was, "There was a kind of camaraderie. We were together in that we'll be there to help each other out."

It's too early to predict what 2021 will bring in Larson's roles as farmer, teacher and commodity group leader. But whatever happens, "We'll get through it," she said.