



**POTATO INDUSTRY
LEADERSHIP
INSTITUTE**

Participant Biographies

Leadership Class of 2023



Thomas Baker

Director of California Operations, Allied Potato
Inc.

Bakersfield, California

Thomas Baker graduated from California State University Bakersfield with a degree in Public Policy, emphasis in Non-Profit Management. Son of a farmer, and raised around Ag his whole childhood, he chose to enter the industry in 2013 and has enjoyed the unique set of challenges often present in production Ag. In his current role as Director of California Operations for Allied Potato, he manages the potato supply produced in his region, while scrutinizing operations and forever searching for efficiencies. When he is not on the farm, he enjoys running, gardening, and cooking with his wife Brittany and his son Graham. As a Bakersfield native, he enjoys contributing to the community and is active in local foundations focusing on Art and Ag. Thomas considers every person on the farm a members of his extended family and ranks team building as one of the highest priorities.



Bryan Bender

4th generation grower, Bender Potatoes
Chambersburg, Pennsylvania

Bryan Bender is 38 years old and is the 4th generation grower of Bender Potatoes. Bender Potatoes grow 140 acres of round white potatoes in Chambersburg, PA on 500 acres of farmland. Bender Potatoes grow 70 acres of Atlantic and Snowden for out of the field chipping and 70 acres of Norwis, Reba, and Waneta for table stock. While 30 acres of Waneta are put into storage to be packed and sold on demand, Bryan oversees sales, shipping, and procuring for repacking to provide local customers with year-round supply. They sell to a few local grocery stores and restaurants, but most of the table stock goes to food service distributors. As a small family farm, Bryan is involved in the entire operation but his focus is growing, buying, and selling potatoes.

Bryan also helps manage the everyday activity of 7-10 year-round employees. To help keep his life busy, he and his wife of 12 years, Betsy, have three kids - an 11-year-old son, 8-year-old daughter, and 5-year-old son. As a family they enjoy eating, watching and playing sports, travel and exploring new places, friendships and family. He is a member of a local church, coaches basketball and football, and loves his hometown of Chambersburg.

Bryan went to Coastal Carolina University hoping to play basketball and as a math major, but mostly to go party at college near the beach. After becoming a Christian through a campus ministry called Campus Outreach, he went to work for them in 2007 at NC State University in Raleigh, NC. In 2012 he moved back to the family farm where he grew up trying escape. Bryan serves on the boards of the Pennsylvania Co-operative of potato growers and the Pennsylvania State Potato research. Last year he went off the Potatoes USA board where he was on the research and industry outreach committees.



Brogan Darrington

Owner, Brogan D Farms

Delco, Idaho

Brogan Darrington grew up in Declo, Idaho where he still resides. He is the youngest of four boys. Brogan currently owns and manages his own small farm while also being in a partnership that manages his father's larger farm. In 2022, Brogan's farms grew six different varieties of potatoes. Aside from potatoes, the farms produce sugar beets, corn, wheat, malt barley and hay. The majority of the farm is irrigated directly out of the Snake River or its canals. The remainder is watered out of deep wells. Brogan graduated cum laude from Utah State University with a Bachelor's degree in Ag Systems and Technology, with a minor in Agronomy. He is an active member of the Idaho Grain Producers. Brogan also earned a ranking of Eagle Scout in his youth.

Brogan graduated from Declo High School then served a two year LDS mission in Antofagasta, Chile. He and his wife, Brittini have three children. Korver (8) Quinn (6) and Mace (3). Brittini works at the local school district as a technology coach. She also teaches online classes. Brogan lives a very active life. He is active in his church and his kids activities. He enjoys playing basketball, golf, and a variety of motorsports. He also loves to travel and experience new things.





Ben De Jonge

Owner, Premier Ag, LLC

Manhattan, Montana

Ben De Jonge is the owner and operator of Premier Ag, LLC. Premier Ag specializes in growing early-generation seed potatoes. He is a fourth-generation farmer in Manhattan, Montana, and also works for his family farm, Gallatin Valley Farms. At Gallatin Valley Farms Ben grows assorted small grains and seed potatoes, as well as helps with the family malt company. His responsibilities between both businesses include crop management, sales, customer service, equipment maintenance, and overall operations.

Ben is originally from Zeeland, Michigan, and graduated from Holland Christian High School. He grew up visiting his uncle's potato farm in Montana. These visits sparked an interest in agriculture that eventually led to a move to Montana for his family. He jumped at the opportunity to work on the family farm alongside his father. Because of this experience, he started his own business, Premier Ag, in 2016. Ben has been over 12+ years of farming experience.

Ben is passionate about producing high-quality seed, serving his clients, and expanding his business skills. He loves to challenge the status-quo mindset of "this is the way we've always done it" and come up with innovative solutions to produce the best products possible for his clients. Ben enjoys learning, growing his knowledge of business, and farming skill set.

Ben married his wife, Ashley, in 2019. He somehow talked her into owning a string of bird dogs and a few horses. When he isn't farming they both love to spend time training their dogs.

Ben looks forward to meeting the other participants at PILI and learning more about their backgrounds and areas of expertise, as well as enhancing his leadership skills within the potato industry.



Danny Deprey

Farm Manager, County Farms

Mars Hill, Maine

My name is Danny Deprey. Potato farming is in my blood. I was born and raised in Fort Kent, Maine on a multi-generational family potato farm. As the industry changed, I transitioned to owning and operating my own log truck.

After getting married and starting a family, I attended college at Northern Maine Community College, and obtained a plumbing and heating degree. True to my roots, I realized that farming is in my DNA and started working for County Farms, LLC for the McCrum family, and have been employed for the past 13 years. I manage a potato farm in the northern part of Maine and grow processing potatoes.

My wife Michelle and I have two children and we enjoy snowmobiling, hunting, fishing, and flying. I am looking forward to meeting others in the PILI and further developing additional leadership skills.



Nick Desautel

Part-Owner/President, John F. Desautel Farming
Company

Grafton, North Dakota



Nick Desautel is a part owner of a 4th generation, family farm. John F. Desautel Farms is located north of Grafton, North Dakota, which is in the Northern Red River Valley. They raise potatoes, wheat, dry beans, corn, and soybeans.

Nick graduated from North Dakota State University in 2012 with a bachelor's degree in Agricultural Economics. Upon graduation he returned to the family farm where he grew up. The farm's primary focus is potatoes. They produce red and yellow flesh potatoes for the fresh market but has always found the potato industry as a whole, very intriguing. The complexity of potato agronomics, marketing and logistics triggers Nick's strong interest towards the potato industry.

He has been married for four years to Amanda, who also comes from a farming family. They are blessed with two children, Annie (2 ½) and Jack (1). In Nick's spare time he enjoys going to the lake with his family, golfing, curling and snowmobiling.

He currently sits on the North Dakota Potato Council Board of Directors and represents their seat on the Northland Potato Growers Association Board of Directors. He is also involved in various boards and organizations throughout the community. Nick is honored to be given the PILI opportunity to meet people in the industry from various areas, establish relationships, build leadership skills, and use the PILI experience to make a positive impact in the potato industry in years to come.



Nicola Carey

Data Scientist, Wysocki Produce Farm
Bancroft, Wisconsin

My name is Nicola Carey. I graduated from UW Madison in 2015 with a masters in Agricultural and Applied Economics. My husband, John, and I have 4 kids who keep life entertaining.

Our family farm started with Wysocki Produce Farm, now a 4th generation potato farm located in central Wisconsin. We produce potatoes for the fresh, process, and chip markets. We also have an early generation seed farm in northern Wisconsin. My primary responsibility focuses on data management and analytics. However, our next generation owners have a two-year rotation through the company, taking time to work in each department. I have worked in our packaging shed, seed farm, IT, QMS, and am currently in my HR rotation.

I grew up on the farm and knew very young that I wanted to make my career there. Agricultural data analytics provides a great balance between being out in the fields and creating tools to assist the operation teams.





James Farris

Farm Hand, Macy Farms LLC

Culver, Oregon

My name is James Farris and this is a little bit about me. I'm a homeschool graduate born and raised in Central Oregon. I'm one of 5 kids all of whom live and work is some facet of the AG world. I'm an avid outdoorsman as well as a very active athlete.

I started working for Macy Farms in 2015 as a hired hand and over the next couple years have worked my way into a management position over the day to day operation of the farm. We are a fairly small operation, only growing 300 acres of seed potatoes per year along other seed crops like carrots, grass seed and wheat. The Farm is a third generation family farm and has a proud tradition of raising quality seed potatoes for many different markets.

I'm looking forward to getting to meet and make friends with others in the AG world and to learn leadership skills and experience more of the industry.





Chelsea Gray

Executive Administrator, Potatoes USA

Denver, Colorado

Hi all! I was born and raised outside of Chicago and moved to Colorado when I was 18 to attend college at Colorado State University where I studied Hospitality Management. After college I worked for a luxury hotel in Denver for a few years before finding my way to Potatoes USA.

As the marketing organization for the 2,000 potato farming families operating in the United States, Potatoes USA promotes five main potato products: fresh table-stock potatoes, fresh chipping potatoes, seed potatoes, frozen potato products, and dehydrated potato products. I will have been with Potatoes USA for 6 years in March 2023. My potato career began in 2017 when I started as Meeting and Event manager for the board and in 2021 I transitioned into my current role as Executive Administrator. As Executive Administrator for the board, I help manage our Denver office and event program, provide admin support for our CEO, and assist with board governance.

If you told me at 18 if I would have a career in ag marketing, I never would have believed you, but I am so grateful I have made my way here. I find members of the potato industry to be the most gracious and friendly people I've ever had the pleasure to meet.

My husband, Corbin and I have a 7-year old French Bulldog named Porter. We enjoy doing all the Colorado things like snowboarding and mountain biking.

For years I have heard how amazing the PILI experience is and am thrilled for the opportunity to attend. I look forward to making more potato industry friends and connections as we learn how to advocate for taters and build leadership skills together!

Aaron Groves

Farm Manager, Black Gold Farms

Jackson, Missouri



Aaron Groves is a native Californian born and raised in the fertile soils of the San Joaquin Valley. For almost twenty years Aaron worked for the world's largest grower/packer, Grimmway/Cal-Organic Farms. Over those years he became proficient in many roles including vegetable seed procurement, variety development, and farming of conventional carrots. In mid-2022 Aaron had the opportunity to further his knowledge and growth in agriculture. He found that opportunity with Black Gold Farms managing their Charleston farm in southeast Missouri. Black Gold Farms is a global production, sales and service operation, specializing in potatoes. As a leading supplier of chip potatoes, Black Gold is internationally known for its innovation in potato production and handling. In operation and family owned for over eighty years, Black Gold operates in eight states and harvests over 20,000 acres of potatoes each year.

A University of La Verne graduate, Aaron and his wife Krissy have two boys and are enjoying their new life in the bootheel of Missouri. Aaron is an avid outdoorsman that enjoys backpacking, fly fishing, and serving youth as a Scoutmaster with The Boy Scouts of America. He is actively looking for a tall mountain to climb anywhere in Missouri.

Being new to potato growing and production, Aaron is excited to be part of the 2023 PILI contingent. He hopes to gain knowledge from his colleagues within the industry and reinforce his leadership skills.



Kenneth Irving

Operation Manager, Irving Farms

Caribou, Maine

I'm Kenny Irving of Irving Farms in Caribou, Maine. I graduated from the University of Maine in 2020 with a degree in Mechanical Engineering. I live in Caribou with my crazy golden retriever, Annie.

I work on our six-generation family farm, helping operate an 850 acres potato farm in Northern Maine with my father, Scott, my cousin Robbie and my uncle, Jeff. Irving Farms harvests a wide variety of potatoes including reds, whites, yellows, and the popular Caribou Russet.

My responsibilities within the company include operating a planter in the spring, the harvester in the fall, and efficiently managing a 33,000 square foot packing facility during the winter months. We currently pack all varieties and size potatoes for distribution to grocery store chains throughout New England, food banks across the country, and food service industry suppliers. Growing up on a farm has helped instill a quality work ethic, the importance of the agriculture industry in northern Maine and taking pride in the product we produce.

I'm looking forward to connecting with other participants at PILI and establishing business relationships throughout the agriculture industry. I hope to bring experience, new skills, and leadership perspective back to the farm.



Trey Jones

Farm Manager, Three S Ranch INC.

Blanca, Colorado

My name is Trey Jones. I currently live in Blanca, CO. I was born and raised in Monte Vista, CO, and graduated from Sargent high school in 2018. After that, I attended Mesa University, studying Environmental Science. After two years, I decided to move to Phoenix, AZ, and chase my dream of becoming a private pilot. I received my private pilot's license in March 2020. After that, I moved back home to work on the family farm. I have two dogs Elle and Harlee.

Three S Ranch Inc., our family farm, is located in Blanca, Colorado. Three S Ranch Inc. is a fourth-generation, family-owned farm. We grow potatoes, barley, and alfalfa. We currently have around 5,500 acres that we rotate crops through. We also own A potato packing facility in Blanca that runs potatoes all year round, supplying customers all across the United States and Mexico.

My stepdad, an owner of Three S Ranch Inc. is the reason I am involved in the family farm today. Growing up on the farm, I always knew I wanted to come back and follow in his footsteps. I loved growing up in agriculture and would not have wanted it any other way. Currently, I am a farm/field manager responsible for all things growing. This includes chemical applications and timing, irrigation management, new products and trials, and so on.

I am currently a Board member of the Colorado Potato Administrative Committee, representing my local county. I hope to keep our farm growing and expanding as well as serve agriculture in my community and nationwide.

I am looking forward to attending the Potato Industry Leadership Institute. I anticipate it will help improve my understanding of problems the potato industry faces on a national level as well as help improve my leadership skills for my farm and community. I look forward to meeting new people that are involved in the industry that can help grow my network.



Dalan Lerwill

Field Representative, McCain Foods

Albion, Idaho

Dalan grew up on a dry farm barley operation in Teton Valley, Idaho. He went to college at BYU-Idaho and perused a BS degree in his passion, Agriculture. Finally getting back to his roots of production agriculture, he joined the field team at McCain Foods in Burley, Idaho in the spring of 2019.

In this role, Dalan is in charge of managing grower accounts and the raw potato supply into the Burley, Idaho fry facility. The managed accounts range from small family operations to large corporate entities, all of which contribute to a valuable supply chain. Geographically these operations span from Central Idaho Magic Valley, west to the Idaho/Oregon borders Treasure Valley.

The majority of acres that Dalan manages are located in Western Idaho. Due to local climate of this region, there is great opportunity to use these crops to fill an early harvest window to keep the plants running until the remaining Idaho crop matures. It is a busy time of year when this window arrives in late July. From late July thru early September, we are reliant on these early crops to run our lines. Dalan coordinates with all of the early grower accounts in order to match crop maturity, manage crop quality, track yields, coordinate bulk transportation between field and factory, and ensure that harvest crews are in order to keep lines of production full and running.

In his free time, Dalan is married and has four rambunctious boys ranging in ages from eight to two years old. They enjoy all things outdoors as a family. Dalan is an avid hunter with a passion for wildlife and conservation. He is always chasing the next season, weather that be deer and elk, late season geese and ducks, or the thrill of a trout on a tight line.



Eric Makarewicz

Grower, Marker Farms

Elmira, Michigan

Eric grew up on his family farm where he got to experience farming first hand. He always had chores around the farm as all farm kids do. Operating machinery as a youth and having responsibility instilled a good work capacity. After high school Eric pursued other career paths but his passion for farming always brought him back home, where he has been growing his skills and taking on more responsibility over the past 15 years. Eric and his wife Rachel have a 1.5 year old son who keeps them on their toes along with two family dogs that love to run around the farm.

Eric is a fourth generation to Marker Farms. The operation consists of three full time employees including his father, uncle and himself. With a small crew Eric's roles are multifaceted.

Marker Farms is a seed grower in northern Michigan that was established in 1915. They currently grow two hundred acres of seed potatoes and rotate with wheat, green beans and great northern beans.

Eric is honored to participate in PILI to gain the tools to excel on the farm and Michigan Seed Potato Association.





Kelci Martinez

Vice President, Van Treese Farms Inc.

Monte Vista, Colorado

Kelci Martinez was born and raised on a family farm, Van Treese Farms, in the San Luis Valley—located in south central Colorado, surrounded by the beautiful Sangre De Cristo and San Juan Mountain ranges. Her family farm is a 3rd generation farm and primarily raises potatoes and Coors malt barley. The farm relies primarily on a large underground aquifer and center pivot irrigation to raise crops in the hot dry summers. Farming runs deep in the San Luis Valley, in fact, Kelci’s high school is located on the corner of a potato field and the mascot is fittingly—the “Farmers.” In 2015, Kelci graduated Valedictorian from her high school class before continuing her education at Colorado State University.

While in college, Kelci decided to focus her studies on environmental horticulture, with a specialization in landscape design and contracting. This allowed her to stay close to her roots and broaden her skill set. Kelci spent her college summers gaining experience in the SLV interning for Agro Engineering, a local company specializing in crop consulting, soil health, and irrigation monitoring. In 2019, she was awarded her Bachelor of Science, summa cum laude.

Shortly after graduation, Kelci moved back home and married her high school sweetheart, Bryce Martinez. Although she wanted to stay and take over the family farm, she only got a small taste of farming, as Bryce had other aspirations. In 2020, the two moved back to Denver so he could attend law school. During the past year, Kelci has leveraged her landscape design degree working for Bloom Floralscapes, a commercial landscaping company. Luckily for her, Bryce finishes law school this spring and the two will return home. Kelci can finally fulfill her dreams and become the 4th generation to carry on the legacy of Van Treese Farms.

She is excited about the PILI conference and the opportunity to connect with industry leaders, learn ways she can further the potato industry, and give back to her local community.



Ryan Pelletier

Seed Farm Agronomist/Operations Manager,
Walther Farms

McMillan, Michigan

My name is Ryan Pelletier. I graduated from Michigan State University in 2004 with a degree in Agricultural Sciences. I live in McMillan, MI with my wife, Krysten and our two beautiful daughters.

I work for Walther Farms on the Seed Farm. I have been employed with the Walther family for 8 years full time after completing two internships with them while in college. I am responsible for growing, storing, and shipping 650 acres of blue tag seed at our two seed locations. I also manage all of the seed contracts with Frito Lay for all Walther Farm locations. I am currently serving an appointed 4 year term on the Michigan Potato Industry Commission that started in 2022.

I grew up next door to the seed farm in McMillan; dreaming of driving big tractors. Little did I know that this dream would come true, and I would work in an industry that my family had been involved in for many years. Some of the very same land that my grandfather operated as a dairy and potato farm, I now farm as part of the job that I love.

I am excited for this opportunity to meet others in the industry and gain new knowledge that I can utilize to build my leadership skills.



Luke Radford

Agronomist, Moss Farms

Rupert, Idaho



Luke Radford is a graduate of Brigham Young University – Idaho (B.S. Agronomy). Currently, he is the Agronomist at Moss Farms. The farm grows seed, processed, and fresh potatoes, along with sugar beets, wheat, corn, and alfalfa in Southern Idaho. This spring will be his 5th year working for the third-generation family farm. His responsibilities have grown over that time. They now include crop planning, purchasing crop inputs, field scouting, the implementation of precision ag tools, and analyzing reports for the farm.

Luke's interest in agriculture started from a young age working with his dad on the family farm. His dad, Jim, started a wholesale ag chemical company after returning from the Vietnam War. Growing up Luke would ride in the truck with his dad scouting fields and meeting farmers. Those experiences with his dad had a direct impact on his career path helping farmers succeed.

Luke is a member of Certified Crop Advisors and holds a professional consulting license in the State of Idaho.

He has been married to his wife Cassie for 10 Years. They have 2 rowdy boys, ages 6 and 2. In his free time Luke loves riding dirt bikes in the mountains, golf, snowboard, and occasionally play video games with his wife and kids.



John Scheuring

CSS Farms

Dalhart, Texas



My name is John Scheuring. I graduated from The University of the Ozarks in 2010 with a bachelor's degree in Biology. My wife Amanda and I have been married for seven years and live in Dumas, Texas.

I grew up supporting the Texas A&M Potato Breeding program during the summers. My father is a Sr. Researcher for the program, and I spent many summers picking field trials by hand. After spending much of my youth sacking 50lb bags of potatoes, I did not think I would have any involvement with potatoes as a career, however, I found myself employed in the potato industry a few years after graduating college. I have now been employed in the potato industry for the past eight years, and I cannot see myself doing anything else due to the great people I interact with on a daily basis as well as the challenges that come with growing potatoes.

I am proud to be employed by CSS Farms. CSS started in 1986 in Watertown South Dakota. In the last 35 years the company has expanded to have a nationwide footprint. A cornerstone to CSS Farms' success is our operations in Texas. With my role as the Regional Agronomist for the Texas locations, I am responsible for overseeing growing decisions and have a direct hand in the outcome of the crop. I also have the opportunity to train new agronomists and introduce them to potato production and the potato industry as a whole. I am fortunate that I get to directly support a few thousand acres of chip production as well as a few different categories of table stock production.

One of the things I am looking forward to during PILI is being able to connect with others that can provide a different perspective outside of growers. I am also excited to meet new people and make new connections. Personally, I am hoping to improve my communication and leaderships skills in order to become an effective advocate for the potatoes industry as a whole.



Luke Schroeder

Manager, Schroeder Brother Farms

Antigo, Wisconsin

My Name is Luke Schroeder. I graduated from the UW Madison Ag program in 2022, and attended UW Lacrosse for a year prior to that.

I work at our beautiful family owned Seed Potato Farm underneath my father and 2 uncles. My 3 cousins (Eric, Andy, JD) and I make up the 5th generation of Schroeder Brothers Farms with plans to continue that tradition. We have 2 farms located in Antigo, WI and grow seed potatoes in many surrounding counties. We are up to roughly 2500 acres of potatoes and grow rotational crops to bring our total acreage to around 7,000. We take great pride in providing the best quality seed potatoes that we can grow for all of our growers. My daily role here at the farm changes by the season, like most. During the fall I manage one of our unloading and storage crews. As we get into winter I help with the shipment of seed on our North Farm. Once spring time rolls around I run a cutting crew and as our hectic planting season digresses into summer, I help with any irrigation needed and service my equipment for the spring and fall time.

I've always been around the family operation and always had a love for farming. As I got into High School and started working more hours in the summertime it became pretty clear to me that this is what I wanted to do for work. The drastic changes in daily tasks from season to season kept me deeply interested and still does. The challenges farming brings each and every day is what makes it so fun for me.

The PILI opportunity will be great for me and I am extremely excited for the trip. Being able to see other operations and meet new people in the potato industry will greatly help me advance my knowledge for farming. I am very appreciative of this opportunity.



Chad Sullivan

Owner, CL Sullivan Farms LLC

Pasco, Washington



My name is Chad Sullivan. I am a potato farmer in Eastern Washington. I have been married to my wife Leslie for 10 years and we have 4 children together.

I grew up in agriculture and have been working on a farm for as long as I can remember. My dad is an orchard farmer, however it was working for my uncle that began my career in the potato industry. I feel incredibly fortunate to have worked as his farm manager for 10 years, where I gained a great deal of experience and knowledge.

Today I am an owner and operator of my own potato farming operation and have been doing so for 6 years now. We grow three different varieties, about 1100 acres in all, of processed potatoes for Simplot. In addition, I am also a partner in an alfalfa farm.

I have also been a member of the Potatoes USA board for 6 years. I have had the opportunity to serve on the admin committee, in research as well as in industry outreach.

I am optimistic that the PILI experience will prepare myself and other future leaders for the privilege to serve in crucial industry state and national roles.





Cole Vculek

Owner, Brian Vculek Farm

Crete, North Dakota

My name is Cole Vculek. I graduated from North Dakota State College of Science in 2010 with a degree in farm management and have been farming since. Our farm is 4th generation with potatoes being in production for the last 33 years. We raise russets for frozen process as well as 4 varieties of russets for seed production. My responsibilities include public relations, finding suitable land to grow on, water management, fertility, and storage management to sell the best product we can. I enjoy the potato side of the farm, there is never a dull moment.

I am looking forward to attending PILI, meeting people from the industry and hoping to sharpen my leadership skills.



Paul Yamane

SR Field Representative, JR Simplot Co.

Moses Lake, Washington

Paul is a Senior Field Representative for the JR Simplot Company. Paul's primary responsibility is acting as a liaison between the company and grower dealing primarily with Direct delivery logistics. Paul has been in the potato processing business for the past 6 years. Prior to Simplot Paul worked as a Farm Field Manager for 30 years.

Paul's latest endeavor has been to join the Washington State Potato Commission Research Council team.

