Faris Farms

SECTION I:

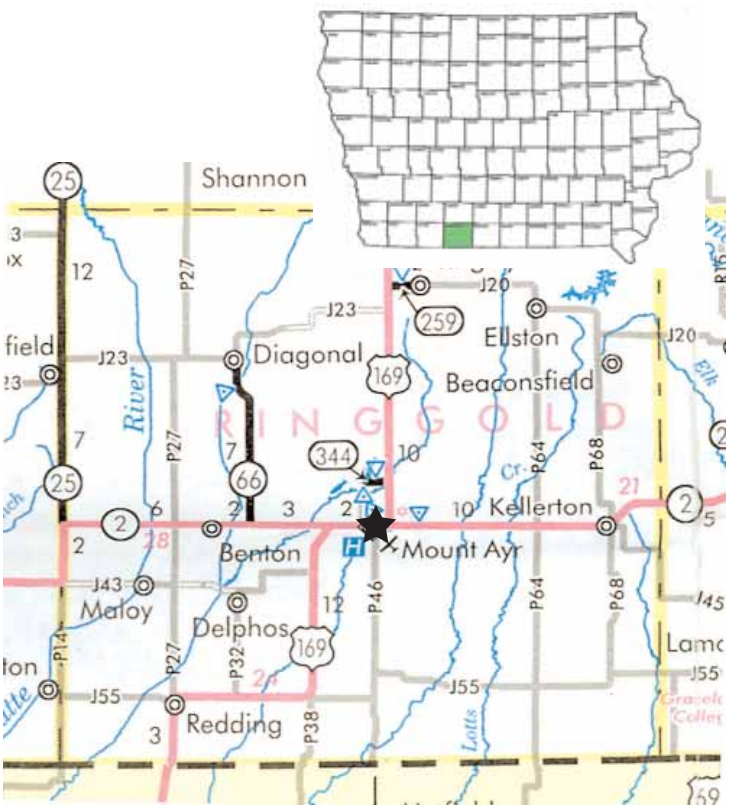
Description of Business

Business name: Faris Farms

Individuals to be recognized:
Lee and Martha (deceased) Faris
Rodney and Elizabeth Faris
Lyle Faris

Address: Lee Faris, Mount Ayr, Iowa

Location: Faris Farms is located five miles northeast of Mount Ayr, Iowa. The majority of the farming operation is in Liberty Township of Ringgold County.



What is the nature of the parent business?

Faris Farms is a commercial cow-calf and backgrounding operation that is based on a 190-head crossbred cow herd. The cow herd consists of spring and fall-calving cows. The fall-calving herd was developed to spread income throughout the year.

Spring-born calves are weaned and backgrounded to an average weight of 800 pounds at 8 to 10 months of age. Fall-born calves are marketed as grass cattle the next spring. The calves are sold at a local livestock auction in Humeston, Iowa.

Cattle provide the major income source for Faris Farms. Crops grown include corn, soybeans, oats and alfalfa hay. About 40% of the corn is fed to the cattle with the balance sold to a local feed mill. All the soybeans are marketed to a soybean processor at Creston, Iowa. Surplus alfalfa hay is marketed to local cattle producers. All of the oats are fed to the cattle.

Conserving the soil is vitally important to the Faris family. Row crops are grown primarily on the "bottom" ground with steeper slopes used only for grazing or haying. Highly erodible land is terraced and tiled and kept in permanent vegetative cover. The only time that highly erodible land is tilled is to reseed alfalfa fields. Pastures are interseeded with legumes or grasses.

Lee Faris of Mount Ayr, Iowa, is a life-long cattleman and conservationist.

Discuss the history of the business.

Lee and Martha Faris started Faris Farms in 1958 when they purchased 80 acres soon after their marriage. Lee farmed his own land and helped his parents, Wilbur and Eva Faris, with their farm, while working full-time as a feed company representative through the 1960s and as a partner in a local grain elevator from 1970 to 1976.

Lee and Martha began purchasing more land to expand their cattle operation in the 1970s. They acquired Lee's parents' farm that was started by Lee's great grandfather, Samuel Ellsworth Holland, in 1903.

Lee Faris and his wife, Martha, purchased their home farm in 1958. The farm adjoins land in the Faris family since 1903.

Elizabeth and Rod Faris of Mount Ayr, Iowa, help Rod's father, Lee Faris, with his cattle operation. Elizabeth was on crutches last winter after falling and cracking her pelvis.

One tract of the Faris family farm was designated a Century Farm in 2003 and another tract will become a Century Farm in 2005. Lee's son, Rodney, will be the fifth generation to own this land.

Rodney Faris helps his father with his farming operation, providing labor and management support. Rodney has his own operation and also works off-farm.

Lyle Faris, Lee's brother, has his own farming operation 13 miles from Lee and Rodney who farm adjoining land. The men trade work as needed, helping each other with crop planting and harvesting and working livestock.

Lee and Martha Faris have three children. Rodney and his wife, Elizabeth, are the parents of three boys, Michael, Richard, and Justin. Their daughter, Jacquline Stewart, and her husband, Russ, have three children, Megann, Trent and Hallee. Their daughter, Jennifer Byrd, and her husband, Shawn, have two children, BrieAnn and Austin. All the family members live near Mount Ayr, Iowa.

Martha Faris, Lee's wife of more than 45 years, passed away in February 2004 after a long and courageous battle with cancer.

Crops grown for the farming operation include 400 acres in a corn-and-soybeans rotation, 200 acres of hay which is mostly alfalfa, 40 acres of oats grown to reseed alfalfa fields, and about 400 acres of improved pastures. Faris Farms has a total of 1,036 acres, 956 acres are owned and 80 acres are rented.

The 190-head cow herd is rotationally grazed on pastures and crop residues. Stocking rates for summer pastures are generally 2 acres per cow-calf pair.

The cows are Angus-Simmental-Charolais crossbreds. Only performance-tested bulls are used. The Simmental and Angus bulls are selected for weaning, growth and yearling weights.

The majority of the calves are primarily born from March 20 through the end of May. Calves are weaned in early September and started on a backgrounding ration of silage and ground hay with some ground grain and protein. The fall-born calves are weaned in late winter or early spring and sold as "grass cattle" or stockers.

Calf weaning weights have steadily increased over the years with better cattle genetics and improvements to the farms' forage production. Weaning weights for heifers average 490 pounds and 550 pounds for steers.

Lee Faris and his family have always been noted for their environmental efforts.

Lee has had tile and terraces built on his land every year since the mid-1970s. Three types of terraces have been installed including broad-base, grass-back and grass-front structures.

"I like grass-front terraces because we can farm those with larger equipment," says Lee Faris.

Lee and Rod Faris share a laugh during chores at Lee's farm northeast of Mount Ayr, Iowa.

The Farises are also progressive and early adopters of technology and trends they think will fit their cattle operation. One example is their participation for many years in the Iowa Green Tag Program. Calves are vaccinated and preconditioned according to the Iowa program. Last year for the first time, calves were tagged with an electronic identification device (EID) ear tag.

"We decided to tag our calves because animal identification and source verification is increasingly important. I also believe the ear tags helped us receive about $2 per hundredweight more for our calves," says Faris.

Give a brief ecological description of the land.

Faris Farms is located in the rolling hills of south central Iowa. Prior to pioneer settlement, the land was originally a mix of tall-grass prairie and woodland oak savannas extending along the rivers and streams. The land of Faris Farms has several cover types including, on the steeper slopes, native warm season grasses and timbered areas of oak, hickory, walnut and ash.

Walnut Creek meanders through most of the farm. The land includes terrain that is from gently to steeply sloping. Row crops are only grown on nearly level "bottomland" near the creek or on the ridge tops. Highly erodible land with slopes of 8 to 14 percent is maintained in pastures and hay fields. Steeper slopes of

Saving the soil and natural resources is a top priority of Faris Farms. Grass-backed, or bench, terraces in the cornfield (in background) prevent soil erosion. The cornfield will be reseeded to alfalfa after two years of row crops. Bottomland (dark green beyond trees) is used for a corn-soybeans rotation. Timber provides permanent cover on steep slopes near Walnut Creek and is excellent wildlife habitat. Alfalfa hay in foreground covers 8 to 12 percent slopes and remains as permanent cover except for re-establishment every 10 to 12 years.

Corn is planted on the more level ridge tops and alfalfa hay covers the slopes to keep soil in place.

Contour terraces hold the soil on Faris Farms, even in permanent hay fields.

This grass-backed terrace can be farmed except for a 10-foot swath on the backside of the terrace. It provides good cover for wildlife in Lee's hayfields without much loss of production. The terrace also provides stockpiled forages for winter grazing of the cow herd.

14 to 16 percent are in permanent grass cover of original prairie remnants or timber.

The cow herd is easily maintained with an abundance of forages and feedstuffs during years of normal rainfall. The average annual rainfall amount is 31 inches per year.

Pastures are planted with improved species of orchardgrass, bromegrass and tall fescue. Pastures are interseeded with legumes every three years. Mostly red clover is used with some birdsfoot trefoil. Excess vegetation is made into hay. About one-third of the pastures are hayed each spring. Cattle are grazed through the pastures on a 35-day rotation.

"With fescue in the grass mixture, the red clover helps reduce endophyte toxicity. We may also make grass hay from the pastures to keep the fescue from forming a seedhead and to keep the pasture forage in a vegetative stage," says Faris.

List all of the natural resources that provide income to the land.

The farming enterprise is the sole source of income for Faris Farms. The fertile land and plentiful rainfall grow bountiful crops, lush pastures for the cattle, and high-yielding hayfields. The crops, cattle and hay resulting from the natural resources and temperate climate of southern Iowa are all income sources for the farm.

Recreational opportunities include good fishing in the farm ponds, hunting for deer, pheasant and quail, and observing rarely-seen wildlife such as prairie chickens or bobcat. Although income could be derived from lease hunting or fee fishing, the Farises let family, friends and community members enjoy their land.

List all organizations that the operation has utilized in environmental efforts.

Lee Faris and his family have worked with the following organizations to improve and maintain the environmental quality of Faris Farms.

- USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) - technical assistance for installing terraces, tiling, and water systems such as ponds and cattle

watering areas.

- USDA-NRCS Environmental Quality Incentive Program - cost share funding for establishing or extending cattle watering systems, improving pastures with interseeding, and setting up rotational grazing systems.

- Iowa Division of Soil Conservation - aid in providing cost share dollars for terraces and ponds.

- Iowa Department of Natural Resources - technical assistance and cost share funding to seed warm season grasses for wildlife habitat. Faris Farms participated in programs to re-establish wildlife including barn owls and prairie chickens.

The Farises have utilized the research, information and educational opportunities from the following institutions or organizations.

- Iowa State University (ISU) Extension Service
- Iowa Beef Center - ISU
- Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture
- University of Missouri Forage Systems Research Center
- Committees of the Iowa Cattlemen's Association and the National Cattlemen's Beef Association
- Iowa Grassland Alliance
- Iowa Forage and Grassland Council
- Southern Iowa Forage and Livestock Committee

SECTION II

Stewardship Achievements and Practices of the Business

Energy

At Faris Farms, energy efficiency is a goal to reduce costs and protect the environment. Energy-saving measures include tending crops using no-till or minimum tillage and using soy diesel in diesel tractors and ethanol in vehicles such as cars and pickups.

Some of the crops grown on the farm are fed through the cattle, which saves energy by avoiding grain, silage and hay hauling off-farm.

Cattle are watered at a series of ponds built throughout the pastures. Cattle are watered below each

This watering tank below a pond can be moved in a wide circle to reseed areas trampled by cattle. The steel posts and a gate protect the black plastic water pipe from damage by cattle.

Cows and their calves are fenced from ponds in their rotationally grazed paddocks.

pond dam via a gravity-flow pipe instead of pumping water with electricity. The continuous flow of water via gravity also keeps water open longer in the winter, thus saving the energy required to heat frozen tanks.

The woodlands along the creeks and waterways are a natural windbreak for the cowherd. When gleaning crop residues in the fall and winter the small timbered areas provide natural shelter for the livestock.

Solar fencers are used throughout the farming operation to maintain paddock areas in the rotational grazing system.

Solar fence chargers power temporary boundary fences in the rotational grazing system. “I think solar fencers are more reliable than a battery fence charger,” says Faris.

Wildlife

Lee Faris and his family have worked to provide habitat for wildlife in several ways. Pastures and hay fields are well managed with adequate cover for nesting birds through practices such as rotational grazing and when possible, delayed clipping schedules.

All ponds are stocked with channel catfish, bass, and bluegill.

Lee has also worked with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to help restore the barn owl and prairie chicken to southern Iowa. He not only supported the barn owl program while it was underway, but also went “above and beyond” by providing a barn that was used to rear baby barn owls for release.

Currently, the DNR is re-establishing the prairie chicken to its native range. Due to the excellent care given by the Faris family to their pastures and hay

This family of barn owls is a nesting pair of adults and two chicks. Lee Faris was a willing landowner in a barn owl restoration project conducted by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR). He provided use of a barn to DNR personnel who raised and trained several baby barn owls in the barn’s loft.

A flying barn owl swoops toward to its nest site in a barn on the Lee Faris farm.

Prairie chickens are returning to southern Iowa after a 75-year absence. A “booming” site and nesting area adjoins Faris Farms. The birds have been sighted foraging in the pastures and hay fields of the farm in Ringgold County, Iowa.

ground, their farm provides excellent habitat for prairie chicken and known display and nesting sites, one of which is adjacent to Faris Farms.

Some of the wildlife species that live on or near the land and water resources of Faris Farms include quail, pheasant, turkey, Canadian geese, ducks, barn owl, great horned owl, prairie chicken, whitetail deer, fox, coyote, badgers, bobcat, beaver, and mink.

Lee Faris reviews his Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) application with Todd Perdew, soil conservation technician at the NRCS office in Mount Ayr, Iowa. Lee applied for EQIP funds to improve pastures and water systems.

Manure Handling

At Faris Farms, manure is handled as a valuable resource. Returning fertility to the land by crops grown and fed to the cattle completes a perfect nutrient recycling.

The concrete on lots that hold backgrounded calves are scraped every one to two weeks and the manure is dried before applying as solids in the crop fields or pastures and hay fields for fall fertilization.

Due to the number of acres in permanent pastures or hay fields, applying manure to land with vegetative cover is an environmentally sound practice, regardless of many weather conditions.

Soil tests help to ensure that appropriate manure application results in adequate, but not excessive, fertility on farm fields. Every four years soil tests are taken on crop and hay ground. Nutrients are applied per test recommendations with nitrogen credits given for soybeans and legumes from the previous year's crop.

Air

Dust control in the feedlots during the spring and fall is carefully monitored by the Farises. They consider it a necessity to control dust and manage manure properly to avoid odor problems, not only to maintain good air quality, but also more importantly, to provide the best possible environment for cattle health.

"We keep the lots clean to reduce dust and give newly-weaned calves the best chance to get started on bunk feeding," says Lee Faris.

Water Systems

Conserving the soil and water resources has been a priority at Faris Farms for five decades. The first pond was built in 1959 to control a gully and is still usable. That containment structure was the start of a series now totaling 15 ponds located throughout the farming operation. The ponds are part of an entire system of terraces and tiling combined with cropping practices that has greatly reduced soil erosion and enhanced water quality on every parcel of land owned by Faris Farms.

Lee Faris cleans the overflow pipe on a continuous flow waterer. Waterers below the 15 ponds on his property are part of a well-designed rotational grazing system for his commercial cow herd.

Most of the ponds used to water cattle have gravity flow outlets below the dams to keep cattle from eroding the pond banks by removing vegetative cover. The continuous flow outlet provides abundant, clean water for the cow herd. Each watering area is well designed and well positioned to protect the surrounding area from erosion by cattle traffic to the watering tank or waterer. Most of the ponds are fenced from livestock to reduce stream-bank erosion.

One of the ponds has an innovative water impoundment access designed by Lee Faris. Cattle can

This water impoundment access was built with Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) funds for $750. The access is 12 feet wide and 22 feet deep into the water. Steel pipe fencing, built by a local welding shop, is strong enough to withstand cattle pressure. Heavy matting called "Geotextile Fabric" was laid down and six inches of gravel was placed over it. The matting and rock extend into the water to the back fence. Cows also receive fly control from the white bag as they enter and exit the access.

Lee Faris has improved his forage base with pasture interseeding of legumes and rotational grazing. "The goal is to produce 'more with less,' whether it's cattle or crops," says Faris.

Red clover and birdsfoot trefoil are interseeded into orchardgrass, bromegrass and fescue for a forage mix that provides season-long grazing for the cow herd.

reach drinking water at the edge of the pond by walking from their paddock down a lane to the access site. The water impoundment access is 12 feet wide and extends into the water 22 feet. The sturdy steel fencing that surrounds the access was built by a local welding shop. Heavy matting called "Geotextile Fabric" and gravel was laid down for cattle to walk on as they enter the water to drink.

SECTION III

Tell how stewardship practices have affected the cattle business, including investment, productivity and profitability.

With careful planning and short-term sacrifice to establish soil-saving practices and water conservation, Lee Faris and his family have improved their cattle operation in many ways.

The conservation practices in place – no-till, minimum tillage, contour farming on slopes, permanent vegetative cover or undisturbed timber on steep slopes, rotational grazing, terraces, tiling, ponds, streambank stabilization, water access points, wildlife habitat – all contribute to increased productivity and profitability for the cattle operation.

"Good environmental stewardship has a snowball effect," explained Faris.

Land improvements such as terraces and tiling not only save soil and improve drainage, but also result in better row crop and forage yields. Higher yields have allowed the Farises to increase the size of their cow herd. With rotational grazing on well-managed and interseeded pastures, cow fertility and calving percentages have improved. Calf weaning weights are higher and it may take a little less time and feed to background calves to a marketable weight.

Leadership

Lee Faris is an extraordinary leader in stewardship and conservation efforts with his own family farming operation and within his community and state. Lee's knowledge of cattle and soil conservation is well respected by those who have worked with him in several organizations.

Lee is a member and has served as president of the Ringgold County Cattlemen's Association and Iowa Cattlemen's Association (ICA). In 2001, Lee received the ICA Hall of Fame Award, ICA's highest honor. He currently serves as a director and vice president of the Iowa Cattlemen's Foundation.

Lee Faris talks with NRCS Chief Bruce Knight during a celebration of the 50th anniversary of the PL566 Watershed Program. The event was held at the Badger Creek Watershed in Madison County, Iowa.

As a young man, Lee was active in 4-H and FFA. In FFA he received the Iowa Farmer Degree and was one of only 10 Iowans to receive the American Farmer Degree that year. For many years, he volunteered as a 4-H leader and served as vice president and president of the Ringgold County Fair Board.

Lee has been a Ringgold County Soil and Water Conservation District commissioner for 16 years and has served half that time as chair. In this position, he works with local government agencies to implement conservation programs to benefit Ringgold County.

Involvement in cooperative research, demonstration, education, or government programs that promote environmental stewardship.

He was appointed by Governor Branstad to the Iowa State Soil Conservation Committee and served for six years, two as chair. He was also appointed to the NRCS State Technical Committee to assist in advising state staff on the implementation of federal farm conservation programs. He has been active with this committee since 1997 helping to give guidance and recommendations on the latest Farm Bill.

Lee has served as co-chair of the Iowa Grassland Alliance since 2000. The group tries to promote the value of forages and grasslands in the state and nation.

This soil erosion structure (pond) was constructed in cooperation with a neighboring landowner to control a gully in a boundary fence.

He is a charter member of the Southern Iowa Forage and Livestock Committee. This group of farmers, business people and USDA agency staff established the first-in-the-nation project to demonstrate alternatives such as rotational grazing to row crop production on highly erodible, marginal land (CRP). The research project, known as the Adams County CRP Farm, has run continuously since 1991. In addition to demonstrations, the group has sponsored many educational events throughout Iowa and developed educational products such as a Sward Stick and a pocket size Record Keeping Notebook.

How would the operator persuade other producers to implement conservation programs in their business?

Faris Farms can now support a larger cow herd as a result of improvements such as interseeded pastures, well-managed grazing and water systems and an abundance of high quality hay.

"The excellent forage base, combined with improved cattle genetics, has increased calf weaning weights 180 to 200 pounds in the last 20 years of steady improvements," says Faris. "We used to wean a 400-

pound calf in November or December. Now we wean a 500- to 550-pound calf in late September."

Lee also says conservation is simply common sense.

"It's a lot easier on the equipment and myself to mow along a terrace than it is to go around a ditch. Most of the terraces I've built have had a ditch you couldn't cross with machinery. By eliminating ditches, machinery maintenance is a lot less," says Faris. He also revealed his deeper environmental ethics.

"It's the right thing to do to protect your land and keep it where it was intended instead of in the Gulf of Mexico," says Faris.

How does the business contribute to a positive public perception of cattle's impact on the environment?

Good environmental stewardship is on display at Faris Farms. The waterways and ponds are clear, cattle graze ample pastures, crop residues hold the soil in farm fields, and hills are terraced and covered in grasses or hay.

Many field days have been held to demonstrate conservation practices including events focused on watering systems-water access, forages-interseeding legumes, weed and brush control, wildlife habitat and restoration programs for barn owl and prairie chickens.

"You don't see soil washing down the hill and the cattle have plenty of forages to eat. We keep our ponds stocked and let the neighbors and locals fish. When they visit, everybody likes to see a baby calf. It's a beautiful sight," says Faris.

The cow herd grazes the last day of grass in a rotational grazing system on Faris Farms. Cows will be moved to a new paddock the next day. "They're always ready to move," says Faris with a smile.