



Meet Rhonda Toquam

**Area Farmer and Dodge County Commissioner
Dodge County, Minnesota**

SE MN Joint Powers Board Member since 2017



What is Agriculture? Is it simply growing crops and raising animals?

Most people think of agriculture as growing crops, milking cows, feeding livestock, driving tractors, trucks, and other machinery. It does include all of those things and so much more. Agriculture plays a much larger part than what I have just mentioned. Products produced on farms not only provide food for human consumption and animals. Co-products from agriculture is used in our gas/fuel, (ethanol, bio diesel) for our cars, make up, insulin, clothing; just to name a few. Agriculture is everywhere!

Tell me a little more about your farming operation. Why did you decide on a career in the Agriculture Industry and who/what influenced you to decide on this career choice?

My husband Roger and I farm with our 3 sons and daughters-in-law. We farm in Dodge County where we raise corn and soybeans (some of which are seed beans). Most of our corn is marketed at Al Corn Clean Fuel, which is an ethanol plant near our farm. We also custom finish about 10,000 hogs per year. Roger and I were married in 1987. At that time, Roger was already actively farming with his parents on the family farm. We continued to farm with his parents and became more and more involved in the daily activities of the farm and also the business/financial side of the operation. This included things like, seed selection for the upcoming crop year, marketing of that crop, preparing and analyzing financials, balance sheets, projected cash flows, crop insurance options, fertilizer recommendations, etc.; along with preparing machinery for the upcoming season, planting, cultivating, nourishing, and harvesting the crop as needed.

As for who or what influenced us to decide on this career choice, I would have to say it was our parents. I grew up on a dairy farm and watched my parents work closely with one another, day in and day out. I desired that same lifestyle for myself, and I think I can speak for my husband in that he envisioned his wife being involved with the farm and raising our children, which is what he saw his parents do; I was able to do that as well. We continue to work with our sons and their wives to help them learn the industry, adapt to change, survive in challenging times, and transition responsibilities to them.

What are some of the major differences between farming now and 30 years ago?

The use of technology has increased significantly. Machinery has gotten larger in size. Livestock farming has become more specialized. Farmers used to have a few cows, pigs, and chickens. If producers today have livestock, it is usually only one species and you have more of that species on your farm than 30 years ago. Producers have learned the value of manure as fertilizer. It is used on many farms in place of commercial fertilizer. With technology, producers are able to produce more bushels, or quantity of a crop on the same amount of acres, and we use fewer inputs such as fertilizer, insecticide, and herbicides. Farming today versus 30 years ago is treated much more like a business than a way of life.

Do changes that your farming operation has made in the past ten years correspond with what you believe the biggest changes have been in the Agriculture Industry during that same time period?

Yes, I believe so. In order to stay profitable, you must adapt to change and incorporate new ideas and technology. Having the next generation involved in our operation has helped with that. They embrace change and are eager to learn and challenge our operation.

What training, experience, and key job competencies are needed to run a successful farming operation?

So much of what is done in a production agriculture operation (growing crops and caring for livestock) is learned from being around it. Growing up on a farm definitely gives you the training and experience by just being around it. A key job competency would be that farming has no set hours, or how many days a week you work. You will have days that begin before sunrise and last until long after sun down. You have to be willing to put in long days and sometimes those long days are not expected. Example: You may head out to the hog barn to do your routine chores for the day and plan for that to take about an hour or so. However, when you walk into the barn, you have a broken feed or water line. A breakdown like this needs immediate attention to get it fixed as soon as possible and you must stay with the project until it is fixed. It is our job as farmers to care for the animals the very best we can; having them be hungry or thirsty is not humane, nor will it be profitable.

Job outlook/employment trends: Are agriculture occupations currently in high demand? What do you predict the demand for Agriculture occupations will be in the future?

Yes, even though farms are getting bigger and there are not as many people directly involved in production agriculture, there are many other areas where people are part of the agriculture sector; just not actively farming. Some examples would be, accountants that have farm knowledge and understand the industry as it differs from a wage earner, bankers, machinery and technology salesmen, mechanics, herdsman, insurance agents, and marketing specialists; just to name a few.

In what ways does your farming operation interact with other businesses and organizations in the community?

It is vitally important for us as producers to be involved in our community organizations and support our local businesses; because again, agriculture is everywhere! We are members of our local Chamber of Commerce. We do as much business at our local hardware stores, co-ops, banks, etc., as we can. Another reason for us to be involved locally, and not so local if necessary, is to be sure that the story of agriculture is being told correctly. I believe that because not all generations are growing up living on a farm or ever visiting a relatives farm, there are many misconceptions about why we as producers do what we do and how we do it. Because of these misconceptions, it is easy for a farmer/producer to become the enemy to some. It is unfortunate, but we have to embrace the fact that we need to tell our story! We need to promote who we are and that what we do is not only for the benefit of the producer, but for those that they grow the product for, the consumer. We live and raise our children and grandchildren on these farms. Therefore, we too are very concerned about clean water, soil erosion, and use of pharmaceuticals in our livestock; the list goes on.

What advice do you have for someone who has an interest in the Agriculture industry, but may not have grown up on a farm or have a background in Agriculture? Where could they start?

If they want to be in production agriculture, I would suggest they find a farmer/producer that may be looking for some extra help in the spring or fall. Farmers are usually looking for extra help during their extremely busy times. This would give them an idea of what day to day activities may look like. If they are more interested in working in the agriculture industry, they could look into trade school for sales, marketing, business, agronomy, veterinary technician, mechanic, or truck driver. Getting a 4-year degree can also be beneficial for working in the Ag sector, degrees in the same areas as mentioned above. With the aging population of farmers, there are opportunities for the right person to take over for an active farmer who may not have the next generation to take over.