

41 GRAINS

FAMILY FARMING & GLUTEN FREE MIXES IN MONTANA



THE JOURNEY

BUILDING A FAMILY FARM

PULSE CROPS & SOIL HEALTH

VALUE ADDED PRODUCTS

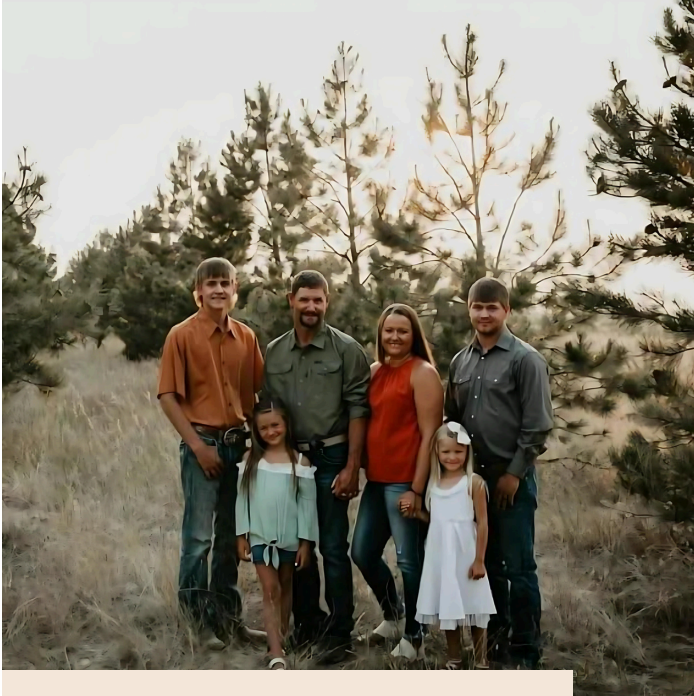
GRANTS & SNACKS

RISKS & REWARDS

TIPS & RESOURCES



BUILDING A FAMILY FARM



THE SIKVELAND FAMILY

Farm Owners & Founders of 41 Grains

Building a working farm has been a labor of love for the Sikveland Family. It started with 300 acres and a big dream. For the first 8 years Rex Sikveland farmed those first 300 acres of wheat while working a full time job as a lineman and later, operations manager at the local coop.

When Kacie joined him that dream expanded into building a business they could hand down to their children. In the beginning, in order to support the farm, they added a fertilizing business to service their farm as well as others in the community. While Rex continued his full time job, Kacie ran the business operations, then on nights and weekends, they would service fertilizer clients, tend to their acreage and repair farm equipment.

While this is an immense amount to take on, as first generation farmers, it was the only viable way to save enough to build up the acreage needed to

run a self sustaining family farm. Over the course of the next sixteen years they strategically acquired additional acreage. When their youngest son finished college and joined the farm Rex was able to quit his job and focus on farming their now 6,000 acres full time.

Kacie has always been interested in nutrition and healthy eating, but as they focused more on their own farm, she began to take that one step further and think about the nutrients going from the soil into the crops they were growing.

In the beginning they were primarily farming wheat, but as they began to face seasons of drought and grasshopper invasions, they began looking for ways to diversify their crops.

After much research, they decided to introduce pulse crops. Integral to the diets of billions in Africa and south Asia, pulse crops are the edible seeds of plants belonging to the legume family. In addition to their healthy profile, pulse crops offer environmental benefits that support sustainable farming systems and are very drought tolerant.

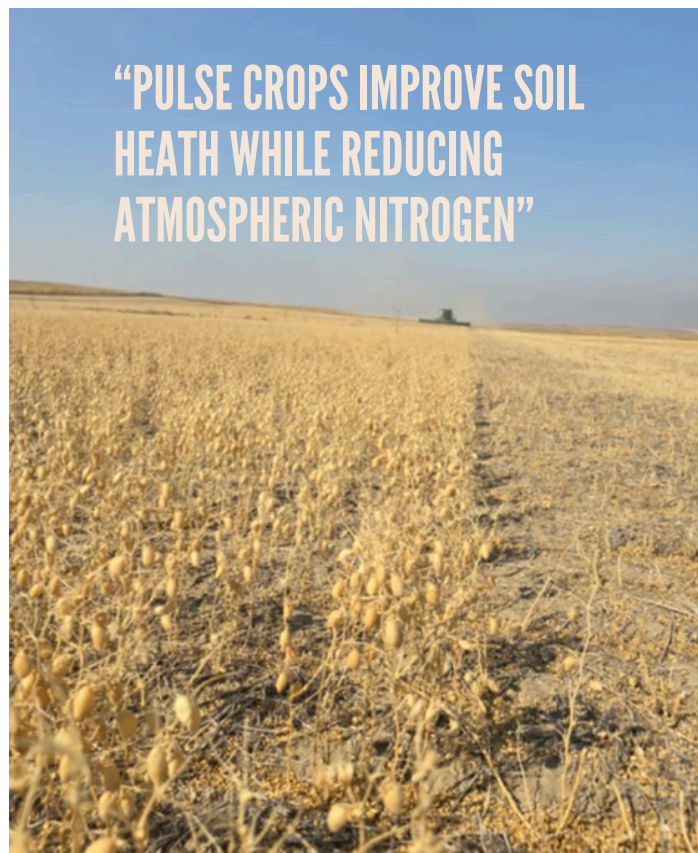


PULSE CROPS & SOIL HEALTH

The Sikvelands selected yellow peas as their first pulse crop, then later added chickpeas, lentils and mustard.

Pulses are exclusively harvested as dry grains, distinguishing them from other legumes that may be consumed fresh or green. They are rich in protein, fiber, vitamins (like folate), and minerals (such as iron), while being low in fat and cholesterol-free. While they have been a global staple in human diets for thousands of years, they are less common in the United States where wheat has a stronghold.

Pulses have the unique ability to reduce atmospheric nitrogen, as they host beneficial bacteria (rhizobia) in their roots that pull nitrogen from the air and convert it into fertilizers in the soil. This enhances soil fertility and reduces the need for synthetic fertilizers.



Pulse crops require less water compared to many other crops, making them a staple in drought prone regions and suitable for sustainable agriculture practices. This was important to the Sikvelands as they are committed to caring for the land and keeping it healthy for generations to come.

Growing pulse crops, particularly chickpeas, helped improve the soil, and biodiversity of their land. But there are two sides to farming, caring for the land is the first part and selling your crops is the second. While some years chickpeas sold very well, other years prices were depressed and it was difficult to find buyers for their crop.

“Chickpeas have so many health benefits, they are versatile, full of protein and great to cook with,” says Kacie, “We wanted to find a way to share them with our community and also support the farm in years when chickpea prices were depressed. Because of this, Kacie began to research and consider developing value added chickpea products.

VALUE ADDED PRODUCTS

One day a neighbor shared some chocolate chip cookies made with chickpea flour. Kacie was amazed by how delicious they were. She began looking for ways to mill her own chickpea flour from their harvest that year. After some trial and error she landed on a milling technique that really set her flour apart from others on the market.

“Most gluten free flours need something extra to make them work, but I quickly discovered that ours was great as a direct substitute for wheat flour,” says Kacie. “After harvest, we clean our chickpeas with a cleaner that uses air and shaking. Then we process them whole with the hulls still intact. We mill the whole chickpeas then we sift. This allows us to make our flour silky smooth while keeping all of the minerals and vitamins intact.



Once her method was established and her base chickpea flour process was set, Kacie dove into product development and began creating a wide assortment of chickpea flour mixes, including mixes for brownies, banana bread, corn-less cornbread, creamy gravy, waffles, pancakes and of course chocolate chip cookies.



GRANTS & SNACKS

Kacie and Rex wanted to create a brand that represented the land where the food is grown. They chose 41 Grains because the number 41 represents both the state (Montana, is the 41st state in the US) and the county McCone County (County 41 in Montana) where they farm. With a name and a line of products, 41 Grains launched in January 2021.

Kacie is a resourceful entrepreneur. She applied for and received a value-added producers grant from the state of Montana. This helped her to purchase the equipment she needed to mill the flour and create the mixes. It also helped her to invest in packaging and labels.

Additionally, the grant sponsored her to attend the Made in Montana show where she was able to meet wholesaler buyers. Shows like this have been key for Kacie getting onto retail shelves and sharing 41 Grains with larger communities.

One of the challenges with having a value added product created in a farming community is getting it out to the wider community. The Sikveland farm

is in Eastern Montana and there are not many distribution centers or hubs nearby. As a result the majority of products need to be shipped to stores, which can get expensive.

“We have a small store in town and our products sell well,” says Kacie, “But we live far away from many larger retail markets.” To tackle this challenge Kacie has been working with a local group to launch a distribution coop for food businesses in Montana. To date, they have received a \$20,000 grant to establish a food distribution hub in eastern Montana. They plan to spend the first part of the grant on a trailer and coolers to get the project off the ground.

Recently, a neighbor with a successful lentil snack business was thinking about retiring, but only wanted to sell if they could keep the business local. They approached Kacie and asked if she and Rex would like to buy the business. Since they already grow lentils, they knew they had the core ingredient. After some discussion, they decided to grow their value added business and add the lentil snacks to their growing product line.



RISKS & REWARDS

With this new product line, Kacie recognized that she was going to need to get really clear on her numbers. She was discussing this with her Montana Food & Agriculture Development Officer and discovered there was a USDA grant available through the NWRM Regional Food Business Centers. The grant enabled producers to take a course called GYRM designed to help entrepreneurs commercialize food products. Kacie enrolled and was able to dive into COGs for all of her existing and new products. She discovered areas where she could find efficiencies and was able to better understand her break even numbers and make production and sales projections for the upcoming year.

Business for 41 Grains has been growing steadily. In 2024, they are projecting revenues to triple. “We would love to hit \$100K in sales by the end of this year,” says Kacie, “We are refining our processes, updating our packaging and adding a couple new SKUs in preparation for the Fancy Food Show in January.”



Currently 41 Grains sell about 25% of their products direct to consumer through their website and the retail space attached to their production facility. Kacie is hoping that she will be able to grow the wholesale side of the business when she attends the Fancy Food Show this winter. She has also had success growing wholesale accounts online through Faire.com.

One thing that Kacie has discovered in her years as a farmer and now as a value added producer: “You need to be very systematic and organized.”

“There is no way to get everything done without a water tight schedule and a very firm plan,” says Kacie. In addition to the general labor of producing, packaging, accounting and emailing, “I schedule brainstorming days, house cleaning days and store cleaning days!”

When not working, Kacie enjoys going to the lake with her family and snuggling with her baby goats. The whole family is looking forward to the baby Highland Cow that is due on the farm this spring.

TIPS & RESOURCES



LOVE YOUR LAND

Stay Engaged

Farming is very rewarding, but not always easy. Some people say that farmers are habitual gamblers because they are taking so many risks out of their control. The same could be said for food manufacturers. The lesson we learned by adding pulse crops is one that can be applied to the product line of any food manufacturer. Continuously evaluate what you are selling. Look hard at your product (or crop) assortment. Be ruthless with yourself about the numbers. Know what is selling and what is sitting on the shelf. Don't be afraid to try something new and mix up what you're offering. Listen to your customers, take feedback and be willing to use it.

Network

Don't underestimate the value of keeping in touch. We live in a small community, so I cross paths with the Montana Food & Agriculture Officer from time to time. I always make sure to check in and update them on what I'm doing. The result is that when a new grant is being offered or there is an event or opportunity they think I would be a good match for, they're ready to throw my name in the hat.

Find Grants and Apply

There really is a lot of money out there for food producers and particularly for farmers interested in creating value added products. Don't be afraid to ask your local department of agriculture for places to look for these grants. They can be an incredible resource

RESOURCE CORNER

Some of the key organizations and resources that led to our success!

[GYRM](#)
[NWRM Regional Food](#)
[Business Center](#)
[Montana Department](#)
[of Agriculture](#)



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PHOTO CREDITS

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