

## Foran Improves Ag Communication in Winifred, Looks to Improve Customer Service



Brian Foran

**WINIFRED, Mont.** – Brian Foran has taken a wild ride through the ranks of CHS-Big Sky at the Winifred, Mont., store.

Foran started his CHS career as an applicator about two and a half years ago. He quickly rose to the challenge of serving as a location manager at the CHS-Winifred store, a place he has frequented throughout his lifetime. “I grew up on a small farm in the area,” says Foran, who manages four employees while handling the cooperative logistics and sales in the Winifred CHS store. “I have lived here all my life. After school, I worked for a local producer here, and then on a farm in Valier (Mont.) before I came back home to Winifred.”

Foran has served as Location Manager of the CHS-Winifred store for about six months. In that time, the store implemented business band radio communications from its store to its sprayers and most other equipment, says Foran. “The radios are powerful CBs that help us better communicate with our applicators when there isn’t much cell service out here,” he explains. “We are at the end of the road, where the pavement ends.”

## Rudyard Agronomist Prescribes Crop Plans Using Latest Technology, Farm Experience

**RUDYARD, Mont.** – Today’s agronomists use technology to prescribe plans for good stewardship and income. “In the past growers used to put fertilizer down on the entire field with no soil testing,” says CHS agronomist Josh Van Wechel of Rudyard, Mont. “Now, we use satellite imagery and yield data to create zones so we can soil test those zones and put the fertilizer where it is needed in those zones.”

A Rudyard native, Van Wechel has watched the agriculture industry gravitate toward precision agriculture and more crop diversification. “I grew up on a family farm north of Rudyard,” he says. “I still help on the family

The store also recently added a credit card fuel pump to its store location and an agronomist to help with fertilizer and crop protection chemical applications. “We are working to provide the services we promise to our customers,” says Foran, “as well as a safer experience for the customers.”

The CHS-Big Sky promise is to help its customers grow by, “providing quality products, the latest in innovation and first-class customer service,” as stated on their company Web site at [www.chsbigsky.com](http://www.chsbigsky.com).

One of the ways the Winifred CHS accomplishes this is by operating a store that serves livestock producers as well as grain growers. “Our customers are raising cattle and growing mostly cereal grains,” says Foran. “We are starting to get some pulse crops into the area though.” Currently, Foran and his team are working on inventorying the store merchandise. “We are deciding what works and what doesn’t work for our customers,” he explains. “And, preparing to have the items that work in the store for when the producers need them.”

In order to better serve its customers, Foran says the CHS-Big Sky Winifred store acquired a new sprayer and spreader three years ago to provide variable and standard rate spreads to accommodate a variety of crops. “Our goal is to improve efficiency and better serve our customers with the products and services they need,” he says. “We sell everything from chemicals and fertilizer to feed and small hardware. We also provide basic shop services like oil changes and fuels.”



Josh Van Wechel

farm. We grow lentils, canola, wheat and some peas.” Van Wechel acquired his agronomist qualifications through years of on-the-job training received in north central Montana and the Palouse region of Washington. “I have been an agronomist for eight years,” he says. “I worked for CHS-Primeland south of Spokane where they grow a lot of peas, lentils, winter wheat, blue grass and canola. I started as a spray operator and began working my way up to agronomist.” Van Wechel returned to north central Montana three years ago to do crop consulting with Agri-Trend and work the family farm. The Agri-Trend work led to an opportunity to work as an agronomist for CHS-Big Sky.

“As an agronomist, I work with the farmer to make a plan for their farm, like which crops to grow, fertilizer needs and pesticide plans,” he explains.

During the winter months, Van Wechel says he contacts his customers and to start planning for the spring crop season. He will create a plan for his own farm ground. “I like to try different things on my own farm and then take what I learned back to the customers,” says Van Wechel. “Being able to try things out on my own place makes it a handy tool to have.”

Other handy tools Van Wechel likes to use when drafting crop plans include past cropping history, soil tests, satellite imagery, drones and

computer programs designed to build crop prescriptions for farms. “I also use soil probes, soil test labs, basic things like hand lens, books and the Internet – Google is a wonderful thing,” he says. (These products are available at all CHS locations.) “You need to have the knowledge and experience to make informed decisions when you are an agronomist,” says Foran.

Van Wechel says he wishes growers would hire certified agronomists more often to reduce the risk of getting bad advice. “There is a program called Certified Crop Advisor where you have to study and pass tests to become certified,” he explains. “More agronomists should become certified before they make recommendations, and growers should hire agronomists with CCA certifications because it shows they have training and experience in the field, because you have to have a certain amount of experience before they will grant you the certification.”

The certified CCA agronomist says he expects to be creating cropping plans for more diversified farms in the future. “Farmers are not going to be depending on just one crop for their income,” he explains. “Precision ag is going to be a bigger trend in this area; farmers and agronomists alike are going to be using all the resources they have to make the best decisions possible.”



## Wendland Uses Technology to Improve Customer Relations, Communications



Darius Wendland  
CHS Rudyard

**RUDYARD, Mont.** –

Communication and customer relations are the key to the success at the Rudyard CHS store, says location manager Darius Wendland. “We have created easier communications with our customers through e-mails and better mapping, which creates better relationships,” he explains. “Customers these days want information as fast as they can get it.” In fact, that’s exactly what CHS-Big Sky promises.

“As agriculture and our communities evolve, we are committed to staying at the forefront of the industry,” states the CHS-Big Sky Web site.

Rudyard CHS customers grow primarily wheat and pulse crops. Wendland says he expects they will start expanding the pulse crops over the coming years, which will create more opportunities for variable applications. “Fertilizer is our biggest seller,” he explains. “Every crop has different fertilizer and crop protection needs, and every field has different needs.”

Managing these fertilizer and crop protection needs is the future of agriculture in north central Montana, according to Wendland. “Farming is moving faster and faster toward technology,” he explains. “Technology that has the biggest impacts will be the ones that create better, faster and more economical ways to do things...that’s the future of farming for this area.” For example, chemicals that fight weed resistance and variable rate chemical applications that are more economical and control farmers’ expenses, adds Wendland. These are the types of technology Wendland plans to use on his own farm when they become available. “I grow mostly winter wheat and spring wheat now,” he says, “but, I plan to get into pulse crops in the next year.”

When not managing the CHS-Big Sky Rudyard store and six employees, Wendland says he enjoys “farming and raising kids.” Wendland has two boys, ages 8 years and 18 months.

Wendland grew up on a family farm near Rudyard. He graduated from Montana State University six years ago with a degree in Agriculture Business. Wendland began working for CHS-Big Sky three years ago. He says working at CHS-Big Sky gave him the opportunity to move back to his hometown and work with people he has known his whole life. “You get out of college and think you know it all,” says Wendland. “But, in reality you don’t really know anything until you’ve done it with your own hands. I’ve gotten to work with a group of good people who have taught me a lot about real life.”



37252 Highway 87 North  
P.O. Box 988  
Fort Benton, Montana 59442  
888.922.5966  
[chsbigsky.com](http://chsbigsky.com)



## CHS-Big Sky Sees Significant Improvement From Previous Fiscal Year



CHS Big Sky General Manager  
Keith Schumacher

**FORT BENTON, Mont.** – Teamwork, customer service and continued customer loyalty greatly improved profitability for CHS-Big Sky this past fiscal year, ending August 31, 2017. “Fiscal Year 2017 experienced a slow start due to a wet fall in 2016, followed by a mild winter and wet spring,” explains General Manager Keith Schumacher of Fort Benton, Mont. “There was plenty of green grass available for cattle last fall, which slowed demand for feed products. Fertilizer sales were also slower than usual in the fall of 2016, as the planting window for all wheat was shortened with the wet weather.”

However, Fiscal Year 2017 experienced a significant turnaround from the previous fiscal year with sales increasing \$25 million overall. CHS Big Sky announced a combined net earning of \$4.079 million dollars. Grain sales netted profitability at \$1.028 million in FY2017. “We had a larger crop and we traded more bushels of grain in FY2017, with steady grain sales throughout the year,” explains Schumacher.

Merchandise sales increased \$1.6 million from \$66.4 million in FY2016 to \$68 million in FY2017. Yet, services and miscellaneous sales fell slightly in FY2017. Agronomy sales of fertilizer and crop protection products netted \$3.8 million in FY2017.

However, due to the availability of green grass, and a mild winter, combined with lower cattle prices, feed sales took a loss of \$634,083 in FY2017. Energy sales also took a hit, as well, with a net loss of \$185,375 in FY2017. “With the mild winter, the demand for propane was less,” explains Schumacher.

Although the past couple of years have been challenging, Schumacher says he is “cautiously optimistic” about the current fiscal year’s outlook. “The grain business looks to be holding steady, and we are seeing some improvement in feed sales,” he explains. “The coming spring season will be a big determinant for this year’s success. I just hope the weather cooperates and we can get the crop seeded, fertilized and sprayed in a timely manner followed by favorable growing conditions.”

CHS-Big Sky’s mission is to help farmer-growers and customers grow, provide quality products, the latest in innovation, and first-class customer service, and committed to stay at the forefront of the industry. Schumacher says he is proud of the CHS-Big Sky employees and the value they bring to the business. “I am proud of the whole team,” he says, “the way they worked through the challenges of the past couple of years, not just the financial challenges, but also the way they worked to meet the needs of the customers.”

Patronage payouts totaled \$1.83 million, based on FY2017 results:

\$0.023/bushel of Hard Red Winter Wheat,
\$0.042/bushel of Hard Red Spring Wheat,
\$0.05/bushel of Other Grains,
2.5 percent of Fertilizer purchases
2.5 percent of Crop Protection purchases
1.56 percent of Seed purchases

There is no patronage for feed and energy purchases, as neither division experienced profitability. The patronage paid, based on FY2017 profitability only, will be directed 100 percent into retained equity for each customer’s equity account with taxes to be paid by CHS on this patronage distribution, says Schumacher. “This year’s patronage payment compares to years past where 40 percent was paid in cash and 60 percent was directed to retained equity,” he explains.

“Additional communications will be mailed out from CHS to each qualifying patron to further outline this year’s patronage payments. “We highly value and appreciate our customers’ loyalty. The way they stick with us through the challenging farming and ranching economy is greatly appreciated, and times will improve.”



Herzog family: L-R Son Ty, Kim, Courtney and son Trevor • Photo credit: Kitty Brown Photography

## Rapelje Board Member Looks for Opportunities to Improve, Diversify Family Farm

**RAPELJE, Mont.** – Courtney Herzog has been a CHS customer for as long as he can remember, though his needs have changed over the years. “We don’t have pigs anymore,” says Herzog, whose family farms and ranches near Rapelje, Mont. “We basically have our cattle herd and farm.”

Herzog and his family raise black Angus and Angus-cross cattle and grow cereal grains in addition to cattle feed. “We started raising our own replacement heifers,” he says. “There is a little bit of a learning curve when you go from buying your replacement heifers to raising your own.” The Herzog cows are bred to calve from mid-March to April. Herzog says they try not to feed much during the winter. The Herzogs have been growing silage corn to graze the past four years. “Our corn yields really well,” he says. “We grazed it to put some bloom on the calves in September.” Herzog says he is impressed with the corn yields on the continuous crop field, which had winter wheat on it last year. “We will try to grow just about anything,” he says. “We have grown peas, lentils, sunflower, safflower, wheat, barley and corn so far.”

While they have grown a variety of crops on their farm, the Herzogs have little desire at this time to market their crops in specialty or niche markets. “We grow wheat because you can take it to several places to sell it,” he explains. “And, we know the cropping systems. We know there are markets out there for some of the other crops, but they are a gamble because they can be trickier to grow if you don’t have experience with them.”

Building relationships and networking with other producers through CHS-Big Sky has been a positive experience for Herzog, who serves as Vice Chairman of the Board of Producers. Herzog has been a board member since 2011. “It has been good to meet producers whose needs and challenges are as diverse as the industry with different crops and weather conditions,” he explains. “I have learned a lot. These are cool people to network with – there are a lot of people who work together for a common good, to help each other out in the high and low markets and its becoming a moving target every year.”

Over the years, Herzog has witnessed CHS-Big Sky expand its services to better serve its customers. “I have seen a lot of changes and a lot of growth,” he says. “I was part of the Central Montana Co-Op, and then we joined the CHS-Milk River group to form CHS-Big Sky. There have been a lot of transitions.”

Herzog has learned to look for opportunities to diversify business, like selling farm equipment. Herzog’s wife, Kim, operates a pheasant hunting operation and a part-time clothing store in Rapelje while helping on the ranch. “Kim is a real go-getter – she takes care of the cows, especially in the summer when I am in the fields,” he says. “If it weren’t for Kim, our boys, Trevor and Ty, and our friends helping out, we couldn’t do what we do.”

## MABA Legislative Update

The 2017 Legislative Session came to an end on April 28, 2017. The 65<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session was a busy one for agricultural businesses including bills on pesticides, seeds, and fertilizer.

### Pesticides

The “pesticide bill”, which amended the Montana pesticide act was a significant piece of legislation. The purpose of the bill was to increase fees to fully fund the Department of Agriculture pesticide program. As introduced this legislation included a significant shift in liability from the dealer to the individual. It also limited storage of certain products in Montana, changed the private applicator training program, and repealed the statute that provides for financial responsibility for commercial applicators.

There were multiple amendments to the bill that resulted in support from the agricultural groups. The primary area of concern that remains unresolved is the question of commercial applicator liability. This will likely be addressed during this interim between legislative sessions. The fees for registration of products as well as licenses were increased in this legislation.

### Fertilizer

There were also two bills introduced related to fertilizer. The first, clarified that only fees more than \$5 in a reporting period must be paid and it provided for a \$25 late penalty for a fertilizer distributor license renewal that is received after December 31. Reporting periods were also changed to June 30 and December 31 for in-state manufacturers and out-of-state suppliers who distribute soil amendments or commercial fertilizer in Montana. If the inspection fee statements are not filed in a timely manner a 10% late fee must be assessed by the Department.

The other fertilizer piece of legislation failed but raised key points that will likely be considered in the future. The legislation provided that the fertilizer tax only had to be paid on product that is used in Montana. The issue of reporting accuracy and other challenges was also raised.

### Call Before You Dig -- 811

This legislation was developed by “excavators” and utility owners to bring Montana’s call before you dig statutes into compliance with federal requirements. Without this legislation, Montana would have continued to be regulated by the Federal Government rather than Montana laws. Federal regulation has serious implications including significant fees for violation.

Soil testing and probing as well as farming in some instances is considered excavation. Most soil testing companies were not aware that they needed to call before testing. There is an exemption for agricultural activities that do not exceed 18 inches if the ground has been cultivated in the last 10 years.

### SEED

The “seed bill” made Montana’s seed law consistent with our fertilizer laws in stating that only the state can regulate seeds. Other Western States are facing challenges associated with counties and local governments limiting agricultural activities on a county by county basis. This patchwork of regulation makes it incredibly difficult for farmers and businesses to maintain viability in today’s market place.

The new law does not limit regulation – it just states that regulation when or if it does occur must be done on a statewide

basis. This law is very important to Montana’s growers and agricultural businesses and was a high priority in the session.

### Pollinators

This legislation failed but it is likely that similar legislation will appear in the future. The bill banned the use of neonicotinoids on state lands and outdoor residential or commercial settings. The bill also provided that local governments could adopt regulations provided they were as stringent or more stringent than the limitations.

Montana’s agricultural community was opposed to the legislation due to the importance of neonicotinoids in Montana agriculture and the science associated with honey bee health that shows that there are multiple factors impacting honey bee health.

### Montana Pulse Crop Committee

The Montana Pulse Advisory Committee was originally created as a rule based committee that provided recommendations to the Department of Agriculture on how their check off dollars should be spent. The check off under the Advisory Committee was 1% of net receipts. The check off has grown significantly with the increase in pulse crop production in Montana. It is estimated that the pulse check off will raise between \$2 and \$3 million dollars in 2017.

The pulse growers recognized that their industry is growing significantly and decided to bring legislation to make the Montana Pulse Crop Committee a statutory committee. The Montana Wheat and Barley Committee is a similar statutory committee. As a statutory committee, the pulse growers will have final say on how their check off dollars are spent rather than serving in an advisory capacity.

### Federal

Federal legislation and timing of that legislation is always difficult to gauge. Pieces that are likely to come in 2018 include:

- The Farm Bill with the multiple pieces that impact growers and businesses across Montana,
- The Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribe Water Rights Compact which was passed by the Montana Legislature but must also be approved along with settlement legislation. This compact protects agricultural water rights across Montana.
- Federal rules related to waters of the US as well as Federal Pesticide rules and new Worker Protection Standards.

It is imperative for growers and businesses alike to be engaged and involved in legislative and agency activities on a state and national level. It takes diligence to protect agriculture’s ability to provide wholesome sustainable nutrition for consumers.



Krista Lee Evans  
Blake Creek Project Management