

Eye on the Future

By Charlene Finck for Farm Journal

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Regardless of what happens, the entire Tom family wants to sit down for holiday dinners together. That sentiment, expressed by 80-year-old Everett Tom, is echoed by other members of the Indiana farm family. The words go straight to the heart of legacy planning. It is vital to have a clear succession plan that keeps

both the business and family going strong.

Navigating the steps needed to lock in a succession plan takes patience and fortitude. Creating a succession plan requires addressing future management needs, preparing the next generation for leadership, devising an ownership transition strategy and creating a business structure that can handle curveballs.

Longer horizon. "No matter what an individual or an operation accomplishes, there is nothing more valuable than leaving a legacy for generations to come," says Kip Tom, Everett's 53-year-old son, who runs Tom Farms LLC. "Our planning horizon needs to reach much further out than the daily or yearly planning we do for production. It's important to have established plans for the farm and the individuals who hold the future of the operation in their hands."

A severe car accident involving Kip in 2005 gave the Tom family a powerful wake-up call to the importance of succession planning. Kip, who was honored as the 2007 Top Producer of the Year, remains compelled to succeed but now puts a high priority on planning multigenerational success.

A key hurdle is carving out time for the effort. The largest provider of seed services in the U.S. and a major player in world seed markets, Tom Farms has grown substantially since Kip joined his parents' 700-acre operation. Now the business includes 15,000 acres in Indiana and 4,000 acres in Argentina in addition to custom ag services and a freight transportation business.

Follow along. As a statement of how strongly Kip and the Tom family believe in legacy planning, they have agreed to let Top Producer chronicle the family's experience in working with Farm Journal Media succession planning expert Kevin Spafford.

"The challenges facing the Toms are remarkably similar to any family business building a succession plan from the ground up," Spafford explains. "We're just getting started. Succession planning is a process, not an event—and one that requires the sincere participation of everyone involved."

Three generations of the Tom family, including three of Kip's children, are participating in the process. "I believe this is the single most important thing we can devote our time and attention to," Kip says. "Succession planning not only helps us achieve more now, but also be poised to be even more successful in the future."



Stay tuned as Top Producer reports on the progress made as the Tom family works to leave its legacy.

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