




GROWER OF THE  
**MONTH**

BY ALLEN THAYER

**FARM FAMILY**  
Mario and Kristy Pitts pose with their children, Mason, 8, Sophia, 10, and Maddox 4; and Mario's parents, Steve and Carla.



# WHY LOBBYING MATTERS

MEXICO AND BIOTECH AMONG TOP ISSUES FOR MARIO PITTS

**NEBRASKA GROWER MARIO PITTS WANTS TO DO ALL HE CAN TO HELP ENSURE A PROFITABLE BEET SUGAR INDUSTRY IN THE FUTURE.**

That's why the third-generation grower from Lyman made a lobbying trip to Washington, D.C., with fellow Nebraska beet grower Kendall Busch earlier this year. They met with congressional lawmakers and staff members from Nebraska, Wyoming, Kansas and Oklahoma. Joining them were two Wyoming beet growers and two Louisiana sugarcane growers. It's the third time Mario has gone to D.C. with fellow growers. They met with legislators ahead of the debate on the 2018 farm bill.

"It's a challenge," Mario said. "I never thought I would do that when I started farming. It kind of pushes me to go talk to congressmen and senators. I enjoy the challenge of doing that. Most people in D.C. understood that every commodity in the whole farm industry is really hurting."

"This year we need to make sure to keep the farm bill in place," he said. "We supply a safe and steady flow of sugar to the country at no cost for the most part."

Sugar policy cost taxpayers nothing in 13 of the past 14 years. The only blemish occurred in 2013 when the USDA took action to keep the market from collapsing after Mexico violated U.S. trade law and dumped subsidized sugar.

"Mexico has been hurting our industry by dumping subsidized sugar in our market," Mario said.

The terms of the North American Free Trade Agreement allow Mexican sugar to flow freely into the United States. In the last decade, Mexican sugar production has more than doubled. Much of that sugar increase has been exported to the U.S., creating an oversupply that drives profits down for U.S. sugarbeet farmers.

The sugarbeet lobby will be trying to secure favorable crop



insurance terms in the next farm bill, dissuading lawmakers from increasing labeling requirements on biotech crops, and trying to defend sugar from an anti-sugar childhood obesity movement.

Mario, 36, said the issue with Mexico is of most concern presently for him.

"I think we will get something straightened out with them," he said. "Something that's fair to us."

The biggest worry long term is the misinformation about biotechnology.

"Farmers have really embraced the technology, because it has made us more successful," Mario said. "We save water. We save on tillage and fuel—all to raise a better crop. I sure wish the American public knew that. The reasons we did it are for those reasons. I don't think any farmer would plant anything if they knew it was dangerous to the people who they were going to feed it to."

Sugar derived from sugar crops grown using conventional, biotech or organic methods has identical nutritional value and composition, according to industry information.

One way to boost the public's perception of biotechnology is to inform consumers that there is no difference between beet sugar and cane sugar.

Mario's wife, Kristy, provided the logistics to enable the lobbying team to visit all the offices in the time they had available.

In addition to doing the scheduling, Kristy helps with bookkeeping on the farm.

"When we get busy she'll do tractor work for a few hours," Mario said. "She helps quite a bit when we work cattle."

"She grew up in a little town in Colorado," he said. "When we got married this farming thing was all pretty new to her. She enjoys it now."

Mario and Kristy have one daughter, Sophia, 10; and two sons, Mason, 8, and Maddox, 4.

## SUPER SEASON

"Last year was the best year we've ever had," Mario said. "I'd like to say because we're really good farmers, but it was Mother Nature who did it."

Pitts Farms is located by Lyman, about 20 miles west of Scottsbluff. He farms with his dad, Steve, 61.

"He has his farms, and I have mine," Mario said. "We farm everything together."

His mother, Carla, handles bookkeeping for his dad and helps keep everything in sync.

"I call her the mediator," Mario said. "She keeps everything straight between dad and I, which helps when we're busy. Because it's pretty easy to forget to talk and just go to work. She's very good at keeping us lined up."

They have about 450 beet acres combined. Other rotation crops include corn, dry beans, wheat and alfalfa.

"We share equipment and everything together," Mario said.

"He works on my farm just as well as I work on his. We own some cattle together. As time went on, we've kind of done more and more together."

"We had really good moisture last spring, in fact almost too much at times," Mario said. "But that got us off to a good start and just good heat units throughout the summer."

Beet harvest averaged 35 tons per acre with sugar content at 18.3 percent. Beets were delivered to the Western Sugar Cooperative factory in Torrington, Wyo., about 20 miles away.

"The plan is to close the Torrington factory after campaign this year," Mario said. "We had to run it a little longer than we had planned this year, because the factory in Scottsbluff hasn't got up and running as good as we hoped. There's a lot more to rebuilding a sugar factory than just putting in new pipes. So we're kind of up in the air so far about the 2017 crop. We're not sure if we'll be going to Torrington or Scottsbluff."

Weed resistance hasn't been an issue for the Pitts.

"We've been pretty proactive since planting Roundup Ready beets," Mario said. "We always plant corn prior to having beets and use other chemicals so we don't get that resistance. But it's a worry or concern that we have. They've had some resistance down by Bridgeport, Neb. So it is moving, but we haven't seen any on our farm."

Mario did conduct one spraying for the disease *Cercospora* leaf spot.

"We had humidity for a few weeks in August," he said. "So we had to spray for *Cercospora*. That's really the only disease problem we've had. We spray Quadris when the beets are little just to make sure we don't get *Rhizoctonia*. That's a huge issue for beet storage. If you have *Rhizoc*, the beets don't store well. We try to be proactive with that."

Currently about 75 percent of the acreage is pivot irrigated, Mario said, with flood irrigation for the rest.

"Over the years we've put more and more pivots in," he said. "It's more efficient. We have a few odd-shaped fields that we cannot put a pivot on, but we're definitely trying to do as much as we can. Hopefully in a few more years we'll be closer to 95 percent pivot irrigated."

Pivot irrigation is especially more efficient during dry years, Mario said. He also credits strip tilling for cutting fuel and labor costs.

"We used to plow at least half of our ground every year."

Planting for the new season normally occurs around April 15, Mario said.







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He's hopeful hail stays away for another season.

"That's usually the biggest challenge with farming around here," Mario said. "We haven't had any hail the last two years, so you never know when your time is up to get it."

### BEET BUSINESS

Mario's family farming history began with his grandfather, Curtis Pitts, who farmed near Fruita, Colo. Steve began

farming full time after graduating from high school. Curtis died in 1980.

Mario said his family quit growing beets in the late 1970s but picked up the crop again after moving to Nebraska in 2002.

"When I started farming we moved to western Nebraska, so we could expand and I could come back to the farm," he said.

"I worked for my dad when I was in high school," Mario said. "I went off to college and after a few years I decided that wasn't for me. I enjoyed being outside and

farming is good because for the most part the harder you work the better off you become to a point. There are always outside influences you cannot control. For the most part, the harder you work the better off you are. I really appreciate everything my parents have done pushing me to be better at and active on the farm."

Mario's first venture in growing beets was as a tenant.

"The first year or two my landlord rented me the shares and the land to put them on," he said. "That's how I got started. I learned to really enjoy beets just because they are a challenge. Roundup Ready made life a lot better."

Mario is a member of the Nebraska Sugarbeet Growers Association and also an ASGA representative.

Mario said a good friend on the local grower board asked him to become involved as he neared retirement.

"The first time I went to Washington, D.C., I don't think I said 10 words in 25 meetings we were at," Mario said. "But he kind of pushed me to do it. I'm sure glad he did. I really enjoy it now. It's a great group of people who work endless hours to make sure that we all have a good sugar policy and a good sugar program." ■

## Mark Your Calendar!

August 4-9, 2017 | Omni San Diego (downtown) | San Diego, California



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**THE 34TH INTERNATIONAL SWEETENER SYMPOSIUM** will be held August 4-9, 2017, at the Omni San Diego, located in the historic Gaslamp Quarter in downtown San Diego, California.

Attendance at the 2017 Symposium is a must for everyone in the industry. How will the new Administration's trade agenda affect agriculture and the sugar industry? How is Congress progressing on the next Farm Bill? What is the current balance with the world sugar market and how will that affect the U.S. and world sugar market outlook? What is the latest on U.S. - Mexican sugar trade? What are the latest trends in the sugar and sweetener containing products market? This highly substantive program will include

renowned industry experts, key policymakers and industry leaders from the U.S. and international communities.

Traditionally around 500 people from all sectors of the sugar, sweeteners and food manufacturing industry attend the Symposium to hear the most significant and timely issues affecting the industry and to network with their sweetener industry colleagues. In addition to the compelling program content, the Symposium schedule allows free time every afternoon to enhance your industry relations in this vibrant setting. Preliminary program and registration materials will be available in May. This is one sweetener industry meeting you don't want to miss! **For more information, visit [www.sugaralliance.org/symposium](http://www.sugaralliance.org/symposium).**