Getting to Know Board Member Joel Keierleber, District 4

Q: During the National Farmers Union Convention you served on the Policy Committee, what was that like?

A: The committee’s role is to take all resolutions that come from the states and evaluate them, combine similar resolutions, and reword them to ensure they are easy to understand. Once the originators of the resolutions approve of our changes, then they go to the floor to be voted on by the national delegates which determines if they become part of the 2014 Farmers Union Policy.

National Farmers Union staff takes the policy that passes at the national convention and uses it as a guide when lobbying in D.C.

I enjoyed the process, as well as the opportunity I had to get to know the other committee members.

Q: While we’re on the topic of National Convention, what do you enjoy most about attending?

A: I really enjoy getting to know farmers from across the nation. It’s interesting that no matter how similar or different our farming operations are from one another, we all face very similar challenges – resources, aging producer population, regulations.

I also enjoy learning about their operations as well as management practices that I can incorporate into my own farming operation. During this last convention I got to know one of the “largest small” family farmers in Hawaii – his farm was 2,000 square-feet and he raises ducks, and red worms and produces an organic insecticide. Basically all three enterprises were stacked on top of each other. I also met a guy from North Dakota who doesn’t use any fertilizer on his fields, yet because of his soil’s health, he is able to raise 125% of the county average.

Q: Tell us about your farming operation?

A: Well, I grew up on a dairy and got my first cow when I was 10 as a 4-H project. However, getting my own start in farming hit a bump when I was injured in a farm accident in 1977. I spent three months in the hospital and the doctors told me I needed to pick a different occupation because I’d be crippled.

My dad’s health wasn’t good, so they sold the farm. A year later, my wife, Audrey and I knew that farming was what we wanted to do. We purchased just a few hundred acres to start off with, while she worked at a 35 year teaching career to allow us to grow and manage our agriculture career. We knew we could manage that and could build from there.
When we started our farm was diverse, we raised pigs, sheep, wheat, milo and, cows and hay on shares. We also sold balers and feed for two feed companies. We started no-till farming in 1980 and by 1986 we were 100% no-till.

Today, like most farms we are much less diversified. We operate about 2,000 acres with grain and high dollar hay, which we sell for horse and dairy feed. We also have a cow/calf operation and finish out the calves. Our land is managed on a very large rotation that includes planting farm ground back to hay and then pasture every few years to build the soil back up.

Q: Tell us about how you became involved in Farmers Union?

A: I grew up involved in 4-H (which is a tradition in our family, our kids were in 4-H and my wife and I were 4-H leaders); then when we purchased our farm, the farmer who sold it to us happened to be a Farmers Union member. We were always impressed by the fact that Farmers Union policy is directed to serve family farmers and over the years became more involved.

Farmers Union has also supported several other issues I feel strongly about – like wind energy development in South Dakota, Redistricting and Feeding America. The Farmers Union is the only farm group to support the SNAP program in our recent farm bill. It is great to belong to an organization that cares about people and not just profits.