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**OTTAWA COOPERATIVE  
ASSOCIATION**

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# OTTAWA COOPERATIVE ASSOCIATION

## FULL-SERVICE FARMER SUPPORT IN EASTERN KANSAS

Produced by Victor Martins and Written by Molly Shaw

**S**ince the first harvest in 1950, the Ottawa Cooperative Association has delivered expertise and the quality grain, seed, fuel, feed, fertilizer, chemical, agronomy and related services Kansas farmers have come to know and trust for continued growth and profitability. Based in Ottawa, Kansas, Ottawa Cooperative is now located in 14 cities across six counties in the eastern half of the Sunflower State.

“We specialize in taking care of all of the farmer’s needs from seed to chemicals to fertilizer and bulk fuel to buying grain; we also have an in-house financing program, crop scouting and variable-rate fertilizer program,” details Clark Wenger, president and general manager of Ottawa Cooperative. “We have a small feed mill and tire shop as well. We’ve built success by being a full-service organization, providing anything and everything a farmer needs to get a crop planted and harvested.”

## One of the last remaining

The organization traces its roots back to the early 1900s and the Ross Milling Company, which operated for 31 years until the 1940s when it was dismantled and sold to Ottawa Cooperative. Today Ottawa Cooperative employs 75 people across its 14 locations, with departments in grain handling and storage, feed mixing, seed cleaning, delivery and bagged sales, veterinary supplies, petroleum products and delivery, chemical and fertilizer sales and application, car care facilities and office management.

“There are few cooperatives left in this part of the state,” says Clark. “I think our presence is a huge benefit to our 1,500-plus members because we allow them to participate in our earnings and growth and continue to offer them new services to help their businesses and farming practices.”

In 2001, Ottawa Cooperative purchased several locations from the Farmers Cooperative Association, formerly located in Lawrence, Kansas. This expansion tripled the cooperative’s capacity, bringing it up to 14 locations. From the spring of 2006 to August 2007, Ottawa Cooperative added over 800,000 bushels of additional grain storage. The addition was spread across four locations in Burlington, Waverly, Ottawa and Scranton, Kansas. This addition brought Ottawa Cooperative’s capacity to more than 8 million bushels as of Aug. 31, 2007. From 2007 through 2015, another 1.6 million bushels of capacity were added at various locations, bringing the current grain capacity to 9.6 million bushels.

### Ties to the farm

Clark has been with the organization for the last 17 years, part of a formative chapter in Ottawa Cooperative’s history. He graduated from Kansas State University and originally wanted to work as a public accountant. “When I graduated from college, I took a job in public accounting and really felt like a caged animal,” he says.

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Born and raised on his grandfather’s farm, Clark couldn’t help but find the day to day of his humdrum desk job unnatural. “I spent my entire working career to that point outside in the elements and all of a sudden I was stuck behind a desk. I really didn’t enjoy it, but I stuck it out.”

He stuck it out for six years, working as a grain cooperative auditor until finally switching career paths. Clark assumed his leadership role at Ottawa Cooperative and became president in October 2014. “I’ve been connected to agriculture my entire life in some capacity,” he shares. “My dad

owned a feed mill when I was growing up and I helped him and I started helping my grandfather on his farm at 10 years old.”

### Adapting to industry changes

Over the course of his career, Clark has seen the industry progress rapidly. Seed genetics and varieties have changed, as well as new crop technology. Clark says it is very much a time of transition and Ottawa Cooperative recognizes this and is prepared to help see members through these changes with new services and support.





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“We’ve launched an initiative called ‘SUSTAIN’ in partnership with some of our main supplier,” says Clark. “The goal of this project is to help farmers become more environmentally friendly, while creating better yields and protecting the land and sustaining it for a long time to come.”

SUSTAIN offers a leading-edge, economically sound and forward-thinking pathway through which growers can meet the demands of the supply chain for fertilizer optimization and soil health, and do so in ways that achieve significant benefits — a win for the grower while delivering significant environmental benefits.

“Ottawa Cooperative strives to help customers succeed,” says Clark. “Adopting the nitrogen management practices within SUSTAIN provides an innovative way to grow yields, minimize environmental impact and optimize grower profitability. BalancedN improves nitrogen use efficiency by splitting applications from one to multiple applications during the growing season and placing nitrogen differently to assure it’s there when the plant needs it.”

To keep pace with new industry technology, Ottawa Cooperative has also launched a new crop scouting and soil sampling service. “These services pair well together and it’s what our farmers are looking for right now,” notes Clark. Also under the agronomy division, Ottawa Cooperative offers fertilizer and chemicals in bulk, application services, including variable-rate technology and test plot analysis of soybeans, corn and wheat.

New technology is ever changing and so are local, state and federal government regulations that put the strain on producers. “Transportation is a big issue we’ve been working on recently,” says Clark. “Restrictions on hours of service when our truck fleet can haul grain during harvest have made it more difficult to take care of the farmers’ inbound grain.”

To combat never-ending changes and industrywide consolidation, Clark says things often come down to efficiency — and he says he is lucky to have one of the most efficient teams in the cooperative business. “We’ve been really fortunate

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in terms of employees,” Clark says. “I see them as No. 1 and I’m a big believer in doing a lot of things to promote cohesion and doing things to keep our team dedicated and excited about their job. I think most of our employees would easily say they enjoy coming to work every day and this is why we have extremely low turnover and long tenures.”

At the same time, Clark realizes it’s important to foster the next generation of cooperative participants and employees. “We’re fortunate to have the ability to bring in quite a few new talented people and we’re using the experienced people we have to pass on the knowledge to young people,” he says. “We started this training program about two or three years ago and it has worked out really well with new people coming in. At first there’s a bit of friction with different generations working together, but once they find common ground it works. I would say it’s worked out very well to this point.”


## Eyes on the future



With the right team in place now and a new crop of employees ready to take over in coming years, Clark says Ottawa Cooperative is well positioned for progress. He looks for efficiency from his personnel and in ongoing improvements to existing facilities. “We’re always looking to add more grain storage and bin expansions and I see the potential for us to expand our footprint a little with some joint ventures and also increase our fertilizer and agronomy capacity,” he says. “There are many areas I’d like to see us build on in the next two to three years, but for now we’re focused on renovating our existing space and make the facilities we have safer and more efficient.”

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Clark says unlike some businesses, running a cooperative is a 24-hour, 365-days-a-year commitment, but an important job he wouldn't trade for the world. "I always welcome calls from employees and customers — nights, holidays, weekends — anytime because I want to find them an answer as soon as possible," he says.

With a growing global population, the pressure on producers is unlike anything before, which speaks to the importance of Ottawa Cooperative's position in the industry. "We're an important piece of the equation for

the food production in the world," says Clark. "I know we're just the Ottawa Cooperative in one little area, but we affect a lot of people."

At home in eastern Kansas, the Ottawa Cooperative Association is making a big impact on the agriculture market near and far, allowing farmers to do what they do best through time-tested, trusted service and support. •





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