



Siblings carry on parents' legacy with family fish farm

Byline: Erin Kelly for the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association

RJ Taylor never imagined he'd return to work at his family's fish farm after he left home at 18.

But that's exactly where he is today, working alongside his sister Arlen to manage Cedar Crest Trout Farms, which their parents, Jim and Lynette, started more than 30 years ago.

And while they are carrying on the family business, it looks quite different from the single-farm operation their parents started with. Today, the business, which also operates under the Springhills Fish brand, has multiple land-based fish farms in southwestern Ontario's Grey County, a partnership with Sheshegwaning First Nation for a fish farm on Manitoulin Island that utilizes offshore technology to grow fish in floating nets, a processing plant, an expanded team, and a working relationship with major retailers. Springhills Fish also delivers fresh fish, including rainbow trout, coho salmon, and Arctic char, to more than 1,500 homes in Ontario every month.

Though the siblings are now well-established in their roles as second-generation fish farmers, Taylor says the succession process to get there wasn't the easiest.

"There is a certain amount of uncertainty and unknowing when trying to sort things out with succession planning. It certainly isn't something that you can rush," says Taylor, noting that the entire succession process took nearly five years.

The move home all started with a phone call that Arlen received from their father asking for help with a sudden surge in orders. Arlen, who at the time was working overseas and had just accepted a contract to set up refugee camps in Iraq, agreed to return to the farm to help out for what she thought would be a temporary situation. After a few years, Taylor says that Arlen began to see more opportunities for the family business.

"Arlen had looked at the business, and she and I started talking about where the business could go and what the needs were," Taylor explains. "She had worked alongside my dad for a bit, who was getting into his late 70s by then, and that's when my parents started talking about some sort of succession plan."



To get things rolling with the succession process, the family brought in a third-party mediator who did a strategy session about what each individual wanted out of life, where the business could go, and the requirements to get there.

“It helps having someone there who isn’t part of the family and who doesn’t have emotions tied up in the process. It also gave my parents an opportunity to say they wanted to step back from daily operations on the farm. Those types of conversations, I don’t know that they would have come up if we didn’t have a mediator,” says Taylor, adding that the strategy sessions with the mediator also opened his eyes to how his skills aligned with what the business needed.

“When we were going through this process with the mediator and figuring out the business needs going forward, all of the gaps that were on the whiteboard were my strengths,” explains Taylor, who worked for several large science research centres after graduating from university. “So, it was only a matter of time before I called up Arlen and said ‘Okay, let’s do this.’”

As they got into the thick of the succession process, Taylor says they quickly learned an important lesson about finding experts suited to their personalities and business vision.

“My parents had an accountant from a larger firm who worked with all the farms in the area and this individual was of the mindset that there is only one way to do succession,” Taylor explains. “There was just no out-of-the-box thinking for understanding the personalities at play and the business and where we wanted to go.”

They decided the best move would be to have a fresh start with new experts. Taylor and his sister found an accountant with an entrepreneurial focus who helped create a succession plan that was in line with what the family and business needed. They also switched banks and lawyers.

“Starting with a clean slate was really helpful. It’s a new relationship and those individuals aren’t comparing you to your parents and how your parents ran the business,” he says.

Taylor is also quick to give his parents credit for being open to a process that suited what he and Arlen envisioned for the future of the business, noting that the tremendous growth of the family farm meant it was becoming less like the business his parents ran for decades.



“For my parents, the business was starting to boom just as they were reaching the end of their careers. So if they were to remain in a decision-making position with the business and holding the purse strings, it would be very hard for the business to grow and modernize. I’ve seen that happen on other farms, so we are very fortunate that our parents were open to something else,” explains Taylor. “I think there was also some awareness on their part that it’s a different industry now from when the business started.”

In addition to growing the business and increasing production, the siblings have focused on communication and interactions with the public, something that Taylor says wasn’t a priority – or even perceived as a good idea – with his parents’ generation.

“A big change was when we opened the gates to the public and became more engaged with the public through social media and local events,” he says. “It’s been a pretty amazing transition for the business, because people are genuinely excited to learn about where their food comes from and the people who produce it.”

The fish farming operation also prides itself on being recommended by Ocean Wise and certified by Best Aquaculture Practices, which Taylor calls the industry’s “gold standard” for animal welfare, environmental impacts, and worker health and safety.

The dust has long since settled on the family’s succession process. Though he never thought he would be managing his family’s fish farm, Taylor now can’t envision doing anything else – particularly since he gets to work with his sister to carry on their parents’ legacy.

“Building this farm was my dad’s dream. I feel very grateful for my parents’ belief in us to carry the business forward.”

And Taylor’s advice for others looking to start a succession process? Find the right experts to work with.

“Find people who are willing to find something that is customized to your situation. Because there’s a surprising amount out there who are not like that. When it comes to ensuring a successful succession, having the right people along the way is pivotal.”

Every year, CASA raises awareness about the importance of safety on Canadian farms through Canadian Agricultural Safety Week (CASW), which takes place during the third week of March. In 2024, CASW takes place March 10-16, and is sponsored by CN,



Syngenta Canada, Canadian Canola Growers Association, Fertilizer Canada, and Parrish & Heimbecker.

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Images:

[RJ & Arlen Taylor 1](#)

[RJ & Arlen Taylor 2](#)

Optional caption: Siblings RJ and Arlen Taylor are second-generation fish farmers who took over management of the fish farming operation their parents started more than 30 years ago. (Images provided by Cedar Crest Trout Farms)