Meet the New Faces in Minnesota Agriculture

By Lucas Sjostrom, Contributing Editor

Becoming a household name isn’t easy. But the University of Minnesota Extension’s Tom Rothman became one with his voice. In his 30 years with the Minnesota Farm Network, Rothman’s reports were broadcast through radios in households, trucks, tractors, and grain elevators across the state.

On January 7, Rothman began as Extension’s Director of Agricultural Stakeholder Outreach as John Byrnes retired from the position. Rothman says his new role is actually similar to what he was doing for the last 30 years, since he covered the research done by many of the same people who are now his colleagues.

Rothman studied agricultural journalism at the U of M and has degrees in radio and television broadcasting and media/public relations from Brown College and Metropolitan State University, respectively.

Outside of his profession, Tom enjoys cooking, hiking and photography. In the summer you might catch him playing softball, fishing and working on his 30-year-old Jaguar XJ-6. He insists that you’re never too old for softball. Tom and his wife live in St. Paul, and have two grown sons, John and Paul.

Filling Rothman’s shoes is Emery Kleven, who grew up on a Dodge County grain and beef cow/calf operation. He began as farm director at the Minnesota Farm Network on February 11. The Minnesota Farm Network consists of 29 radio stations across Minnesota that carry a schedule of their 18 programs daily. Kleven’s job is to deliver ag markets, news, and weather reports that give people the latest information for agriculture.

Before taking his new role, Emery worked as a farm broadcaster in Minnesota, Iowa and Nebraska, and most recently as co-owner of the Price Discovery Report, which is carried on 22 radio stations in SD, NE, IA, and MN. He attended Brown Institute and Minnesota State – Mankato after high school, but returned to the family farm before becoming a broadcaster for the first time at Faribault’s KDHL Radio.

Off the air, Kleven said he’s a huge sports fan. In fact, you’ll find his name in the record books for boys basketball at three different Minnesota schools. While he attended West Concord for his entire career, he also, mistakenly, shot baskets on the wrong end of the floor at conference foes Pine Island and Byron.

If you thought Tom and Emery were the only Minnesotans with broadcasting in their veins, think again. Margaret Hart is another broadcast communications graduate of St. Cloud State University. After 25 years in radio and television, she started as a communications officer with the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) six years ago. In January, Hart began as the Interim Communications Director after Michael Schommer moved to the Minnesota Department of Health. Hart grew up on a 640-acre farm near Madison, MN, with three older brothers who, she says, often tricked her into doing their chores.

In her new role, Margaret will continue to inform consumers and urban residents of MDA’s important work and explain why agriculture is relevant to them in their everyday lives.

While Hart spent 25 years in “traditional” media categories, MDA is now engaged in social media. The Department holds a presence on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter (with over 7,000 followers).

“With social media, one piece of content can be put in front of hundreds of thousands of people in a very short period of time, without it ever once being printed in the newspaper or broadcast on TV or radio,” Hart explained. “This provides a tremendous opportunity for farmers and all of us in agriculture to tell our story.”

At home, Hart battles her husband and 17-year-old son in a board game called Dominion – she has never won. Margaret is also

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-MARGARET HART

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TC&W operations commenced July 27, 1991 over 229 miles of what was formerly known as the “Ortonville Line” of the Soo Line Railroad Company (now Canadian Pacific Railway) between Minneapolis/St. Paul, MN and Milbank, SD. Prior to TC&W and Soo Line operation of this line, it was part of the Milwaukee Road’s main line to the Pacific Northwest. This line was originally built in the 1870’s by the Hastings and Dakota Railway. TC&W’s Minnesota Prairie Line subsidiary operates 94 miles of track owned by the Minnesota Valley Regional Rail Authority, which runs between Norwood Young America and Hanley Falls, MN. In July of 2012, TC&W acquired the assets of the Sisseton Milbank Railroad Company, with operations over 37 miles of line between its namesake cities in South Dakota.

TC&W and its subsidiaries employ over seventy people and operate over 340 miles of track in Minnesota and South Dakota. Commodities handled include corn, soybeans, wheat, sugar, canned and frozen vegetables, ethanol, crushed rock, metals, plastics, fuel oil, machinery, lumber, manufactured goods, and fertilizers. TC&W customers can access North American and world markets via our connections with Canadian Pacific Railway, Union Pacific Railroad, BNSF Railway, Canadian National Railway and Minnesota Commercial Railway.

What are the key trends affecting your industry?
Railroad companies continue to grow and invest as the economy improves. Billions of private dollars continue to be spent annually by U.S. railroads to maintain and enhance rail infrastructure. With sustained high fuel prices, fuel efficiencies of railroads are a key factor in railroad competitiveness, especially over longer hauls. As the nation’s roads and bridges deteriorate at a faster rate than they can be renewed and as an anticipated shortage of truck drivers materializes, demand for rail service increases. The federal mandate of Positive Train Control will have sweeping changes for freight rail operations – the technology is in the beta stage, but the mandate is for implementation by the end of 2015. As a short line, we are caught in the necessity of adopting this technology without knowing the ultimate costs, but they will be very significant.

What are your legislative priorities?
The route TC&W uses to get from rural Minnesota into Minneapolis and St. Paul has been identified as the alignment of the proposed Southwest Light Rail Transit (SWLRT) from Hopkins to Minneapolis. It has been and will be challenging to work with Met Council so that the goals of the SWLRT can be met while preserving the competitive freight rail access TC&W gives to its rail shippers. TC&W received over 60 letters of support from its customers, cities and counties it serves as part of its response to the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS), for which we are grateful! TC&W’s comments may be viewed on our website, tcwr.net. We also monitor proposed Minnesota Pollution Control Agency’s (MPCA) legislation – we are good stewards of the environment, greenhouse gas friendly, and we feel MPCA’s concerns can be addressed outside of the legislative process. We also monitor concerns of Agri-Growth members - we share a common bond as we are 95 percent dependent on agriculture for our business.

The Minnesota Agri-Growth Council is an advocate for the state’s food and agriculture industry. Founded in 1968, the Council is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that represents the shared interests of its 200-plus members, which include food and agriculture businesses, organizations and producers, as well as the service industries that support them.

Member In Focus

Company: Twin Cities & Western Railroad Company (TC&W)
Website: www.tcwr.net • Location: Headquartered in Glencoe, MN

Q & A with Mark Wegner, President:
How is your organization funded?
As a freight railroad our income is earned by hauling freight for our customers. In the past two years our customers have shipped or received products to or from thirty-nine U.S. states, seven Canadian provinces and four Mexican states. We are volume dependent, which means the greater amount of freight cars we haul means the greater amount we can reinvest in our track structure. We have to constantly look at providing competitive rates to our customers, working closely with our large railroad partners to enable our customers to access the North American marketplace and export markets. As a short line railroad (the large railroad that spun us off their system couldn’t maintain the property for competitive freight rail service on a long-term basis) we are very proud that we’ve been able to maintain TC&W to a 40 mph track standard over the past 21 years, but freight railroads are a very capital intensive industry and short line railroads like us are particularly vulnerable to volume swings.

What is new at TC&W?
We have been very pleased to see several of our customers make major investments in new and expanded facilities; in 2012 Granite Falls Energy invested in a loop track for unit ethanol trains, South Central Grain & Energy invested in their Buffalo Lake facility to enable it to become a shuttle grain train facility, and United Grain Systems opened a new grain shuttle facility at Brownton. We are fulfilling our mission by adding jobs and growing the economy in the area of Minnesota we serve.
writing a part-fiction book based on a small town church forced to close due to dwindling membership and the foibles that follow when they sell the building to con-artists from the cities.

Don’t judge each day by the harvest you reap but by the seeds that you plant.”

- ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

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Karin lives with husband, Matt, and daughter, Elizabeth, in Delano. They raise beef cattle and sheep. The Schaefer family includes son, Cameron, born in 2015. The Schaefer’s have a dog, Jack, and a cat, Sadie. The Schaefer family also raises beef cattle and sheep. The Schaefer family includes son, Cameron, born in 2015. The Schaefer family also raises beef cattle and sheep.

On the other side of St. Paul from MDA, is the office of Dr. Kesha A. Henry. Henry is a Jamaica native and currently enjoying her first Minnesota winter as the executive director for the Minnesota Agricultural Education Leadership Council (MAELC). She started in July 2012. MAELC’s 16-member legislative council is dedicated to improving and restructuring ag education in Minnesota, as it has since its founding in 1997.

Henry comes to Minnesota from Purdue University where she obtained her Ph. D. in Curriculum and Instruction with a concentration in Agricultural and Extension Education. While she was at Purdue she served as a graduate research and teaching assistant in the Colleges of Agriculture and Education. Henry has spent her career focusing on higher education and career development of urban agricultural science students, international extension, and communication in virtual communities of practice. Before beginning her master’s degree at North Carolina A&T State University, Henry worked with Jamaica’s Ministry of Agriculture for five years.

“I look forward to working with all our existing and new members and partners as we continue to promote agricultural education across the state,” Henry explained.

Henry spends time with family outside of work. One of her favorite quotes is: “Don’t judge each day by the harvest you reap but by the seeds that you plant.” - Robert Louis Stevenson

Another person working to grow agricultural literacy is Karin Schaefer. Previously with the Minnesota Farm Bureau’s public relations team, Schaefer started as Executive Director with the Minnesota Beef Council in September 2012 as Ron Eustice retired October 1.

The unique thing about Schaefer is that she can preach to the choir. As she explains it, “Our primary beef purchaser in the grocery store is a working mother aged 25-44. This is me! I can relate to the pressures and concerns consumers have about providing a nutritious and healthy meal to their families, while staying within a budget.”

If we put the experience and passion of everyone we’ve previously talked to in a blender, the resulting resume might look something like that of Malissa Fritz Schentzel. A southwest Minnesota native, Malissa earned an ag journalism degree from South Dakota State University, and then worked in the Sioux Falls, SD, television market. In 2001, Schentzel moved to the Twin Cities and into the role of communications coordinator for the Department of Agriculture for two years. Next, she accepted a position as communications director with the Minnesota Board of Animal Health under state veterinarian Bill Hartmann.

Schentzel recently started as account director helping to lead the Farm and Food Advocacy (FFA) team at Weber Shandwick in Bloomington. Weber Shandwick prides itself on working with food and agriculture companies of every size, and organizations with every size budget. Malissa and the entire FFA team help companies and organizations reach their intended audiences and effectively communicate their messages.

“Ultimately, when I come to work every day I help agricultural companies and organizations from Minnesota and across the U.S. share their story,” Schentzel said. “It is an awesome job.”

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Malissa is most looking forward to the impact she can make in agriculture, whether that is helping people who work from an office or a tractor. Most importantly, Schentzel explains, “The time is right to engage in the conversation with consumers, with your customers. And social media channels provide the perfect conduit to reach them.”

Living on their farm just south of the Twin Cities, Malissa and her husband are raising three kids and sheep. She also spends time on volunteer boards, visiting classrooms, and working with 4-H youth to spread the word of agriculture.

Another South Dakota State University graduate working in Minnesota is Tom Slunecka. Slunecka grew up on a farm in central South Dakota and graduated with degrees in communications and agronomy. Tom began last September as the executive director for Minnesota Soybean. Minnesota Soybean is the collaborative name for Minnesota Soybean Growers Association (MSGA) and Minnesota Soybean Research & Promotion Council (MSRPC), housed in Mankato, MN.

The two organizations are separate, but share office space and staff to carry out their missions. MSGA is a farmer-controlled membership organization that began in 1962. MSGA monitors government policy and provides education and leadership training designed to improve soybean farmer profitability. MSRPC is Minnesota’s soybean check-off organization. Its work in soybean production research, building international markets, and working to defend Minnesota’s soybean farmers right to farm is vital to Minnesota agriculture.

Throughout his career, Slunecka has been in the thick of what’s happening in agriculture. He was previously the vice president of marketing for PhibroChem in Omaha, NE, where he focused on ethanol and animal agriculture. He also previously worked for American Cyanamid, National Corn Growers Association, and the Ethanol Promotion and Information Council. In all his roles, Tom championed bio-tech and bio-fuels to consumers outside of agriculture. In this new role, Slunecka hopes to strengthen Minnesota Soybean’s political relationships through MSGA and streamline research efforts through MSRPC.

Tom’s passions outside work include spending time with his family, including fishing and snowmobiling. His family has a retreat with some of the finest wild pheasant hunting grounds on the South Dakota central prairies.

The Minnesota Agri-Growth Council represents the diversity of the food and agriculture industry. This article is an overview of changes of key influencers throughout all facets of the food chain.