

## 2018 Wisconsin Essay Contest Winner

Audrey Pelikan, Jefferson FFA

“To develop and deliver leading edge products, services, knowledge, and technology through high level expertise and strategic assets.” Through my Youth Apprenticeship at Insight FS, I have witnessed this as the primary focus of the GROWMARK System. Cooperatives are maintaining reliable local service while continually improving efficiency through technology, which is what the next generation desires. Cooperatives remain relevant by their legacy of good service, advances in technology, and unique cooperative structure.

The GROWMARK System began in 1927 and has been providing local, stable service to farmers ever since. FS cooperatives successfully carry on this legacy by providing face-to-face service, which as a member of the FS staff, I have witnessed firsthand. Employee/customer relationships develop because of the trustworthy service and business still being done on a word and a handshake. The GROWMARK System has a genuine concern for the success of their 250,000+ customers and numerous community members. That was extremely evident at our cooperative when a long time FS customer recently passed away and the employees were with his family during the funeral. To FS, maintaining the cooperative reliability and legacy is key in demonstrating the value of cooperatives to the next generation of farmers.

Cooperatives are also leveraging new technology to attract the younger generation of farmers. For example, our local cooperative created the Precision Agriculture Department that employs yield monitors as one way of enhancing customer service through current technology. Not only is the Precision Agriculture Department advancing; all of the departments are becoming more streamlined through technology. The Energy Department installed remote tank monitors that alert the customer and the cooperative by phone when the customer’s propane tank becomes low. According to a study conducted by Millennium Research, 64 percent of farmers under the age of 40 are using all the precision agriculture they can, and the numbers will continue to grow. The younger generation of farmers are increasingly using cutting edge technology and they expect their cooperative to do the same.

The uniqueness of a cooperative structure lies between large companies that only provide the technology piece and small companies that only provide personal service. The GROWMARK System utilizes a farmer board structure because they were founded on a member-focused approach. Cooperatives give back to their customers by compensating their loyalty monetarily and through localized service. If a farmer has a complaint or suggestion, they can go to their elected representative, who will then take it to the cooperative board. In which case customers have ownership and a voice in the farming community, which demonstrates the cooperative’s values to the next generation.

By their long-standing legacy, advances in technology, and the uniqueness of their structure, cooperatives can and will remain relevant to the involvement of the next generation. They have struck a balance between history and advancing into the future. The way the next generation of farmers will do business is considerably different than their parents, but agricultural cooperatives will be with them every step of the way.

