

SUGARBEET

## Northern Minnesota family 'humbled' by community-led sugarbeet harvest following farmer's death

Paul Olsonawski passed away suddenly in July of this year, leaving his family and farm behind. His community rallied together to harvest his sugarbeet crop early in an effort to support the Olsonawski family during their time of need.

Written By: Emily Beal | 11:08 pm, Sep. 27, 2021



American Crystal Sugar opened its piling site exclusively for the harvesting of the Olsonawski family's acres on Sept. 27, 2021. With a vast number of volunteers, there was a steady line of trucks at the piling site, carrying only the sugarbeets of Paul Olsonawski, who died in July 2021. Photo taken near Humboldt, Minnesota. Emily Beal / Agweek

HUMBOLDT, Minnesota — It normally takes the Olsonawski family 10 days to complete their annual sugarbeet harvest.

This year, it took less than 24 hours.



Tractors, trucks and machinery of every color, shape and size filled the Olsonawskis' acres on Monday, Sept. 27, with a steady stream of sugarbeets falling into carts. Though sugarbeet harvest will not officially commence in the Red River Valley until Friday, Oct. 1, neighbors, friends and fellow farmers gathered with one common goal: to help a farming family in need.

Paul Olsonawski passed away suddenly at age 55 in July of this year, leaving his wife and four children behind. His wife, Dawn, has had a lot on her plate. Luckily, getting this year's sugarbeet crop out of her late husband's fields will not be one of them.



Dawn Olsonawski says it's been a relief to not have to worry about getting the fields harvested after her husband's death, and she has been humbled by the outpouring support that included a massive harvest effort by the sugarbeet industry. Photo taken Sept. 27, 2021, near Humboldt, Minnesota. Emily Beal / Agweek

"It is such a relief. One of the first feelings I had when he passed was just this gripping fear that I have never felt in my life. For this to happen, it helped ease that fear a lot. I didn't know what I was going to do after losing him," Dawn Olsonawski said.

## Gathering a game plan



Duck Younggren was a key part in the planning and success of the community led sugarbeet harvest for the Olsonawski family. Photo taken September 27, 2021, near Humboldt, Minnesota.

Garnering 60 trucks, 10 diggers, 10 defoliators and more equipment is no small task. But for Dan Younggren, known as Duck to friends and those in the sugarbeet industry, it was a labor of love.

"We decided to get together and have a harvest and take his sugarbeets off," Younggren said.

Younggren was a close friend of Paul Olsonawski and a fellow sugarbeet grower. Younggren is also the current president of the American Sugarbeet Growers Association.

Using his contacts, Younggren sent out a stream of text messages and phone calls to community members who also raise sugarbeets. He was happily surprised by the amount of support he received in his harvesting endeavor.

"We started at 7 o'clock this morning and it's like letting 60 cats go. They're going in all different directions. So it's really fun to see and really good to get done for Paul's wife," Younggren said. "Everywhere you look you see trucks coming and going."



The Olsonawski family is thankful for the immense support the sugarbeet growers in the region and community members have shown them since Paul Olsonawski's death in July 2021. Photo taken Sept. 27, 2021, near Humboldt, Minnesota. Emily Beal / Agweek

American Crystal graciously opened the piling site in Humboldt exclusively for the Olsonawski harvest, which took place right down the road.

Close friends and family are thankful for Younggren's consistency and perseverance while planning the large scale event.

## A community coming together

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Lester Wallenberg was close friends with Paul Olsonawski and became one of his hired hands 11 years ago when Olsonawski decided to expand his sugarbeet operation. Photo taken Sept. 27, 2021, near Humboldt, Minnesota. Emily Beal / Agweek

Wallenberg and Paul Olsonawski had known each other since childhood but became close friends in 1986. They went on many skiing and fishing adventures together. Wallenberg started working for the Olsonawsksis 11 years ago, after Paul Olsonawski decided to grow his sugarbeet operation. Wallenberg has been working in the sugarbeet industry since 1979 and became a wealth of knowledge for the Olsonawsksi during their expansion.

"He was great to work for," Wallenberg said. "He was just a jolly guy."



Orchestrating the simultaneous harvest of four different sugarbeet fields belonging to the Olsonawski family was an intricate task and took careful planning when telling trucks where to go. Photo taken Sept. 27, 2021, near Humboldt, Minnesota. Emily Beal / Agweek

In addition to sugarbeets, Paul Olsonawski also farmed soybeans and wheat. Both of those harvests had volunteers to help get the crops out of the field as well. But for Dawn Olsonawski, this sugarbeet harvest was different from both the wheat and soybean harvests.

Dawn Olsonawski hadn't cried on Sept. 27 until she made her way to the sugarbeet fields. As she stood and watched the carousel of machinery and volunteers, she was overcome with gratitude and emotion.



Sugarbeet growers from all over the Red River Valley jumped at the opportunity to help a fellow farm family in need. Photo taken Sept. 27, 2021, near Humboldt, Minnesota. Emily Beal / Agweek

She knows witnessing the team work taking place in his acres would have had an impact on her husband.

"Paul would be extremely proud of what is going on," Dawn Olsonawski said. "There would be some tears streaming down his face with gratitude."

Sugarbeet growers from all over the northern Valley made their way to the four fields that needed to be harvested. One-hundred acres was harvested during pre-pile, leaving 540 acres left to be harvested by the volunteer crew.



Tony Olsonawski grew up on a sugarbeet farm run by his father and his uncle, Paul Olsonawski, who died in July 2021. Tony was genuinely surprised by the amount of manpower that showed up on Sept. 27, 2021, to help with the family's sugarbeet harvest. Photo taken near Humboldt, Minnesota. Emily Beal / Agweek

Tony Olsonawski, nephew of Paul and Dawn Olsonawski, grew up farming with his Uncle Paul and father. He has found memories growing up in the sugarbeet fields and is touched by the outpouring support of the community. He grew up with many of the volunteers.

"Couldn't ask for a better childhood. I think it's the way everybody should grow up" he said.

## Smiling down

**"This farming family we have here is wonderful. This is what America should look like right here."**

The energy in the sugarbeet fields was an equal mixture of bitter and sweet. Those who were close to Paul Olsonawski ~~shone~~<sup>shined</sup> up while talking about his charisma and character, but knew he was smiling down on all of them.

"I told his brother 'I think Paul has got his finger on the weather today because it is absolutely ideal,'" Younggren said.



There were 60 truck driver volunteers at the community-led sugarbeet harvest at the Olsonawski farm, making a steady stream of trucks go in and out of the fields. Photo taken Sept. 27, 2021, near Humboldt, Minnesota. Emily Beal / Agweek

The sugarbeet fields were reaping the same energy Paul Olsonawski gave to those in need while he was alive, tenfold.

"Paul wore everything on his sleeve, but I always said Paul would be the first person to give the shirt on his back," Younggren said.

Tony Olsonawski said his family is grateful for the constant stream of support since Paul's passing, especially for his aunt's peace of mind.



Dawn Olsonawski watches as community members complete sugarbeet harvest in her late husband's fields. Photo taken Sept. 27, 2021, near Humboldt, Minnesota. Emily Beal / Agweek

"Harvest is always a stressful time. It's just one less thing she needs to worry about. It's great seeing everyone out here making sure she's going to be taken care of from now on," Tony Olsonawski said.

As for Dawn Olsonawski, she is forever humbled by the acts of kindness her community has shown her and her late husband.

"This farming family we have here is wonderful. This is what America should look like right here," Dawn Olsonawski said.