

Matt Wolters – Surefire Ag

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

The population estimates are in. Census Bureau data show the most recent estimates of population change in Kansas counties, with a pattern of urban growth and rural population loss – except for a few counties which have bucked the trend. For example, the northernmost tier of counties in Kansas all demonstrated population loss, with one exception: Rawlins County. Why is this so? At least one source of the population growth in Rawlins County has been the advent of a private sector, entrepreneurial agribusiness enterprise. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Matt Wolters is a co-founder of Surefire Ag Systems in Rawlins County, the site of unexpected growth. Matt grew up here at Atwood, studied agricultural economics at K-State and came back to northwest Kansas. He went to work for another company but saw an opportunity in the fertilizer industry.

Matt contacted his brother Josh who had been an engineer with larger companies but was ready to leave the big corporate structure. They partnered with their friend Blaine Ginther. Their idea was to create a system of equipment that could attach to a farmer's existing farm implements and be used to dispense liquid fertilizer.

The three went to work. They set out to create a company to produce such a product and found they had complementary skills. Josh Wolters is an engineer and Blaine Ginther had worked in management and sales, while Matt specialized in operations and strategic management.

The three entrepreneurs launched a company known as Surefire Ag Systems. The purpose of the company was to deliver customized equipment for application of crop inputs. They began the business in August 2007 on a farmstead north of their hometown of Atwood.

“The foundation of our business is configuring a package of components to make a system that attaches to existing equipment to apply liquid fertilizer, chemicals, or herbicides,” Matt said. For example, adding their system to a corn planter makes it possible to apply fertilizer also. “Our system can be customized to each specific piece of equipment,” Matt said.

Surefire Ag got started at the time that GPS guidance and tractor autosteer systems were really growing in popularity. Being able to integrate the Surefire Ag systems with those technologies was a key to success. Surefire Ag experienced significant growth and continued to innovate.

“By God's guiding hand, we hired our first electrical engineer in 2011,” Matt said. This highly-trained engineer, originally from Hoxie, happened to be moving back to the area when he and his wife decided they wanted to raise their kids here. He joined SureFire and his skills enabled the company to do more product development. Surefire Electronics was launched in 2012 and Surefire's QuickDraw system was introduced in 2013. QuickDraw is an automated, electronically controlled spray tender system which automates batch mixing of crop inputs.

The company continues to grow. “One of our objectives is to be an economic engine for Rawlins County,” Matt said. The company now employs 35 people and has sold products to 47 states, six Canadian provinces and beyond. Such market breadth is

remarkable for a young company from rural Atwood, population 1,258 people. Now, that's rural.

In addition to generating employment, the company created the Dream Big Education Foundation to support Rawlins County schools. SureFire made a one-hundred thousand dollar donation which has been used to put smart boards and Ipad carts in the grade schools and significantly upgrade the information technology infrastructure in the high school.

“Our people are our greatest asset,” Matt said. “We’ve been blessed with the most dedicated, committed group of people who have come together to make it happen. They grew up with a work ethic and the moral compass to take care of people.” For more information, go to www.surefireag.com.

The population estimates are in. Of all the northern tier of counties in Kansas, the only one to experience population gain is Rawlins County, home of SureFire Ag Systems. We salute Matt Wolters, Josh and Lisa Wolters, Blaine and Erin Ginther and all those involved with SureFire Ag for making a difference with agricultural entrepreneurship and dedicated effort. In rural Kansas, hard work is the only surefire solution.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.