



Submitted photo

Weston rancher Jason Fellows herds cattle at his ranch in southeast Idaho.

Becoming an agricultural advocate for life

By Sean Ellis

Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

WESTON – Southeast Idaho farmer Jason Fellows is involved in a national program designed to help agricultural leaders greatly improve their role as advocates for agriculture.

American Farm Bureau Federation's Partners in Advocacy Leadership program is designed to help people develop the executive-level skills needed to become effective advocates for the farming and ranching industry in their communities and beyond.

Fellows has had a passion for agriculture since he was a little kid but the PAL program is helping him develop the knowledge and skills needed to put that passion into action.

"I think one of the reasons this program really reached out to me was that I've always loved agriculture and it's something I've wanted to be involved in since I was a kid," Fellows says.

"One challenge agriculture is really facing is, how do we be sustainable and productive in the future? And I think advocacy is a big part of how to do that. Being advocates for agriculture is what will help us be sustainable forever."

Fellows, 36, is a first-generation farmer, although he was raised in agriculture, working on his uncle's dairy farm growing up.

He bought his first set of beef cows in high school while involved in the FFA program and he and his brother started a beef cow operation 15 years ago. The operation now runs about 150 cows and sells about 1,000 to 1,500 tons of hay every year.

Fellows, who was raised in southeast Idaho, lives in Weston, which is just west of Preston, with his wife, Lacey, and daughter, Brooklee.

PAL is an intense two-year program for farmers and ranchers between the ages of 30 and 45 that requires a major time commitment from participants.

The goal of the PAL program is to personally develop participants to the point they have the expertise and confidence to successfully represent and promote agriculture in the media, in government, or on speaking circuits.

"Basically, our goal is to create advocacy rock stars for agriculture," says Johnna Miller, senior director of media and advocacy training and PAL coordinator for American Farm Bureau Federation.

“When you’re less than 2 percent of the population, you need all the advocates you can get, especially when the vast majority of Americans have never set foot on a farm,” she adds. “We want to give the PALs the tools to be able to tell their agriculture stories in a way that resonates with everyone, no matter where they live.”

Fellows grew up wanting to be a cowboy and has loved agriculture since his earliest years.

“There is just something about when the earth is tilled, there’s a special smell,” he says. “It’s really that connection with ... the earth that probably made me decide I wanted to be in agriculture.”

Fellows says one of the main lessons he has learned so far through the PAL program “is to live life with urgency. A lot of us, we wait for somebody else to do something and to truly be an advocate, we need to be the ones that are acting, realizing there’s an urgency in everything we do. We need to have a pep in our step and we need to be moving forward.”

Fellows was recommended for the PAL program by Idaho Farm Bureau Federation President Bryan Searle, a potato farmer from Shelley.

Fellows first got involved with IFBF by participating in a district-level speaking event known in Farm Bureau circles as a Discussion Meet.

“Ever since then, he’s not slowed down and he has a passion for agriculture and a desire to promote the industry,” Searle says. “He understands agriculture and the business side of things and he’s just very passionate for the industry.”

In addition to serving as Franklin County Farm Bureau President, Fellows has also served as statewide chairman of Idaho Farm Bureau Federation’s Young Farmers and Ranchers program and he currently serves on the IFBF board of directors, representing southeast Idaho.

The application process for the PAL program is intense, as candidates are evaluated on their knowledge of agriculture issues, leadership desire and the extent to which they offer leadership potential for agriculture’s future.

A panel of judges select a group of finalists who are interviewed and ranked based upon the interviews.

“It was an intense, tough interview,” Fellows says. “They wanted to see how you would do under pressure.”

The application process might actually be the easy part, as PAL participants commit to a two-year program that includes them attending and completing four separate multi-day training “modules.”

These modules include homework assignments and participants agree to become active members of AFBF’s grassroots outreach team and create informational outreach and consumer-engagement videos.

PAL graduates conduct media interviews, attend AFBF events and participate in Farm Bureau advocacy efforts.

Fellows attended his first training module in June and is committed to three more through September 2023. He says the training has already started to change him, for the better.

“It affected me a lot,” he says about the June training. “Like farming, to get a better product, we put in different inputs, and I think one thing I’ve learned from that first module is that I need



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Weston farmer Jason Fellows, shown here on his beef cow operation, is involved in an American Farm Bureau Federation program that equips farmers and ranchers with the executive-level skills to be effective advocates for agriculture.

to put different inputs in me to be able to grow personally. I need to start fertilizing myself in a little bit different manner to be able to get a better product.”

The first module was challenging and rigorous, Fellows says.

“The homework is intense and it’s making me stretch a lot and grow,” he says. “It is definitely a life-changing experience and it’s something that we decided as a family is worth doing.”

Fellows says one of the biggest things he hopes to get from the training is the ability to take action and encourage others to do so also.

“We need to realize that we all need to take action,” he says. “Through this program, I want to be able to advocate and help others believe in themselves that they need to take action.”

He also embraces the fact that PAL graduates are expected to be agricultural advocates for the long-term.

“I think this is a team you’re on for life and hopefully I can share my experiences and truly be a voice for agriculture,” he says. ■