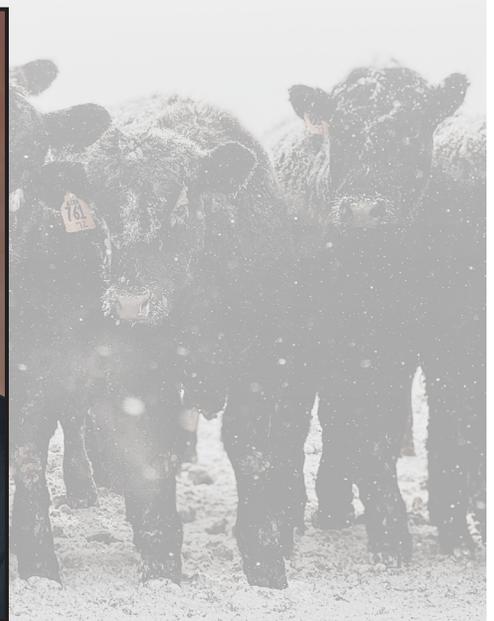


2023 WATERTOWN WINTER FARM SHOW DEDICATED TO Jeff Heesch



By Twila Schmitt
Contributing Writer

When it comes to the Watertown Winter Farm Show, Jeff Heesch believes the future is as important as the past. Even as this Ag Committee veteran is being honored this year, he credits the next generation with keeping the Farm Show's reputation strong.

"It's not just having younger blood involved, but it's seeing a true passion in these young men and women who wish to see the Farm Show continue to grow, evolve and be the best," he said.

The Watertown Area Chamber of Commerce Ag Committee, which organizes the Watertown Winter Farm Show, annually honors an individual or family who has spent years contributing to its success by dedicating the Farm Show to their name. In 2023, two individuals will share this honor – Jeff Heesch and John K. Weismantel.

Heesch, Senior Vice President of First Bank & Trust in Watertown, served as president of the organization for twelve years. He joined the organization in 2008 as Community Bank president. Prior to joining First Bank & Trust, he served as Vice President for Plains Commerce Bank in Watertown for seven years. He was recently recognized by the South Dakota Bankers Association for his 40-year career in the banking industry.

Heesch grew up on a farm near Elkton. He attended Pipestone Area Vocational Technical Institute where he earned an Associate Degree in Ag Banking and also attended Graduate School of Banking in Boulder, Colorado. He worked in Flandreau, Clearwater, Nebraska, Midland and Dawson, Minnesota before moving to Watertown in 2001.

Heesch said his nearly immediate involvement with the Watertown Winter Farm Show "was probably Chuck's fault," as they moved next door to the Langners when the family first moved to Watertown. Since that

time he has served several roles on the Ag Committee, including Chairman. Heesch is encouraged to see a new generation of young professionals becoming involved in the Ag Committee.

"They are a big part of the Winter Farm Show, but also become involved in other events throughout the year, such as the annual 4-H BBQ and Adopt the First Grade," he said.

The next generation is not afraid to ask questions and say, "What if we try it this way?"

The 78th Watertown Winter Farm Show is scheduled for February 8-11, 2023, at the Codington County Extension Complex. Heesch said he is slowly getting used to the idea of being honored.

"Following an Ag Committee meeting Chuck (Langner) asked me to stick around. When Chuck and Keith (Mack) told me, I was really shocked. There are so many others on the Ag Committee that could get this honor before I did," he said.

Travis Nelsen, Ag Committee Chairman, said that it is truly an honor to recognize Heesch as one of the Farm Show Dedication recipients for his many years of involvement in the Watertown Winter Farm Show.

"Jeff has always been a strong supporter of the Farm Show throughout his career and has been a long-time active Ag committee member helping promote Ag in our community," said Nelsen.

Heesch is a member of the SDBA, Ag Committee, past member of Business Industry School Coalition (BISCO) and Lions Club. In his free time, he enjoys being on his pontoon on Lake Cochrane and spending time with his family. He and his wife, Kelly, just celebrated 40 years of marriage and have five grown children: Tara, Christopher, Abbey, Alex and Steven.

"My family is everything to me," said Heesch.

"Our five grown children live in Oregon, North Dakota, Montana, Iowa and Texas." They also have twelve grandchildren – and love to visit them as often as they can. "Spoiling them is on the top of our list of things to do. We have so much fun doing that and then turning them back to their parents."

Heesch added that he also enjoys "a little farm time" at his brother-in-law and nephew's farm, helping with spring planting and harvest.

"I was born and raised on the farm and after being off the farm for 40-plus years, I feel it is still in my blood. Maybe that's part of why the Winter Farm Show is so important to me."

Heesch reflected on the many changes he's seen at the farm show during the past two decades – many involving technology. The Extension Complex now has more lighting, a better sound system, stronger Wi-Fi and electronic information screens throughout the farm show grounds.

And Heesch believes the Watertown Winter Farm Show's strongest days are yet to come.

"We'll continue to draw huge crowds from the region and many sectors in Watertown. It's beyond farmers and extends to all the businesses that rely on agriculture, such as elevators, veterinarians, retail and of course, banking," he said.

While the annual February schedule can be challenging, Heesch believes offering "something to look forward to" in the winter months makes it the perfect timing. The addition of online auctions over the past years have helped sales, no matter what the weather brings.

"There's always a lot of work to do, but we have fun. It's truly the best show around."

Congratulations, Jeff Heesch!