

THE HUTCHINSON NEWS

KANSAS-AGLAND

North Dakota farmer branches out to Africa

Staff Writer The Hutchinson News

Published 12:01 a.m. CT June 14, 2013 | Updated 11:00 p.m. CT June 13, 2013

MIKKEL PATES

Agweek FAIRMOUNT, N.D. (AP) - Wallie Hardie is a Richland County farmer, but in the past two years, he and his son Josh have become farmers in Africa, too. They say they hope they're becoming smart farmers because surviving in frontier-style farming requires it.

Wallie has been pushing frontiers for years. He was instrumental in starting the North Dakota Corn Growers Association in the 1980s, becoming North Dakota's first president of the National Corn Growers Association in 1997. In the past year, he has been on a new level of energy, seemingly starting new pieces of a new career, promoting small-scale "designer nitrogen" fertilizer plants to be bolted onto ethanol plants in the region. Wallie, 60, has been farming in a family operation, but now farms in Mozambique and Tanzania, with Aslan Group Global. It's a real frontier. Wallie was the oldest of three children on a farm in South Dakota. He graduated from high school in Rosholt, S.D., in 1970 and got both bachelor's and master's degrees in agricultural economics at North Dakota State University. He eventually taught a year in ag business at Iowa State University in Ames before coming home to the farm in 1978, according to Agweek (<http://bit.ly/111BaxV>). In the mid-1980s, Wallie was growing five crops - wheat, barley, sunflowers, soybeans and corn. The corn yielded a consistent 120 bushels an acre. Wallie and his wife Connie, who have three children, have grown their farm to more than 5,000 acres. Josh, 32, joined the operation in 1999 and has a separate farming entity, though they work together. Wallie has been active in church work, and developed a special interest in Third World overseas missions. His daughter Ginna, who now lives in Kenosha, Wis., was the first of the children to work with Royal Servants, a group that takes young people on Christian missions in Europe and the Third World. Mozambique is a long country on the southeast coast of the continent and acquired its independence from Portugal in the 1960s. About 20 years ago, Mozambique suffered a civil war. Wallie remembers being appalled at the poverty when he visited Ginna in 2007, in the wake of a

civil war that pitted northern rural people against the city people in the south. Particularly, he and Josh thought it ironic that they could drive for eight hours in the country without seeing a single commercial farm, while nongovernmental entities handed out packets of soy-based protein. In February 2012, the Hardies met leaders of Aslan Group Global. Based in Florida, Aslan Group is led by Jes Tarp, a former Evangelical pastor who is originally from Denmark, and Paul Larsen, a Minneapolis-based financial planner. The Aslan Group had farmed in Ukraine and expanded to Mozambique in 2012, when the nation's government awarded the group a "concession" to farm there. The concession started at up to 3,000 acres and can grow to up to 25,000 acres, assuming the group can clear and farm the land. A concession runs for 50 years, but is renewable for another 50. There is no private land ownership and no land rent. The taxes are a few dollars an acre. Land clearing costs can run from \$100 to \$300 an acre, depending on the situation. The Aslan Group had started farming small, harvesting 100 acres in the spring of 2011 and 500 acres in 2012. "They said, 'Look, we've got this concession, but we need real farmers on the ground.' We were primed for that, because of our visit to Mozambique," Wallie says. "We thought, you know, this fits in our wheelhouse. We know how to grow soybeans, how to grow corn. This is what we do." The Hardies invested some money and agreed to be paid consultants for the group. To get to their farm in Africa, the Hardies typically fly into Nampula, Mozambique, a city of about 2 million where the only Westerners are in the aid business. They then take an eight-hour ride to the village of Ruace, a town of about 2,500 people about 10 miles from the farm. "You want to have a pillow underneath," Wallie says of the rough journey. Wallie went to Mozambique in August 2012 and stayed two weeks to tour the farm and see the clearing operation. In the previous year, the Aslan Group had already built a headquarters with two four-bedroom brick guest houses. A shop and office has just been completed in the past month. The apartments include restrooms with running water, but no hot water. The farm crews eat in huts with bamboo walls. The cooks make meals over an open fire. The farm has a general manager, "Chish," and about 10 other management people, mostly from nearby Zimbabwe, where commercial agriculture is more prevalent. They purchased a tractor from South Africa, which arrived a week late. "Soybeans are the No. 1 cash crop, but we'd like to bring in sunflower and maybe sorghum and corn, as well," Wallie says. It's hard to raise soybeans in the area because of the tree branches and other obstacles on the ground. Sunflower and sorghum can be harvested higher off the ground. The company put in a 42,000-bushel steel bin this year, and it's full of beans. It's the first time the company has dealt with anything other than bags. By February 2013, Wallie had a second deal going in Tanzania, to the north of Mozambique. That month, Wallie traveled to Tanzania and Mozambique with John

Phipps, the editor of U.S. Farm Report and an Illinois farmer. Phipps had known Wallie through corn grower leadership and, together, they toured a 68,000-acre Tanzanian cattle ranch the Aslan Group had acquired for \$5 million from a family that had owned it for 20 years. The Aslan Group has cleared 150 acres and plans to produce soybeans and sorghum. The farm uses two bulldozers and a backhoe to clear the land. After Phipps, Wallie hosted farmer friends from central Nebraska - corn growers with irrigation experience. "They think there's irrigation potential," Wallie says. "The problem is there is no underground water. We think the only way to do irrigation is to put a dam on seasonal rivers, creating a reservoir behind that." Wallie theorizes that with irrigation, he might be able to harvest three crops in 12 to 16 months - possibly a short-season soybean, followed by no-till wheat or barley, and then 85-day yellow corn. Wallie spent three and a half weeks in Mozambique in April for the 10-day harvest. The combine came from Rosholt. "I lost 15 pounds," Wallie says. "If you want to lose 15 pounds, go to Africa. One day, I went to the cooking area to get a cup and a rat hopped over a clean pile of dishes. They said breakfast was coming in an hour, but I said I don't really care for breakfast." Harvesting 1,600 acres was a challenge. "Combining went good the first day or two, but then you got into fields that had junk in them," Wallie says, referring to the stumps, branches and roots. He combined with 30 people walking ahead of him, piling tree debris into piles. The farm employs 160 people, but Josh says they want to get it down to about 20 full-time and maybe 50 seasonal employees. Laborers get \$3 to \$4 a day, which is a good wage for the community. About 80 percent of the country lives on less than \$2 a day. Instead of flailing soybeans, Wallie insisted that the crews use mechanized threshers before the combines arrived. When he was finally able to use the combine, it was "like I was from Mars," he remembers. "Eyes and mouths dropped. They never imagined in their wildest dreams that anyone could dump 400 bushels of beans in 2 minutes." In Tanzania, the company expects to use Bonsmara cattle, a red breed of beef cattle bred in South Africa from Africander, Shorthorn and Hereford breeds. The cattle are adapted to the temperatures, the disease and insects of the region. Vern Anderson, an animal scientist with the North Dakota State University Extension Service, has a consulting company and plans to go to Tanzania in August to make recommendations on cattle feeding. The Hardies don't expect to stop growing. For the 2013-14 crop, the Hardies expect to double to 3,600 acres in Mozambique. In Tanzania, they expect to clear 2,000 acres between August and January. Eventually, the farmers expect to clear 3,000 to 5,000 acres a year in both locations.