Teamwork, innovation help elevator co-ops weather tough times

many in agriculture, officials of el-Kansas are finding ways to survive and even thrive.

Alliances and efficiency have been the keys, the officials say, as elevators adjust by shedding some operations, expanding into promising areas such as fuel sales and banding together to share personnel and costs.

the 2002 bankruptcy filing of Farmland Industries. Garden City Co-op, with several

The moves were driven partly by

elevators across southwest Kansas, was hit especially hard and couldn't keep up with expenses.

Taking in less than 50 percent of

eral manager John McClelland said. stead of each having its own.

Since then, a handful of southwest Kansas cooperatives formed Syracuse Co-Op Exchange are an alliance to market crops and to sharing an employee who makes buy and sell seed and chemicals, on-farm calls about crops. McClelland said.

drought and the demise of Farmland Co-op Equity Exchange is one of was we knew we had to maintain the the five cooperatives working same service and products. Our member customers depended on efficiency by changing our own operations so we could profit."

ern Ag Chemical last spring to help provide discount products to pro- ing that."

HUTCHINSON — Amid pro- a normal crop that year, Garden City ducers, McClelland said. Officials longed drought and tough times for cut employment by half and sold also recently created Western Coassets that included a convenience operative Seed. They share trained evator cooperatives in western store and a short-line railroad, genagronomists and other services in-

> Meanwhile, Garden City and Others also are teaming together,

"Our challenge through this said Larry Dunn, whose Elkhart alongside Garden City Co-op.

"The cooperative system is a it," he said. "But we had to define battle to keep going," Dunn said. "We're all working together to help lower our costs. If we are going to The cooperatives formed West- stay in business, we have to learn to react faster, and I think we are do-

eastern Kansas and 12 in western Area Programs, said the distinction Missouri — can start planning to also increases tourism and raises awareness to each area's unique

There are currently 37 such areas

nationally of a region in the devel-Suzanne Copping, assistant coor- opment of our country," Copping

McClelland said Garden City the decreased grain volumes be- ager Gaylord Sanneman said he Co-op is reaping the benefits of changes made in the past few years.

For instance, employment has spiraled upward since the sting of drought and Farmland's demise. McClelland has 119 people on staff, compared with the 56 working at the cooperative when he started in

Garden City also expanded its elevators, giving the complex a 24million-bushel capacity.

The cooperative also looked outside typical agriculture markets for ways to boost profits.

For instance, officials expanded their petroleum department in a time when minimum-till farming was reducing farmers' use. Instead of just marketing to

farmer clients, the department dis-

tributes fuel to trucking companies,

convenience stores and other big

users, McClelland said. The fuel business has grown from \$8 million to \$48 million a year in sales. "We have tried to find new markets that are profitable, that help subsidize our agriculture business,'

We now sell fuel into Oklahoma City, Topeka, Denver to Cheyenne. That is how we are able to subsidize cause of the drought."

Even at co-ops where the returns have been less bountiful, officials said things are turning around because of better management strate-

"We learned we had to make adjustments to reduce expenses," said Gary Friesen, general manager of Scott Cooperative based in Scott City. "We have reduced personnel. We are trying to do as much and more with fewer people downsizing the operation so we could fit into a limited income string these days."

Because of diminished grain volumes, Sublette Co-op general man-margins.

hasn't replaced equipment as needed. The cooperative didn't reduce services, but it went to parttime employees in several positions and is looking for other ways to cut

expenses. While this year will be lucrative, the single-elevator co-op binned only 1.5 million bushels of wheat one-third of normal and the poorest crop in Sanneman's 23 years in Sublette. And he estimates a 20 percent to 30 percent decline in the fall

"Without the changes we've been making, this year would have been a lot worse," Sanneman said of the

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make the most of the designation.

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cials in the 41-county area — 29 in dinator of the National Heritage said.

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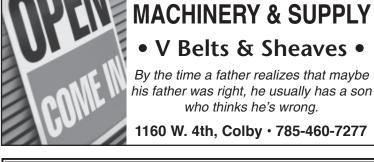
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