

Growing the Next Generation of Wyoming Producers: Four Years of the GrowinG Internship Program

When the University of Wyoming’s Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics launched the GrowinG Internship Program in the spring of 2022, the vision was deceptively simple: pair beginning farmers and ranchers (BFRs) with experienced Wyoming agricultural operations for a high-impact, 10-week summer internship. Four summer cohorts later, the program has become a cornerstone of workforce development for the state’s ranching and farming sector—an initiative that is as much about cultivating people as it is about producing food and fiber.

A Program Designed for Hands-On Learning

Each GrowinG internship works much like a short, immersive apprenticeship. Interns (all 18 or older with fewer than ten years of management experience) live and work on a host farm or ranch, receiving room, board, mentorship, and a \$5,000 stipend funded through a USDA Beginning Farmers and Ranchers Development Program grant, donations, and other sources.

Hosts gain energetic help during the busy season; interns gain day-to-day skills and confidence that can only come from saddling a horse at dawn or fixing a pivot on a hot July afternoon.

Weekly work summaries—published as “Intern Tales” on the program website—cement learning and give future applicants a transparent look at the experience. Meanwhile, an online portal delivers training modules on safety, risk management, and business planning, reinforcing the hands-on work with sound theory.

Year-by-Year Highlights



Cohort	Dates	Key Milestones	Notable Firsts
Year 1: Pilot (2022)	May–Aug 2022	Program stood up in just five months, matching its first class of interns to host sites in six counties.	Launch of the <i>Intern Tales</i> blog; first intern earned academic credit through UW Agricultural & Applied Economics.
Year 2: Expansion (2023)	May–Aug 2023	Graduates climbed to 16 after only two summers, and several hosts asked to return for a second year.	Diversity of interns broadened to include veterans, community-college students, and candidates from Hawaii to Virginia.
Year 3: Consolidation (2024)	May–Aug 2024	Introduction of a three-part leadership webinar series; rollout of the GrowinG digital portal for hosts and interns.	Donor community rallied on UW Giving Day, raising funds to underwrite five additional stipends.
Year 4: Scaling Up (2025)	May–Aug 2025	Applications opened two months earlier than previous years to meet demand; emphasis on matching by enterprise type (e.g., cow-calf, specialty crops, direct-to-consumer).	Quotes from 2024 alumna Ronni Owens featured in UW News, underscoring the program’s impact on career choice.

(Note: Program years correspond to summer field seasons; planning and recruitment occur the preceding fall and winter.)

By the Numbers

- 4 consecutive summer cohorts completed (2022–2025)
- 30+ interns placed with Wyoming operations (16 in the first two years alone)
- 20 unique host farms and ranches spanning 13 counties—from the alfalfa fields of Goshen County to the high-country sheep outfits in Sublette County





- \$5,000 stipend per intern, totaling more than \$150,000 in direct trainee support

- 400+ combined weeks of on-site learning and labor contributed to Wyoming agriculture

Transformational Learning, Tangible Impact

GrowinG was designed to shorten the steep learning curve that stymies many first-generation producers. Program co-director John Hewlett has noted that participants “have surprised us in nearly every direction you can imagine.” Veterans looking to transition to civilian life, urban students exploring production ag for the first time, and young ranch hands refining their grazing management all find common ground in the daily realities of running an operation.

Alumna Josie Sackett discovered that herding cattle on horseback—standard practice on her Wyoming host ranch—was gentler on livestock than the ATV her family used back in Iowa, shifting her view of low-stress stock handling. Fellow intern Olivia Halter credits the experience with crystallizing her five-year career plan: “I want to advocate so people know what goes into their food—and that you can make a living in ranching.” Hosts, for their part, report fresh ideas and an infusion of energy during peak season. Several have hired former interns as seasonal or full-time employees, closing the talent gap that looms as Wyoming’s producer population ages.

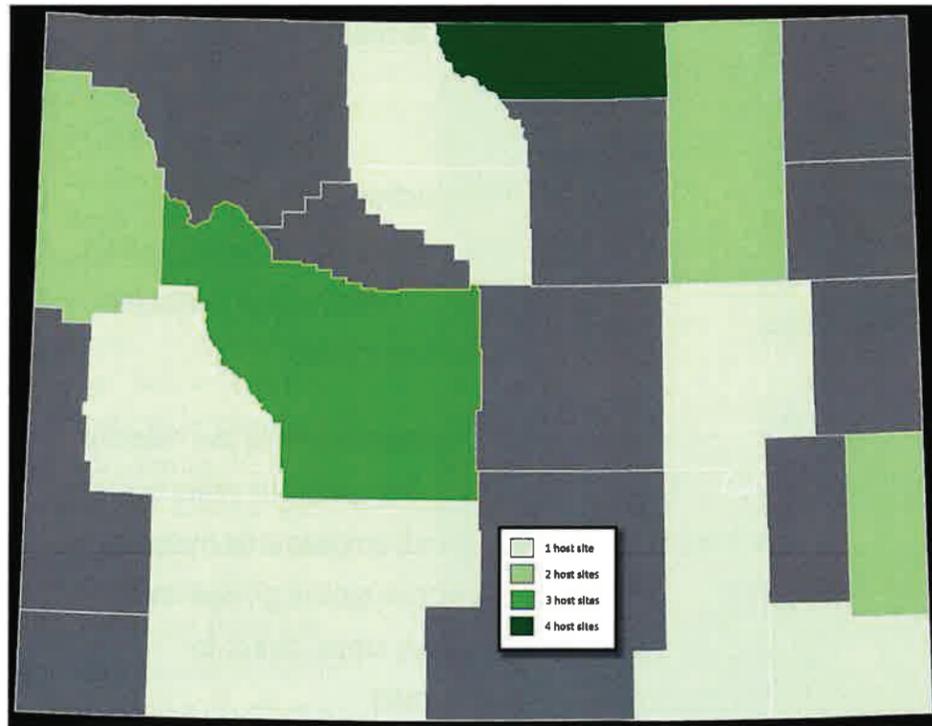


Figure 1. GrowinG Host Sites, 2022-2025

Building Resilience in Wyoming Agriculture

Beyond individual stories, GrowinG contributes to a resilient statewide food system in three concrete ways:

- 1. Workforce Development** – Interns leave with practical skills in livestock handling, irrigation management, business planning, and regenerative grazing—skills that translate directly into productive enterprises.
- 2. Community Networking** – Each cohort forms a peer group that shares resources long after the summer ends, and many alumni return for field days or to present at FFA and 4-H events.
- 3. Bridging Town and Gown** – By linking UW’s research and extension capacity with private producers, the program accelerates the flow of science-based management tools onto the land.

Challenges and the Road Ahead

Like most grant-funded initiatives, GrowinG’s greatest hurdle is sustainability. The founding USDA BFRDP grant sunsets in 2025, and program leadership is actively courting new partners—from ag lenders to conservation nonprofits—to secure multiyear underwriting. Meanwhile, demand keeps climbing: the 2025 applicant pool out-paced available slots by nearly two-to-one, prompting earlier outreach and a push for more host sites.

Plans for Year 5 include:

- Expanding the number of stipends to meet host demand
- Adding a practicum option, allowing qualifying interns to engage with the industry in shorter learning opportunities, from a few days to a week or two
- Piloting an apprenticeship program, expanding training to 6-12 months for qualifying hosts
- Formalizing an alumni mentor network so graduates can support incoming interns

Get Involved

Whether you are a producer ready to mentor the next generation, a student eager to test your skills on the range, or a community member who simply believes in Wyoming agriculture, there is a role for you in GrowinG:

- Prospective interns and hosts** – Application materials and eligibility details are posted at growing-wy.org/apply.
- Supporters** – Tax-deductible gifts of any size go directly to stipends and training materials; donate at growing-wy.org/support.

REFLECTIONS

Host Reflections:

“Our intern brought new ideas, asked thoughtful questions, and helped us see our operation differently. We now look forward to mentoring each season.”
— Multi-year host, 2024

“The energy and curiosity of our intern pushed us to re-examine some of our routines and even try new technology.”
— Host, 2023

Intern Reflections:

“At the start of the summer, I’d never operated a tractor or set up irrigation. Now I do both with confidence. I also learned to communicate with customers and manage a work schedule.”
— 2023 intern

“The experience opened my eyes to new career possibilities. I used to think I wasn’t cut out for ag, but now I’m planning my own small operation.”
— 2022 intern

“Weekly feedback and the mentorship changed everything—I realized learning from mistakes is just part of the

A Bright Future Rooted in Real-World Experience

Four seasons in, GrowinG has proven that a well-structured, adequately funded internship can do more than teach fencing skills; it can change career trajectories, strengthen rural communities, and ensure that Wyoming's iconic working landscapes remain in capable hands. With dozens of alumni already applying their knowledge—on family ranches, in ag-business startups, and back at UW as graduate students—the seeds planted in 2022 are bearing real fruit.

For complete program history, success stories, and the latest application deadlines, visit growing-wy.org. And if you're in a position to help cultivate the next crop of Wyoming agricultural leaders, please consider making a gift today at growing-wy.org/support.

Together, we're not just growing internships—we're growing Wyoming. 🌱

