



*Nicole
Montna
Van Vleck*

President and CEO,
Montna Farms

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Correspondent

Third-generation rice farmer Nicole Montna Van Vleck didn't have to look far to discover where she could make the biggest difference in her life's work. It just took some time to get there.

"I thought I'd actually do something in the legal world or the regulatory world, maybe supporting agriculture," said Montna Van Vleck, president and CEO of Montna Farms. Based in Yuba City, the farm is a longtime producer of Japanese short-grain specialty rice.

After graduating from University of California Los Angeles, Montna Van Vleck worked for three years at Morrison and Foerster in Los Angeles, doing legislative and regulatory work in agriculture, land-use and the environment.

"I enjoyed working at the law firm and had wonderful mentors, but I realized that being back on the family farm was really important," she said. "It was just my sister and me. If one of us didn't go back, then what would happen to it?"

Twenty-one years later, Montna Van Vleck is an accomplished leader who has gone above and beyond protecting her family's heritage. "Nicole thinks big," said Tim Johnson, president and CEO of the California Rice Commission, where Montna Van Vleck has been a board member for more than a decade.

One of her most significant achievements has been her involvement in passage of the long-stalled Agricultural Act of 2014 – a massive piece of legislation that represents nearly \$1 trillion in spending

over the next 10 years.

"She led the California rice delegation and worked with our national organization, the USA Rice Federation, to represent the interests of the growers here in the state," Johnson said.

Montna Van Vleck, who lives in Sacramento with her family, frequently traveled to Washington, D.C., and other rice-growing states over the four-year span it took to find consensus among the various segments of agriculture that are covered in the farm bill.

"Nicole knows her issues, and she can communicate the needs of the constituency very well," Johnson said. "It was, by all measures, the most difficult farm bill that has passed in memory."

When Montna Van Vleck returned to Montna Farms in 1994, her parents already had mapped out a succession plan for the family business. Because they had their plan in place at a relatively young age – her father recently turned 70 – Montna Van Vleck and her sister, Michelle Montna Vogt, had time to adjust.

Montna Van Vleck started as manager of operations and, in 2002, was named managing partner. She took over as president and CEO in the fall, when her father became chairman of the board. Montna Vogt is president of the family council.

Over the years, Montna Van Vleck has helped push the family business to new heights. "I feel like I've helped drive the change to grow the operation," she said, noting that it's very much still a family affair. "We've about doubled in size, both in what we're farming and the size of our rice-drying and storage facilities."

Since Montna Van Vleck took the helm, Montna Farms has become vertically integrated – growing, drying, storing, milling and marketing its own rice. The company also owns a rice mill through its partnership with the American Commodity Co. Montna Van Vleck joined the board in 2011 after her father stepped down.

Montna Farms also recently joined with JFC International Inc., a division of soy sauce maker Kikkoman, to grow and produce its tamanishiki rice line.

"Nicole is really plugged into California agriculture," said James Beckwith, president of Five Star Bank, and a longtime family friend and business associate. "She has grown Montna Farms into being something quite significant and a big-time producer in the area. Anyone who's in the rice business knows Montna Farms."

Montna Van Vleck also has had extensive leadership training through both the California Agricultural Leadership Program and the USA Rice Leadership Program. "It's a big honor to be invited to those programs," Beckwith said.

As a result of her work to better the agricultural world and people's lives, Montna Van Vleck received the 2014 Congressman Garamendi Woman of the Year Award, which lauds the accomplishments and leadership of women in the third congressional district.

"I really enjoy areas where we can get win-wins and find holistic solutions to things, as opposed to approaches that are more singular in their focus," Montna Van Vleck said. "That's what drives me. It's really about being able to solve problems."

THE ESSENTIALS

Age: 47

Education: B.S. in political science, University of California Los Angeles

Personal: Lives in Sacramento with her husband, attorney Stan Van Vleck, and their 17-year-old son and 14-year-old daughter

Advice to younger women: "I would really push women who are interested to look at the production side of agriculture as a career, not just supporting agriculture. I think women have some great skills to manage farming operations."

Biggest whoops: "I have a bad habit of multitasking while on conference calls. One day, while on a call and driving the kids to school, I had just given a report and forgot to put the phone back on mute. The kids and I carried on with our own conversation until someone pointed out that all 30 of the other participants could hear us."

Giving back: Montna Van Vleck serves on the board of the Northern California Water Association and is vice president of the Sutter Bypass Slough Water Users Association. She also is treasurer of the Garden Highway Mutual Water District. Most of that work revolves around managing water conservation. She also works with Ducks Unlimited and The Nature Conservancy to ensure a safe habitat for birds.

Something about you that would surprise others: "Most people don't know that I am a duck hunter and so is my daughter."

Fantasy career: Travel writer