

## When Risk in a Crisis Becomes a Turning Point: Lessons from Top Producers

From cyberattacks to succession, top producers share how they turned high-stakes crises into strategic growth. Discover how balancing data with values and peer relationships can transform agricultural risk.



By **Angie Stump Denton** • February 25, 2026 09:53 AM



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In a volatile agricultural landscape, risk is a constant. Weather, markets, input costs, succession issues, cyberthreats and pandemics all push farm families into uncomfortable decisions. During the “When Taking Risk in Times of Crisis Pays Off” panel at Top Producer Conference, six producers shared how they’ve navigated those moments — and what they’ve learned when the stakes were highest.

The panel, moderated by [Rena Striegel](#), president of Transition Point Business Advisors in West Des Moines, Iowa, included: Edward and Rebecca Dalton, of [Dalton Farms](#), Wakeman, Ohio; [Chris](#)

[Payne](#) of 3B Hay & Straw, Ontario, Ore.; Wendy Alsum Dykstra and Heidi Alsum Randall of [Alsum Farms and Produce](#), Friesland, Wis.; and Ron Rabou of [Rabou Farms](#), Albin, Wyo.

Their stories spanned family tragedy, ransomware, COVID-19 disruptions, organic transitions and bold expansion moves — offering a candid look at what it really means to take risk in agriculture.

Here are five key takeaways from the conversation:

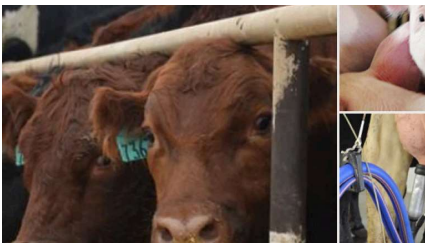
## 1. Crisis as a Catalyst, Not a Dead End

For several panelists, a crisis didn't just test their operations; it forced a complete re-evaluation.

The Daltons describe being emotionally exhausted and financially stuck before a Top Producer event pushed them to question everything.

“We were floundering in agriculture,” Rebecca says. “We were not making any money, really. We were just doing it to do it and to continue that legacy. And we were to the point where, like, ‘why are we doing this?’ You know, we only have so many days here. We only have so much time here.”

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After a series of family tragedies and persistent unprofitability, they made a bold move to transition about half their acres to organic production. The shift brought much-needed profitability and renewed purpose.

“The risk was I was going to quit farming,” Edward explains. “We needed something and a spark and to just want to farm again.”

In Wyoming, Rabou’s turning point came after the sudden death of his father and the unraveling of a complex family ranch structure. Walking away from a fifth-generation operation was emotionally painful, but necessary.

“We did a lot of soul searching, and I kind of came to the conclusion that the risk for me for not doing something was much greater than actually doing something,” he says.

Rabou and his wife started essentially from scratch, building an organic grain operation and a hunting enterprise, borrowing heavily despite having grown up in a “never borrow” mindset.

## **2. Numbers Matter — But They Aren’t Everything**

A recurring theme was the importance of knowing your numbers while recognizing data alone cannot drive every decision.

“Knowing our numbers is what really helped us,” Edward explains. “If you know your own data front and back, when you really get into those tight situations that you need to be able to think and move... sometimes you just have to move, whether you want to or not.”

Recently, the Daltons made a bold move back to conventional production. The Daltons’ choice to step out of organic was a conscious decision to go against what the spreadsheet said, in favor of their family and team.

“Right now, when I’m hauling \$12 beans instead of \$40 beans, like we were for a few years, I’m not really happy with that decision, but it was too much time,” Edward explains. “We were losing time with our boys, and that ultimately is why we went back, even though we were making more money per acre.”

Rabou emphasizes having a clear philosophy about leverage: “I have no problem borrowing money on appreciating assets, but I have to be very careful about borrowing money on assets that depreciate.”

For him, land and infrastructure are long-game investments, and he admits he more often regrets the risks he didn't take than the ones he did.

"I've never looked back and said I shouldn't have made that investment," he says. "But I have looked back a multitude of times and said, 'Wow, I wish I would have made that investment.'"

### **3. Fear vs. Action: Moving When the Window Opens**

Panelists agree that fear is often the biggest barrier to seizing opportunity — especially when decisions must be made quickly.

Oregon onion grower and packer Payne describes how, in the middle of a tense meeting, he and another young partner were essentially challenged to buy out older shareholders in an onion packing facility. They had seconds, not months, to commit.

His broader advice to producers now: "Don't get caught up in fear. If you let fear dominate your thought processes, you're never going to succeed."

Preparation helps in those "15-second" decision moments, Payne adds. Continually learning, attending conferences and thinking through scenarios ahead of time gives you a framework so you're not starting from zero when opportunity knocks.

Edward adds, "You absolutely know how it'll go if you don't try. If you're not willing to try, it's not going to work. You can't move forward if you don't do something or try."

### **4. Cyberattacks, COVID-19 and the Power of Systems**

For Alsum Farms & Produce crisis came in very modern forms: a ransomware attack and then the COVID-19 pandemic.

"At 3 a.m. one morning in October, I got a call from our IT manager that we had been hit with ransomware," Wendy explains.

She explains recovery from the attack required all hands on deck, multiple external experts and months of work to protect traceability and keep product moving. The aftermath included layered backups, new server and email security, user training and an ongoing relationship with cybersecurity and insurance professionals.

Just months later, COVID-19 hit. With 90% to 95% of their business retail-focused, the Alsum team quickly formed a COVID-19 response group, redesigning workflows to keep employees safe and shelves stocked.

The sisters say one key result from COVID-19 was when another supplier faltered, the Alsums were ready to step up for a major retailer — turning crisis into opportunity.

## **5. Relationships as a Strategic Asset**

Beyond capital and land, the panel underscores the value of relationships — with peers, competitors and buyers.

Edward, Payne and Rabou maintain a group text, often used when one of them is wrestling with a big decision.

“Have people in an industry that you can trust and communicate with,” Edward stresses. “There’s been days they’ve literally had to walk me off a ledge when I’m trying to figure out how to make a decision.”

In the potato and produce world, Heidi says, competitors often become collaborators when the chips are down.

“The nice thing about the potato industry and the produce industry in general that we’ve experienced is that it’s been very collaborative,” she explains.

Rabou adds he sometimes sells grain below top price to maintain long-term relationships and outlet security.

“Those relationships to me are more important than making the dollar in the moment,” he explains.

His broader warning to producers is to stop comparing your operation to your neighbors’.

“You really have to determine what works good for you as an individual, you as a couple, you as a business,” he stresses. “Stop paying attention to what everyone else is doing.”

## **The Bottom Line from Top Producers**

Across all their stories, the panelists echoed a few core principles:

1. Know your numbers but also know your values.
2. Act in crisis — don't let fear make the choice for you.
3. Be willing to pivot, even away from something profitable, if it no longer fits your life or strategy.
4. Invest in appreciating assets and in relationships, both of which can pay off long after the crisis has passed.

In short, risk in times of crisis isn't just something to endure; handled intentionally, it can be the turning point that reshapes a farm for the better.