

Feature Story



#DirtRoadTour

A love-hate relationship on the open road with Rob Sharkey and Donnarie Hales

RESEARCH TRIANGLE PARK, NC, September 13, 2017 -- Driving around the U.S. with one person all summer long can be difficult for anyone, but Donnarie Hales and Rob Sharkey handled it with a little pinch of sass and a heap of ag knowledge. As hosts of separate podcasts on the Farm and Rural Ag Network (FRAN), Hales and Sharkey traveled the country on the aptly named #DirtRoadTour, highlighting the challenges and triumphs growers face across different geographies and crops. Not only did they provide a forum for growers to voice their successes and concerns, they also showcased social media's value for today's grower. Posting short Twitter videos under #DirtRoadTour, the snarky host-duo drove from rice farms in rural Louisiana to North Carolina's tobacco growers.

"I think everybody has such a passion for agriculture and our hopes were to show those grower's stories in a new light compared to some of the traditional methods," Hales said. "Let's go out. Let's talk to growers. Let's talk about what's going on in their area. Show some different regions that people haven't seen."

The tour connected with growers on a more personal scale — walking the land, getting to know the trials and tribulations growers face on a daily basis and highlighting stories that don't always get the attention they deserve from traditional media

"I like going to farms that I didn't know anything about. I had no idea what it was like to raise rice or tobacco," said Sharkey.

Since the launch of the #DirtRoadTour, they visited Louisiana, Oklahoma, Texas, North Carolina, Virginia, Nebraska, Kansas, Iowa, Illinois and Indiana.

However, there's a lot of people Hales and Sharkey weren't able to visit. "Which has been unfortunate," Hales says. "But it's a testament to how everything on the tour has been. Maybe we'll get a chance to do this again."

The tour has been quite successful on social media, with more than 1,600 direct uses of the hashtag, resulting in over 7.5 million potential impressions.

"It's been overwhelming in a good way. We have had such a positive response," says Hales. "It's been an awesome experience."

A native of North Carolina, Hales grew up on a farming operation focused on timber, pork, corn and soybeans. She is currently a Product Manager at BASF and host of the company's Grow Smart podcast. She can be found on twitter @halesbells82.

Sharkey is a fifth-generation farmer, raising the same crops his family has for more than 150 years. He hosts his own podcast, The Shark Farmer, where he interviews guests with his unique style of "sharkcasm." He can be found on Twitter @sf28430.

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