

Ron and Mary Bitner honored as Farm Family of the Year

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NAMPA — Canyon County's 2013 Farm Family of the Year and the impact of agriculture in the county were the highlights of the Nampa Chamber of Commerce's monthly luncheon Wednesday.

Ron and Mary Bitner, owners of Bitner Vineyards in Caldwell, were recognized as the Farm Family of the Year by the Nampa and Caldwell Chambers Agribusiness Committee, a joint venture between the two cities' chambers of commerce.

Ron Bitner first planted his vineyard in 1981, when there were just two Idaho wineries, he said. There are now more than 50, and the industry has a \$20 million economic impact on the county.

The Bitners host guests at their tasting room and bed and breakfast and see tourists from Salt Lake City, Portland and Seattle who come to Canyon County to taste the wine.

"We're becoming a destination, and it's really had an impact on us," he said. "And you're going to see more of that."

The Bitners sell 75 percent of their wines at their winery, known for its views of the rolling vineyards.

Ron Bitner thanked Greg Koenig, who processes the Bitners' grapes, and Ezequiel Campos, who has worked at the Bitners' vineyard for 32 years.

CANYON COUNTY AGRICULTURE

The Nampa and Caldwell Chambers Agribusiness Committee works to promote agriculture and share its economic impact through education, tours and legislative advocacy.

Every six years, the committee hosts a legislative tour where elected officials go behind the scenes at local companies and learn about agriculture. This year's tour, which was held in August, included plots at the University of Idaho's Parma Research Extension, which were used to educate the legislators on the variety of crops grown in the county.

George Crookham, CEO of Crookham Company, and Rep. Darrel Bolz, R-Caldwell, both spoke at the luncheon about the importance of preserving farmland to ensure the industry's future.

In the last 20 years, Canyon County has lost about 25 percent of its farmland, Crookham said. Bolz said while the number of farmers has decreased over the years, the world's population continues to grow, and it's important to preserve the land used to grow food.