

# Funding requested to improve soft white wheat in saltine crackers

Members of the Oregon Wheat Commission, Washington Grain Commission and Idaho Wheat Commission met Wednesday during the Tri-State Grain Growers Convention in Portland.

**George Plaven • Capital Press**

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COURTESY TRI-STATE GRAIN GROWERS  
CONVENTION

Jayne Bock, technical director for the Wheat Marketing Center, requested \$20,000 from the Tri-State Grain Commission for research to improve the performance of soft white wheat in saltine crackers. She spoke to commission members at the Tri-State Grain Growers Convention Wednesday in Portland.

Jayne Bock may be just 10 days into her new job as technical director at the Portland-based Wheat Marketing Center, but she is already looking to build upon research to strengthen markets for Northwest growers.

Specifically, Bock has proposed to continue studying characteristics of saltine crackers made with soft white wheat — a signature variety grown across the Pacific Northwest with low protein content that makes it perfect for products such as pastries, cookies and cakes.

Bock laid out her proposal Wednesday to members of the Oregon Wheat Commission, Washington Grain Commission and Idaho Wheat Commission during a meeting at the Tri-State Grain Growers Convention in Portland, requesting \$20,000 from the groups to pay for lab testing.

The project started last year as customers in Latin America began switching from soft red winter wheat to soft white wheat for making saltines, but were uncertain about what protein levels they needed.

At the time, researchers identified protein levels between 10.5 and 11.5 percent for replacement of soft red winter wheat, but Bock said their study was limited in the test kitchen. According to her proposal, it did not include products like malted barley flour, which are added commercially to maintain consistency and can have a significant effect on quality.

"That will affect how the dough spreads and how it will fit packaging," Bock said.

Bock said she would like to re-run the study with added malted barley flour to better replicate what buyers and consumers are seeing. Grower funding would cover costs such as samples and milling.

Though commission members did not take a vote, Glen Squires, CEO of the Washington Grain Commission, said it was a "no-brainer." Each group committed to discussing the request further at their next meetings.

In addition to Bock, the Wheat Marketing Center recently hired a new research scientist, Lingzhu Deng, and lab technologist, Tina Tran, while the board of directors also voted to grow from 13 to 15 members, welcoming the Oklahoma Wheat Commission to the table.

Managing Director Janice Cooper said it is the first time a new state has joined in 33 years.

"We are open to other states that are interested in joining the effort," Cooper said.

In other presentations, the Tri-State Grain Commission heard from Mike Spier, a merchandiser with Columbia Grain, who discussed market trends in the USDA Foreign Agricultural Service's latest export sales report.

According to figures, world production is down 29 million metric tons in 2018, including 14 million metric tons in Europe and 17 million metric tons from Black Sea producers including Russia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan. Production is actually up 4 million metric tons in the U.S., though sales are down 16 percent year-over-year, including 10 percent among soft white wheat.

Retaliatory tariffs in China have some effect, Spier said, though the biggest trade war casualty is U.S. soybeans. By this time last year, there were 54 soybean vessels bound for China carrying nearly 3 million metric tons of product, and none this November.

"Soybeans are the biggest impact," Spier said.

Kristin Meira, executive director of the Pacific Northwest Waterways Association, addressed some outstanding issues on the Columbia River system, including a newly energized argument for breaching Snake River dams in order to boost salmon populations which act as an important food source for struggling orcas.

But Meira, whose organization represents ports and businesses that depend on river navigation, said the answer is not that easy.

"Everybody's focus seems to be on the Snake River dams," she said. "It's just been a whole lot of mischief."

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