

Washington Grain Commission: The offense and defense of the wheat industry

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Mark Fowler, U.S. Wheat Associates vice president of overseas operations, and WGC commissioner Mike Miller look over samples with customers in Latin America. *COURTESY WASHINGTON GRAIN COMMISSION*

An acre of land is the size of a football field, and like football teams, the wheat industry plays both offense and defense. But with a limited number of players, “wheaties” are organized more like a basketball team, with team members switching automatically from offense to defense, depending on who has the ball.

The Washington Grain Commission’s (WGC) efforts to secure new customers or to expand wheat use in existing countries is part of our offensive strategy. For example, rapid growth in population and flour milling capacity in Indonesia requires a fast break and three-point shooting from the floor, such as our recent funding of a workshop for milling company staff to learn about wheat development, production, handling and purchasing in the U.S. This year, we are also looking at increasing technical assistance.

The WGC is also expanding efforts in more established countries like the Philippines, where this year we are re-engaging buyers to purchase club wheat, a sub-class of the Northwest’s flagship class, soft white wheat. With Filipinos demanding increased sophistication in their end products, not to mention the absence of a club premium, now is the perfect time to make a play by bringing millers to Wheat Marketing Center (WMC) in Portland for new product testing.

We’ve made another move on offense in Latin America, joining with Idaho and Oregon to fund a technician to work with mills and bakeries to enhance utilization of U.S. wheat classes. This adds to a milling consultant already funded to showcase the benefits of using Pacific Northwest soft white wheat in blends with other wheats.

We recently helped provide expertise for a crop quality seminar in Chile and Peru, as well as marketing efforts in Colombia. These are long-term projects that usually take

years to come to fruition. But Peru has already committed to visiting the WMC to learn more about baking confectionary products with soft white wheat.

When it comes to defense, we have to maintain, problem solve, strengthen and even grow the important wheat markets developed by farmers over time, such as Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Thailand and Guatemala.

Like the shot blocker who swats away a ball from the basket, our defensive posture is designed to defend the U.S. from the likes of Australian, Canadian, Russian and Ukrainian wheat. Call it guarding our market share.

Defense is needed in established markets like the Philippines, where subsidized Turkish flour displaces Northwest soft white wheat. The WGC is helping launch a new effort to assist Philippine millers defend against these flour imports.

The battle is also on to defend our Japan market where we are now at a price disadvantage to Canada and Australia, due to the U.S. withdrawal from the Trans Pacific Partnership. Joining with the Washington Association of Wheat Growers, U.S. Wheat Associates and other states, we are working with legislators, the U.S. Trade Representative, and the Japanese milling industry to ensure fair play into our No. 2 market.

Our game plan also includes meeting the quality needs of end users. We've engaged WSU breeders to learn functional quality needs of buyers. In the future, engaging private company breeders with customers will be an increased focus. All breeders have a big job to meet agronomic needs of wheat farmers and the quality needs of end users. If end-user needs are not a consideration, farmers may find they have a variety that has no interest from buyers. Poor quality varieties would also degrade the entire Northwest wheat supply.

There is no buzzer ending the WGC's competitive efforts to claim new markets and protect established ones. The WGC is now working on its second 60 years of doing so.