Dependable People: A Spotlight on the Montana Wheat and Barley Committee

JULY 17, 2020

For 40 years, U.S. wheat farmers have supported U.S. Wheat Associates’ (USW) efforts to work directly with buyers and promote their six classes of wheat. Their contributions to state wheat commissions, who in turn contribute a portion of those funds to USW, qualifies USW to apply for export market development funds managed by USDA’s Foreign Agricultural Service. Currently, 17 state wheat commissions are USW members and this series highlights those partnerships and the work being done state-by-state to provide unmatched service. Behind the world’s most reliable supply of wheat are the world’s most dependable people – and that includes our state wheat commissions.

Member: Montana Wheat and Barley Committee
Member of USW since 1980

Location: Great Falls, Mont.
Classes of wheat grown: Hard Red Winter (HRW), Hard Red Spring (HRS), Durum
USW Leadership: James E. Jenks, 1984/85 Chairman; Richard Sampsen, 1995/96 Chairman; Leonard Schock, 2006/07 Chairman; Janice Mattson, 2009/10 Chairperson; Chris Kolstad, 2018/19 Chairman.

The mission of the Montana Wheat and Barley Committee (MWBC) is to protect and foster the health and prosperity of the Montana wheat and barley industry by encouraging scientific research to improve production and quality; maintaining current markets; promoting new market development; and serving as an educational and informational resource.

2018/19 Chairman
Chris Kolstad from Montana (R) passes the gavel to 2019/20 Chairman Doug Goyings from Ohio.
Why is export market development important to Montana wheat farmers and why do they continue to support USW and its activities?

Montana exports most of its wheat to partners around the world. Wheat production in the state is logistically advantaged to efficiently fill shuttle trains with hard red spring (HRS) and hard red winter (HRW) bound for the Pacific Northwest (PNW) ports. Montana’s wheat is often considered as improver classes because it offers strong functional characteristics. The extreme summer heat and extreme winter cold together are conducive to growing excellent small grains with high protein. Montana wheat is desired by quality-conscious customers, making the Pacific Rim our largest market. Market development efforts are very important to Montana farmers and USW plays a key role in identifying potential markets and maintaining existing markets. Our farmers have invested in these efforts since 1967 when our committee was formed, and our very low checkoff refund rate shows Montana farmers understand the value of these efforts.

Montana wheat farmer and USW Director Denise Conover traveled with USW to Tanzania and Kenya in November 2019 to learn more about food aid programs and wheat monetization.

How have Montana wheat farmers recently connected with overseas customers?

MWBC hosts upwards of 100 overseas trade team visitors each year. Our farmers love hosting trade delegations and are quick to open their homes to our guests. Showcasing a way of life that often spans many generations is a great point of pride for Montana farmers, and discussions on best practices and planting decisions often lead to 3-hour dinners and forming long-term connections. Montana farmers view our overseas customers as an extended family.

Current circumstances are transforming the way we reach customers, including taking part in weekly updates and virtual meetings hosted by USW. MWBC is being proactive in our efforts as the uncertainty associated with the pandemic has brought challenges. However, our farmers are not slowing down. They are working their hardest to continue to supply the market with the highest quality wheat in the world.
What is happening lately in Montana that overseas customers should know about?

- We are developing a video series that creates a virtual trade delegation experience and focuses on what a visitor would learn and experience if they were visiting Montana in person. The series will tour the Federal Grain Inspection Service (FGIS) certified State Grain Lab with a look at the grading process and factors that set Montana wheat apart, and feature a farm tour to present crop rotation, precision agriculture and other sustainable practices.

- Montana State University (MSU) has done an excellent job keeping research projects moving forward during the pandemic and is hiring a new endowed chair and HRS wheat breeder. Montana farmers invest over $2 million every year in wheat and barley research.

- MSU wheat breeding programs continue to focus on quality, traits like low PPO and increased stability and developing durum varieties.

Montana farmers would like to thank USW for their continued efforts in developing and maintaining overseas markets. Without these efforts a lot of us would not be able to do what we love out in “Big Sky Country.” Many Montana farmers have hosted overseas visitors traveling with USW and have made lifelong friendships and memories because of it. Those experiences have outlasted cultural, political and historical differences over the last 50+ years for MWBC.
Janice Mattson, a wheat farmer from Montana, was USW's first female chair in 2009/10. She was also featured in a 4-part series about the U.S. wheat supply chain system in 2014.

Al Klempel (L), a wheat farmer from Montana, traveled with USW to Spain, Portugal and Morocco on a board team trip in 2019. The team is pictured here with equipment sponsored by U.S. Wheat Associates at the IFIM milling school in Casablanca.

Leonard Schock, 2006/07 USW Chairman and a Montana wheat farmer presented at the 2016 North Asia Marketing Conference in Guam.
2018/19 USW Chairman Chris Kolstad, a wheat farmer from Montana, and NAWG President, Ben Scholz, a wheat farmer from Texas, represented the U.S. wheat industry at the 2017 National Association of Farm Broadcasting Trade Talk event.