

Dependable People: A Spotlight on the North Dakota Wheat Commission

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*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: North Dakota Wheat Commission

Member of USW since 1980

Location: Mandan, N.D.

Classes of wheat grown: Hard Red Spring (HRS); Durum

USW Leadership: James Ole Sampson, 1980/81, USW's first Chairman; Cecil Watson, 1992/93 Chairman; Alan Lee, 2003/04 Chairman; Brian O'Toole, 2015/16 Chairman.

The North Dakota Wheat Commission (NDWC) works to sustain and expand use of



wheat grown by North Dakota farmers by creating worldwide market opportunities through efforts including opening overseas markets, reinforcing consumption of grain foods, developing new wheat varieties and influencing international import and export policies. Wheat producers fund these programs with a checkoff of a penny and a half on each bushel sold.

NDWC Commissioner David Clough congratulates 2015/16 USW Chairman Brian O'Toole, a wheat farmer from North Dakota, at the 2016 Summer Board Meeting in Fargo, N.D.

Why is export market development important to North Dakota wheat farmers and why do they continue to support USW and its activities?

Many variables drive wheat prices globally and export market share. Some of these variables, such as global production, quality impacts from adverse weather, political and economic trends, or “black swan” events like COVID-19 can dramatically affect trade flows and prices. USW provides the network to help react to those larger forces, drive needed policy changes in trade or market tangibles, and tweak the little things that can add up to a big difference in the final sale. Every wheat producer wants to build the optimum market share and the highest local price within the global competitive environment, but we cannot do market development as a single state. USW helps ensure we are reaching out to current and potential customers on an individual basis, by promoting the wheat grown on individual farms through the synergies only achieved from a collective marketing force across multiple states and producers.

Our board members consider USW to be the “boots on the ground” to promote our high quality HRS, durum and other U.S. wheat classes.

In recent years, the value of USW marketing programs and staff, have become even more important, in our perspective, due to the consolidation and shift in major export companies. Most now source their wheat from multiple origins and promote their sales on that basis. USW helps customers find the best source and class of U.S. wheat for their needs. They help provide the real picture of what U.S. produced wheat can provide to customers, and help trouble shoot any challenges customers may have in accessing or utilizing wheat from the United States.

Without the government programs that once existed to support U.S. wheat exports more effort is needed to educate customers on the higher value and reliability of U.S. wheat, in the face of intense price competition. The reputation that the U.S. has as a premium source of wheat, is largely due to the day-to-day activities of USW. Investment in export market development will always be a priority for North Dakota wheat producers since we rely on export markets for slightly more than half of our annual production of HRS and roughly 40 percent of our durum.



USW Director of Communications Amanda Spoo (middle) with past NDWC Commissioner David Clough and his wife Aileen on their farm during the 2018 Spring Wheat Tour.

How have North Dakota wheat farmers recently connected with overseas customers?

Traditionally, North Dakota hosts trade delegations from various countries every summer. Our producers enjoy these teams as an opportunity to visit with customers face-to-face. Our customer educational program involves an extensive overview of our wheat breeding and quality research programs, current crop prospects or harvest quality, risk management strategies, and visits to a local elevator and wheat farm family. We strive to showcase the unique qualities of our wheat, and build a trust and a relationship with customers, assuring them that North Dakota producers are committed to raising some of the best wheat in the world, designed with the customer in mind.

Last fall, Commissioners Greg Svenningsen and Philip Volk attended the [Japan Buyers Conference](#) and various other commissioners have participated in USW board travel, meeting key customers around the world and USW staff. Producers return from board travel with a new understanding of key customer markets and a keen appreciation for USW staff working overseas on their behalf.

The [Northern Crops Institute \(NCI\)](#) Grain Procurement course, held since 1983, has also been a great opportunity for producers to interact with customers with USW sending key participants.

Currently, NDWC is exploring and enacting efforts, along with USW, to interact with customers on a virtual platform. This is needed with the current travel restrictions worldwide and may offer additional opportunities to reach more customers within a country or region.



NDWC Commissioner Phil Volk and his family were featured in a [USW video shoot](#) during their 2019 spring wheat harvest.

What's happening lately in North Dakota that overseas customers should know about?

Producing a quality product is a source of pride for North Dakota wheat farm families. NDWC contributes about 40 percent of its budget to research, prioritizing investment on customer needs – specifically end-use quality. Our board understands the need to maintain HRS and durum quality to continue to meet customer demands. Wheat is grown all over the world, and many customers can source general quality wheat from closer points of origin. Our wheat needs to provide special, inherent quality attributes that cannot be sourced elsewhere. The consistent, and strong track record of export sales to many traditional customers attests to the benefits this focus on quality has brought to our producers. Our board members and other producers involved in Commission activities have genuine enthusiasm for growing quality wheat for customers, once they learn more about customer needs and meet customers in person.



Current and past NDWC commissioners at the 2016 USW Summer Board Meeting in Fargo, N.D.



NDWC Administrator Neal Fisher at the 2017 USW World Staff Conference in Estes Park, Colo.



NDWC Commissioner Phil Volk and North Dakota wheat farmer (far left) participated on the 2019 USW South Asia Board Team trip to the Philippines, Singapore and Indonesia.