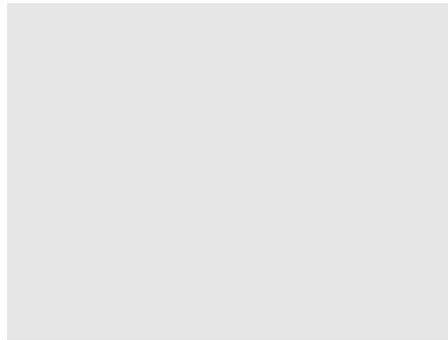


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TOP STORY

'The Big Guy:' Darren Padget leads U.S. Wheat Associates through uncertain times

By MATTHEW WEAVER Capital Press
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Darren Padget talks to farmers during the 2019 Tri-State Grain Growers Conference in Spokane.
Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

Padget, who grows wheat in Grass Valley, Ore., took over July 17 as chairman of U.S. Wheat Associates, the overseas marketing arm of the industry. The chairman serves a one-year term.

The stakes are high. U.S. Wheat represents nearly 105,000 farmers nationwide and has an annual budget of \$18 million.

Those farmers produced 1.92 billion bushels of wheat last year. Of that, 973.6 million bushels were sold overseas at a total value of \$6.2 billion. About 56% of that total was exported through Pacific Northwest ports.

“Darren’s leadership is going to be very important because everything is in flux right now,” said Mike Miller, a Ritzville, Wash., wheat farmer, board member on the Washington Grain Commission and himself a former U.S. Wheat chairman.

Miller cites the upcoming elections, trade agreements, new political appointees and COVID-19 as just some of the things Padget will be dealing with on behalf of wheat farmers.

From their travels together, Miller believes Padget is up to the challenge.

“We’ve had the pleasure of being able to work through problems and come up with solutions for our states or for U.S. Wheat,” he said.

Powell, too, thinks Padget has all the qualities a leader needs.

An average farmer must wear “six or seven” different hats as part of the job, handling things like marketing or operations, Powell said. Most have their strengths in particular areas, and might not be so good in some of the others, he said. “Darren rates highly in every category that I’m aware of. That’s unusual.”

Padget spoke with the Capital Press July 28 by telephone from his farm. The interview has been edited for length.

Q. What were you most looking forward to working on as chairman?

Darren Padget: The people that work for U.S. Wheat do the work. You're just there to set policy and oversee the executives, so it isn't like you have an agenda to go change the world in one year. You want to keep it on an even keel, whatever the previous people have done, the chairs ahead of you, and make it better, if necessary.

The thing that's going to be most difficult, with COVID and everything, everything's locked down. I guess for myself, just meeting the people on the other end that make wheat go overseas, the millers, the executives and the people that are responsible for us having a home for 85% of our production in the Pacific Northwest.

Q. What is the biggest need in the industry right now?

Padget: To continue the relationships U.S. Wheat has built over the years through these different times. And so far they're doing a real great job. The virtual conferences and stuff they've had, we've actually had more attendees than if we'd had them in person. I still prefer in person, but the numbers are almost double. That could be the silver lining to the whole thing.

Q. What is your biggest worry?

Padget: That we have to stay locked down for an extended, foreseeable period of time.

Q. What does the industry look like in that case?

Padget: About what it does now, I guess. It's just that we don't travel between the countries right now. But if somebody wants to see our in-country rep, they can if they choose to. So that part's nice. Things have actually gone amazingly well. Nobody knew where this was going. If you said two months ago how things were going to be today, it would be pretty hard to be accurate. Things are changing practically on a weekly basis, whether it's the format of the meetings, who attends them.

I know one of Japan's biggest issues was hoping the supply wouldn't get shut down, and that's quite honestly been one of my concerns: What happens if the grain inspectors can't inspect?

That would be my biggest fear, is that our supply chain is interrupted. That's priority number one: Make sure the supply chain stays intact, and our customers get what they need. Sales are actually up in some countries through this. Pretty cool.

Q. Has the lockdown impacted your own farming?

Padget: Well, when you live in the middle of nowhere, you're not affected as much as your urban brethren, until you have to get groceries or want to go out and have dinner. And then you notice it more.

Once in a while, the parts chain may have slowed up a little bit because of the COVID.

I haven't personally had much issue. But as a farmer, (I'm) definitely not affected like somebody that works in town. My daughter is a physical therapist and in the medical field and she every so often lectures us on making sure we're wearing our masks and all that other stuff.

It's what we've got to do. And that's fine. I would feel bad if I carried it back home to my 80-year-old parents, one of which has a bad immune system. So, don't want to do that.

Q. What would you tell President Trump farmers need most from him?

Padget: Don't add any new burdens to regulations. Ensure that our supply chain remains intact. I guess that would be number one. I mean, you can talk about COVID and everything else, but make darn sure that supply chain to our customers, no matter where they are, stays open.

When you've got half of your crop exported, and you look at corn and soybean sales to China, you've got to have your economy hitting on as many cylinders as possible. It's bad enough, the unemployment rate and everything else. Agricultural trade has always had a surplus, and boy, you sure hate to see that go away.

Q. How important is the upcoming election for farmers?

Padget: Well, to quote President Trump, “It’s huge.” The farmer, through the current administration, has been acknowledged more than any other administration that I can remember in a long time. When it comes to trade policies and everything else, agriculture has been front and center.

One reason being that food is an easy one to get an agreement on, over, say, intellectual property and stuff where you get down in the weeds. That’s why with all the trade deals, we’ve been invited to be there along with corn, soybeans and beef. Everybody’s got to eat. It makes it a little easier to negotiate.

I feel pretty fortunate that we’ve had (U.S. Wheat staff members) Vince Peterson, Dalton Henry and Mike Spier all consulted pretty constantly from some pretty high places through these talks and negotiations. That’s because they’ve done a dang good job, they’ve got good reputations. The administration calls up and says, “What do you think about this?” They know they’re going to get a straight, honest answer. That, I am extremely proud of.

Q. What should wheat variety development priorities be moving forward?

Padget: Just maintain that quality. Yield is what pays my bills, no two ways about it. But when you’re involved and you see why (U.S. wheat is) where we are, especially out of the Pacific Northwest and the Midwest, the people that breed the varieties are getting the message loud and clear: We don’t just need quantity, we’ve got to have quality.

Our overseas people have got to show our customers why they make more cookies per bushel. You’ve got to have that quality so if they’re willing to spend a little bit more for U.S. wheat, they get more. That’s an ongoing challenge. Some of the companies have gotten the message and one or two, maybe not so much.

Q. Any thoughts on public breeding programs versus private breeding programs?

Padget: That’s an interesting one as we go forward. The privates have made big strides forward. Of course, the public (university) system is what’s made it to where we are. There’s definitely benefits to both techniques. The privates can kind of put their foot on the throttle if

they need to bring something out, but the schools have the intellectual property and plasmids to start with.

What it looks like five or 10 years down the road, there will probably be public-private partnerships such as University of Idaho and Oregon State University releases with Limagrain.

Quite honestly, it's a pretty small fraternity. There's not that many wheat breeders around. They all know each other.

But if you want to reach a farmer, get a big ol' yield horse in there. That's fine, and that's happened, but you can remember the debacle we had with a hard red variety out in Eastern Washington. The Japanese said, "You send us any more of this, and you're done." That's what the message will be from our customers if we don't give them a good quality product. And every class has its challenge. Oregon, Idaho and Washington have sent a message loud and clear to maintain quality, and other states are doing that, too.

Q. Any message to farmers from your perspective as chairman?

Padget: It is certainly a privilege and an honor to serve on your behalf. Thank you.

Darren Padget

Age: 57

Height: 6-foot-8

Location: Grass Valley, Ore.

Education: Associate's degree in mechanized agriculture at Blue Mountain Community College in Pendleton, Ore.

Married 35 years to Brenda; son, 30; daughter, 28

Organizations: Padget has served on the boards of U.S. Wheat Associates, Oregon Wheat Commission, Oregon Wheat Growers League, the Wheat Marketing Center and Mid Columbia Producers Inc.

Website: <https://www.uswheat.org/>

Matthew Weaver

Field Reporter, Spokane



Darren Padget has real presence in the wheat industry.

Sure, part of it is his 6-foot-8-inch height that turns heads wherever he goes.

Wally Powell, who just ended a three-year term as chairman of the Oregon Wheat Commission, tells a story about how well-known Padget is overseas. “I was at one of the mills in the Philippines two or three years ago and the first thing out of a guy’s mouth — he walked up, shook my hand and said, ‘How’s the big guy doing?’” referring to Padget.

Beyond his height, there’s another reason Padget is well-known.

“Almost every trade team that comes through from Asia has a stop at Darren’s farm,” Powell said.