

# In reversal, abundant grain trains available for harvest

By JAMES MACPHERSON  
Associated Press

STERLING, N.D. — The grain elevator that towers over this small prairie town has been humming with workers loading crops onto rail cars destined for domestic and worldwide markets.

It's a welcome sight in Sterling, North Dakota, and across the upper Great Plains, where in the past two years grain elevators overflowed and mountains of wheat, corn, soybeans and other crops lay in piles, awaiting rail cars that seemed to never come.

Just in time for what the U.S. Agriculture Department expects to be near-record corn and soybean harvests, grain train cars are in abundance. The reversal is attributed to unprecedented spending on track upgrades, political pressure from politicians in agriculture-rich states and a drastic decrease in trains hauling crude and freight to and from western North Dakota's oil-producing region.

"There had been some uncertainties but it has gradually gotten better," said Josh Mardikian, grain manager at the South Central Grain Cooperative elevator in Sterling. As he spoke, a train was being loaded with 24 million pounds of spring wheat, much of which would be used for a national pizza chain's dough. Grain trains had been running late by as much as 45 days in the past 18 months, Mardikian said, but in the past week, mile-long, 110-car trains had shown up some four days earlier than expected.

Oil activity in North Dakota was partly to blame for the widespread shortage and backlog of rail cars



AP Photo/James MacPherson

In this Aug. 20 photo, elevator worker Brian Grahn inspects a rail car about to be loaded with spring wheat in Sterling, N.D. With fall harvest fast approaching, farmers are expecting to get the trains they need to move crops to market, a turnaround from the past two years when elevators across North Dakota — and in some other farm states — were overflowing and mountains of grain were piled on the ground awaiting rail cars.

from North Dakota and Montana down to Kansas and east into Illinois, National Farmers Union President Roger Johnson said. "It doesn't take too much more on the tracks to really get things snarled up," he said.

The long delays added to costs for grain elevators and agricultural producers, but whether the costs trickled down to consumers depends on the food product manufacturer, said Ed Usset, a grain marketing economist at the University of Minnesota.

"It's conceivable that every bakery in the world could have tried to pass those costs along but oftentimes companies just ride it out until things get better," he said.

Frustrations with grain shipping made it all the way to Washington, where politicians last year called on the Surface Transportation Board to press the railroads, which it oversees,

for plans to address the backlog.

BNSF Railway Co. said it has invested billions of dollars in upgrades across its rail network since 2013, including \$1 billion in North Dakota alone. The railroad is now shipping all freight "faster, more predictable and more consistent," according to John Miller, a vice president who oversees the Fort Worth, Texas-based company's grain-related business.

"We put the pressure on the railroads and were willing to be a pain to them but we are also willing to give them credit that they've owned up to this problem and appear to have fixed it," said U.S. Rep. Kevin Cramer, a Republican from North Dakota who was one of the politicians who pressed for solutions. "We'll see."

Lochiel Edwards, a grain farmer who represents Montana's Grain Growers Association on

rail issues, said the "only logical solution was to build a bigger rail network."

Also contributing to the turnaround is a slowdown in drilling activity in western North Dakota's oil patch due to depressed oil prices. While the state's oil production has remained stable at about 1.2 million barrels a month, the percentage of crude shipped by rail has dropped below 50 percent due to increased refining capacity and additional pipelines.

"I hope we don't have to put up with the crap we had to in the past," Minnesota Farmers Union President Doug Peterson said, especially in a year when his state is seeing bumper crops.

Johnson, the national farmers' union leader, remains optimistic.

"Almost no one is talking about it," he said. "That's the best indicator things have eased up."

# Program pairs veterans with ag careers

By MATTHEW WEAVER  
Capital Press

SPOKANE — A new program is helping area veterans put down new roots in agriculture.

The Spokane Conservation District launched the Vets on the Farm program in the spring. It's designed to educate veterans about agricultural career opportunities, and pair them with farmers who serve as mentors.

"There's such a need on both the farming side and the veteran side," said conservation district director Vicki Carter.

The Farmer Veteran Coalition in Sacramento initiated the concept in 2006. A documentary, "Ground Operations: Battlefields to Farmfields," talks about gaps in the farming population as farmers retire, Carter said.

"Veterans, particularly our post-9/11 veterans, are the perfect fit," she said. "They are looking for a new mission, and food security is another way for them to carry out what they've already dedicated their life to, which was national security."

More than a dozen veterans have applied. All have different goals, Carter said, ranging from small-scale farming to large-scale operations.

Others are pursuing a related ag business, such as a soil restoration business.

The conservation district is looking for companies to provide paid internships. Carter has worked with several farmers, a local vineyard and a local

**Online**  
<https://www.facebook.com/VetsOnTheFarm>

seed dealer already. "We don't want people to think of this as a donation, but rather an investment in our returning veterans and their own food security," she said.

Carter aims to put 10 veterans to work next year.

Steven Lowe and Beau Hansen filled out applications for the program during a recent career fair for veterans. Both are now in the Army Reserve and considering their career options.

"I was raised in a farming family in south-central Idaho," Lowe said. "After growing up and loving it, I came here and I find out they're actually assisting people to get their own farm, essentially. I was like, that's what I want right there."

Hansen's brother-in-law farms, he said.

"Our generation nowadays doesn't understand the importance of farming," Hansen said. "It's very therapeutic. It's a lot of hard work, but it's good work. You're on the land you live on."

Lowe hopes to spread the word about Vets on the Farm.

"I know there's a lot of people I grew up with or I've talked to in the service that would love to hear what they have to say about getting into the business of agriculture," he said.

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