

# Wheat



Gary Polson, left, and his sister-in-law, Diane Polson, right, combine wheat on the hilly terrain of the family farm north of Waterville, Wash., on Aug. 18. They are counting on good yields to offset quality and price issues.

Dan Wheat/Capital Press

## WHEAT HARVEST A FAMILY SHOW

By DAN WHEAT  
Capital Press

**W**ATERVILLE, Wash. — It's harvest time in the high country. An ocean of golden wheat is being cut and threshed by combines working like ants over miles of the Waterville Plateau.

At 2,600 to 2,900 feet above sea level, it's the highest wheat region in the state and because of that wheat matures more slowly than neighboring regions to the east.

It's also desert. Farmers struggle with inadequate moisture to grow what's truly dryland wheat.

But this year, a little too much rain and temperature fluctuations right before harvest caused a condition referred to as falling numbers. It can involve kernel sprouting and damages starch and quality.

"I was sitting here fat and happy with all the rain and cool weather knowing the heads were filling but totally unaware of the falling numbers issue," said Gary Polson, 56, who farms 6,400 acres of wheat north of Waterville with his brother, Lynn, and his son, Max.

Wheat testing lower in



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Gary Polson, center, with his son, Max, and sister-in-law, Diane, were assisted by three hired hands during wheat harvest.



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Two combines cross a fallow field on way to wheat harvest near Waterville, Wash., on Aug. 18. Chelan Butte in background.

quality brings less money and with prices already low, it's a concern. Polson said he's

heard of one grower docked 25 cents per bushel.

Polson hopes to earn at least an adequate return with volume. With good yields they'll exceed 200,000 bushels this year.

Normally, the Polsons' yields run 50 to 60 bushels per acre but this year they're 65 to 68 and as high as 70.

"It's not a bin buster, but for how dry it was last fall (during seeding), we're totally blessed," he said.

Still it's not a "go forward

financial year." There won't be money for extras.

The Polson brothers are farming land farmed by their father, Elton, who died eight years ago.

Lynn, 63, had first dibs on farming. Gary did it part-time while he and his wife, Lauren, worked other jobs. They've been farming full-time for 19 years and depended on the direct payment federal subsidy. It was a little less than 25 percent of his farm income and was based on production. It helped for years that wheat prices were below \$4 per bushel.

Congress ended the subsidies with the 2014 Farm Bill. Polson was fine when prices were \$7 to \$8 per bushel. Now it's not as good.

"Last year we did OK, selling for \$6. I didn't like it then but sure would now. It beats the \$4.23 afternoon cash market today in Waterville," he said.

This year their harvest began Aug. 3 and likely will finish Aug. 27. The brothers and Gary's son, Max, and hired hand Elijah Weber drive trucks hauling wheat to Central Washington Grain Growers silos in Waterville.

The cooperative typically handles 13.5 million bushels (340,000 metric tons) of wheat grown in Douglas, Okanogan and parts of Grant and Lincoln counties. It's mostly soft white winter wheat and 80 to 85 percent of it typically is exported to Asia and the Middle East.

Terry Cox and Bob Olin drive trucks hauling wheat to Central Washington Grain Growers silos in Waterville.

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## Harvest links farmers to flour mills of Asia

Despite challenges, family stays in the field to feed world

By ERIC MORTENSON  
Capital Press

CONDON, Ore. — It's a limited pallet this time of year in the Columbia Plateau counties. Blue sky above brown fallow, with combines of John Deere green or Case IH red moving in slow, shrinking circuits around golden wheat fields.

It's an empty landscape, most ways you look. Few buildings and no traffic. And in that emptiness, you can lose track of the broader world. The wheat kernels tumbling into the hopper on Chuck Greenfield's combine are the reminder of the connection. From Gilliam County, Ore., with fewer than 2,000 people, it will go to flour mills in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and the Philippines.

"Feed the world," Greenfield says.

It is a diminished group of farmers who can make a living doing that. Greenfield's employer, Marc Pryor, said the county had about 150 wheat farmers in the 1970s. Now he estimates the number is in the teens. It's a classic example of the economy of scale: Like most crops, wheat's narrow profit margin makes it critical to spread input, equipment and labor costs over more acreage, and it forced many farmers to get bigger or get out.

In 1950, Oregon had 34,000 farms of one to 49 acres. Now it's down to 21,800 in that size category. The state lost 8 percent of its farmers between the 2007 Census of Agriculture to the next one in 2012.

The weather, crop diseases, equipment breakdowns and the market don't care. Wheat that sold for \$7 a bushel one year brings \$5 the next. There may be enough rain to germinate and nourish a dryland wheat crop through the bone-dry summer, and there may not. "It's pretty tough right now," Pryor says.

He's 66 and trying to maintain the farming operation that flourished under his father, Earl Pryor, now retired. His stepmother, Laura Pryor, was the Gilliam County judge for many years. The family business, now called Prycor LLC, farms about 3,500 acres. Marc Pryor monitors the farm from Los Angeles, where he lives and has a business, and returns home to Condon for harvest.



Eric Mortenson/Capital Press

Wheat pours from the combine during the harvest in Oregon's Gilliam County.

Marc Pryor is president of an engineering forensics business, which involves finding out why materials, products, structures or components fail, or don't work like they should. Farmers have their own structural problems.

Some are putting land into conservation reserves and making money that way, Pryor says, but that takes land out of production and limits expansion possibilities. Estate taxes can make it difficult to pass farms along to heirs, and in some cases the previous generation still needs to be supported by the farm's revenue. A strong U.S. dollar can make U.S. wheat more expensive than competitors', crucial to Pacific Northwest producers whose wheat is exported.

But to people who question the business, Pryor has a ready answer. "Well, we produced over six million pounds of food this year, what have you done?"

"And it's in our blood," Pryor adds. "That's why we're still doing it."

Chuck Greenfield, the combine driver, talks about the same thing. He turns 72 in September and is the Prycor field manager. He's worked for the family 35 years.

"You're kind of independent, you don't have to deal with a lot of people," he says. "If you work in a factory, you're basically a number."

He glances over, taking his eyes off the machine's spinning header for a second.

"As far as I'm concerned, this is a good way of life," he says. "It's not always bad to sit and listen to the combine."

His grandson, Justin Waggoner, is driving the red Case IH combine. He went school to learn welding, but returned to the wheat fields.

"I didn't ask him to come back," Greenfield says. "He's got farming in his blood."

Greenfield and his grandson circle in to the trucks to unload. Truck driver Buster Nation, who says he's "16 running on 17," manipulates an auger transferring wheat from a smaller truck to a larger one, which will haul the load to a grain elevator.

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