



Eric Mortenson/Capital Press

Freshly baked crackers emerge from a pilot-scale baking line at the Wheat Marketing Center in Portland. The laboratory tests recipes for crackers, cookies, noodles and tortillas made from wheat.

## PNW wheat exports ride on region's reputation for quality

By ERIC MORTENSON  
Capital Press

PORTLAND — Pacific Northwest soft white wheat growers must rely on the quality of their product to maintain an edge in the highly competitive export market, speakers at a Dec. 5 media briefing said.

Cheaper wheat is available from Russia, the Ukraine and elsewhere, but buyers in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan are "premium buyers" who remain willing and able to pay for Northwest wheat used to make crackers, cakes and cookies.

"The price goes up, they don't buy any less," said Steven Wirsching, West Coast office director of U.S. Wheat Associates, a trade group that maintains offices in Portland and Arlington, Va.

Sales to North and South Asia are so critical — the Philippines and Indonesia are also among the top 10 customers — that seven of U.S. Wheat's 15 international offices are in Asia. The premium Asian buyers are notoriously strict about wheat quality, he said.

"Certainly, market development is a full-contact sport," Wirsching said.

Wheat is the world's most widely planted grain, Wirsching said, and provides 20 percent of the world's calories. In the world's poorest regions, wheat provides 20 percent of the protein, he said.

Blake Rowe, CEO of the Oregon Wheat Commission, described the "quality loop" in

place that brings new varieties online, protects growers and satisfies the demands of overseas buyers.

He said it can take 8 to 12 years to develop new wheat varieties with the yield, quality and stress and disease tolerance that make them worthwhile for growers. New Northwest varieties are tested with three years of data from 15 sites,



Blake Rowe

and are always grown side-by-side with and compared to the Stephens variety, the industry standard.

The growing, handling, storage and shipping of wheat is carefully monitored, he said. If something goes wrong on the farm, or at the elevator, it resonates down the line of trade. Japan, he said, tests wheat for 220 pesticide residues.

In markets such as Japan, the end use of soft white wheat is in such things as sponge cake, and consistent presentation and look of the finished product is crucial, Rowe said.

"They understand pretty much everything you want to know about wheat and what products they can make from it," he said.

"Quality is a priority for us. If the only way we have to compete is on price, we will lose some markets."

On another topic, Rowe said it's unclear how a Trump administration will handle agricultural issues such as the

next farm bill. As of Dec. 5, when Rowe spoke at the Portland briefing, Trump had not appointed an agriculture secretary to replace Tom Vilsack, who is wrapping up eight years at USDA under the Obama administration.

While Trump has no history with farming, wheat growers are comfortable with Vice President-elect Mike Pence's agricultural background as Indiana governor, Rowe said.

"Right now we have to wait a little bit," he said. "We will get there."

Rowe acknowledged the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which export-heavy Pacific Northwest farmers favored, is "not going anywhere in its current form." Trump was highly critical of the TPP during the election campaign, but whether he intends to scrap it or re-negotiate it is unknown, Rowe said.

It's clear Trump intends to roll back regulations such as the EPA's unpopular "Waters of the U.S." proposals, "But the specifics of that we have to wait and see," Rowe said.

Wirsching, of U.S. Wheat Associates, noted that the Columbia and Snake river systems will be closed to wheat barge traffic as locks and gates at dams are repaired and updated from Dec. 12 into March 2017. He said the industry will move wheat from upriver elevators by other modes, primarily rail. He estimated there will be market demand for 1 million metric tons of soft white during the closure.

## EPA and tribe: State should stay out of What's Upstream

By DON JENKINS  
Capital Press

The Environmental Protection Agency and a Puget Sound tribe say a Washington watchdog agency should step away from an investigation into whether the What's Upstream advocacy campaign violated state law.

In separate statements made public Friday, the EPA and Swinomish Indian tribe both challenged whether the Public Disclosure Commission should pursue a complaint filed by Save Family Farming.

The EPA said a federal audit will answer whether What's Upstream organizers misspent public funds. The tribe said the PDC has no jurisdiction over how a tribe spends money.

PDC Executive Director Evelyn Fielding Lopez said the office will review the responses before deciding whether to take enforcement action. The PDC can issue a fine of up to \$10,000 or refer a case to the state attorney general's office to seek stiffer penalties in court.

It's unclear whether the PDC can enforce a penalty against a tribe, she said.

"It's a very interesting question. That's one that a court has not been asked to resolve," Fielding said. "We would say anyone who participates in a campaign or in lobbying is subject to these laws."

Save Family Farming alleges that What's Upstream lead organizer Larry Wasserman, the tribe's environmental policy director, failed to register What's Upstream as a political committee or grass-roots lobbying organization. The complaint also named EPA Northwest Administrator Dennis McLerran and Seattle lobbying firm Strategies 360.

Save Family Farming Director Gerald Baron said that if tribes are exempt from campaign laws, they could be used by groups to shield political activities.

"It's potentially a lucrative source of income for the tribes," Baron said. "It would drive a truck through our state campaign laws."

Lawyers representing the Swinomish stated that the tribe was responding to Save Family Farming's complaint as a "courtesy" to the PDC.

"The PDC has no authority to regulate how tribes spend

their funds," according to the 11-page response, "Tribal officials are immune from state enforcement actions."

The attorneys charged that the complaint was an "obvious attempt to gain publicity, stifle and distract public awareness of harmful agricultural practices."

What's Upstream organizers in late 2015 launched a revised website that encouraged residents to ask legislators to consider mandatory buffers between farm fields and waterways, though no specific legislation was mentioned.

Environmental groups involved in What's Upstream said in a letter to supporters that the campaign was timed to influence the 2016 Legislature.

Wasserman's reports to the EPA over several years said the purpose of the campaign was to change state regulations.

In its response to the PDC, the tribe denied trying to influence state lawmakers.

"The intent was not and could not have been to influence legislation because no actual or proposed legislation ever existed," attorneys wrote.



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