

Port: White wheat experienced the steepest drop in exports

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Total U.S. wheat exports of last year's crop are estimated at 800 million bushels, down from 994 million bushels previously, according to USDA.

White wheat, including the soft white wheat commonly grown in the Northwest, experienced the steepest drop in exports, from 270 million bushels to 148 million bushels, according to USDA.

However, prices for wheat remain relatively strong and foreign buyers continue to need the product, Haarmann said. "We're fortunate to have a steady demand for wheat in the Pacific Northwest."

The USDA projects that U.S. wheat exports will tick back up with the current crop, to 825 million bushels for wheat overall and 180 million bushels for white wheat.

At nearly 1.8 billion bushels, total U.S. wheat

production in 2022 is projected to rise from last year's level of 1.65 billion bushels, the agency said.

Winter wheat yields are expected to increase across the northern U.S. wheat growing tier,

including 44% in Oregon, 74% in Washington and 28% in Idaho, according to the agency.

"We're looking forward to a much better year for all our communities in the coming crop year," Haarmann said.

Tractors: Growers remain well represented at tractor pulls

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Connection to ag

Not everyone who enjoys tractor pulling is a farmer, but fans tend to feel a connection to agriculture that's strengthened by the activity.

"It's usually someone from a farm background or who's been exposed to agriculture," Peterson said.

Growers remain well represented at tractor pulls, which originated as a way to compare new machines, he said.

Tractors began greatly increasing in power during the mid-20th century, sparking curiosity about their capabilities and rivalries among their admirers, he said. Competitive pulling became more formalized in the 1960s and 1970s in the Midwest, where the motorsport continues to enjoy the greatest popularity.

In the Northwest, the Sublimity Harvest Festival was among the earliest organized competitions when it started nearly 50 years ago. The festival, which is Sept. 9-11 this year, now includes monster trucks, truck pulls, ATV pulls and other activities, but it originated as solely a contest between farmers.

"The original event was the tractor pull," Peterson said.

Nowadays, stock tractors normally used for field work continue to participate in contests, though they're in a separate category from those modified for peak pulling performance.

On-farm events

Bill Zimmerman, president of Oregon Tractor Pullers, regularly hosts events at his fruit and vegetable operation north of Vancouver, Wash.

"I don't get away from vacation much, so this is my enjoyable thing to do," he said.

For him, it's more interesting to find out what can be accomplished by ordinary machines than by 300-plus-horsepower "hot rod tractors" especially built for the task.

"I'm more into it from the point of view of how it came from the factory, and how did it perform," Zimmerman said.

Having worked at a tractor dealership in the past, he's nonetheless impressed with how far people take the alterations.

"They have tractors putting out horsepower that we never dreamed of with those engines," he said.

Modified tractors are solely intended for competition and no longer have much utility for regular farming, said Joe Shaver, the organization's vice president. They'd overheat or break down with continuous use.

"A car that's good on the drag strip, you don't want to drive to work every day," Shaver said. "It's the same with tractors."

Replacing steel parts with those made of aluminum reduces overall weight and adding special engine components increases horsepower.

Such changes can make the tractor more prone to stress damage, particularly



Bill Zimmerman, right, narrates a tractor pull event held at his fruit and vegetable operation, Bizi Farms, north of Vancouver, Wash. Zimmerman is president of the Oregon Tractor Pullers nonprofit.



A participant pulls a sled with his garden tractor.

when it's run hard during an event.

Boring the cylinders of an engine block to accommodate larger pistons, for example, comes with trade-offs, Peterson said.

"To make it fit, you're sacrificing some of the structural integrity and the cooling," he said.

Winning combination

Horsepower alone won't necessarily guarantee a victory, though.

To achieve optimal traction, the tractor's weight must be properly balanced, and the operator must hit the right gear at the right speed.

"You want the front wheels barely off the ground" while pulling, Peterson said. "That's the perfect weight balance. You're maximizing downward force at the rear end of the tractor."

The tire pressure must be adjusted to fit the track, which in turn is affected by the weather, soil type and site maintenance. Accounting for those factors can be more art than science.

"The conditions are never the same from day to day and pull to pull," he said.

Finding specialized parts for modified tractors can be difficult and expensive, Shaver said. If demand isn't big enough to warrant mass production, they may have to be individually machined.

"It's not like you're just going to go to the auto parts store and pick this up," he said.

Restored tractors

In some cases, tractors have been lovingly restored for top dollar by collectors who wouldn't dream of an

extreme mechanical overhaul. They usually compete against other stock tractors at weights and speeds that won't risk undue wear and tear.

"Hey, I can take it out and play with it," Shaver said.

"It's something to do with your old tractor," Peterson said.

A serious contender looking to compete at the highest weight and speed, on the other hand, may spend \$50,000 on a tractor.

Owners typically reduce expenses by modifying the machines themselves as much as possible, since paying someone else for labor "gets really expensive," he said.

Special sleds

The weighted sleds that attach to tractors are also custom-built, since they're designed to increase friction with the ground as they're pulled.

As a sled is pulled down the track, heavy-duty chains draw the weight box closer to the front. With each passing foot, the sled's front pan presses harder against the ground, eventually forcing the tractor to stop.

Mark Valentine, a retired farmer who lives in Royal City, Wash., built two sleds to accommodate tractor pullers in the area.

"The demand for a sled was tremendous and there was no one to build it," he said.

Valentine saved money by doing the work himself and hunting for used parts at scrapyards, but the price of some components was still steep.

For his most recent project, he spent \$3,000 on the chain that pulls the weight box, which he considers an

investment in reliability.

"The sled can't break down. The tractors can," he said. "If you bring a sled and break down at the beginning, everybody's looking at you like, Why did you even come?"

Sled costs are a major consideration for tractor pull organizers. A sufficient number of competitors must pay "hook fees" to use the sled, or the event won't cover its rental fee.

The Oregon Tractor Pullers group bought its own sled five years ago to ensure the organization's financial stability.

Raising money

Rather than focusing on remaining solvent, the nonprofit can now raise money for other causes, such as helping the people who lost their homes in the 2020 Labor Day fires.

"What we make at the pulls is pretty much pure profit," he said.

Still, most tractor pulls aren't big-budget competitions whose top performers earn substantial cash prizes. Participants must content themselves with occasional trophies and ribbons instead.

"It is mostly bragging rights," Peterson said. "This is not a sport where you're going to make money, that's for sure."

Instead, the hobby naturally attracts people who know how to turn a wrench.

The vast majority are mechanically inclined, often having worked on farm equipment, automobiles and motorcycles since childhood,

Peterson said.

"Knowing what bolts to what is a huge advantage," he said.

Even those who aren't farmers tend to have jobs related to building or operating machinery.

For example, Shaver is a machinist who specializes in medical implants, such as the plates and pins used to repair bone fractures.

Peterson has a background in mechanical engineering and runs a company that makes distance-measuring sensors.

Such expertise can prove useful in tractor pulling.

"People ask how I do so well and I tell them it's calculated success," he said.

Technical knowhow may give him a leg up, but Peterson isn't secretive about his methods and theories. He's written three self-published books about different aspects of tractor pulling.

Infectious pastime

Tractor pullers eagerly promote their passion for the hobby, which can prove infectious. As enthusiasts involve their children and other relatives, the number of tractors in the family commonly multiplies.

"If you've got one, you might as well have a dozen," Shaver said.

Steve Gleason and his 17-year-old daughter, Cora, have been participating in tractor pulls for over a decade. They compete with garden tractors as well as a 1952 John Deere Model A, which they rebuilt together.

"We completely tore it

apart," she said.

Tinkering with machinery is a family tradition that Gleason's proud to share with his daughter. It's how he acquired his own mechanical knowledge.

"Most of it I learned from my dad growing up," he said. "Growing up, we did not have anything he did not fix."

Cora currently works as a harvester and farm hand for a Willamette Valley berry grower and plans to pursue agriculture as a long-term career.

Her mechanical experience will likely prove useful, but that's not the only benefit tractor pulling confers.

"I enjoy competing and I enjoy beating the guys," she said.

Apart from reinforcing intergenerational bonds, working on tractors can set a career trajectory.

"My son wants to work on this stuff because it's his tractor," Peterson said. "It really teaches kids skills they may not otherwise be exposed to."

Garden tractors popular

Since many families can't afford to buy a farm-sized tractor for each member, they opt for garden tractors. The Oregon Tractor Pullers has seen this division "explode" in popularity over the past five years, which organizers consider a welcome development.

"We want the barriers to entry to be as low as possible," Peterson said.

Dick Roberts, a hay grower from Napavine, Wash., spent just \$140 on a Craftsman GT6000 garden tractor, which he upgraded with a \$200 motor.

Those expenses were dwarfed by the \$800 tires, which are designed to better grip the ground.

Despite the hefty price tag, Roberts doesn't regret the purchase.

"If you want this type of tire, you have to pay," he said. "If you have twice the power but piss-poor tires, you'd spin out right away."

The costs involved in tractor pulling are highly variable and depend on the preferences of the competitor.

The rules

Tractor pulling generally enjoys a friendly, wholesome reputation, yet it hasn't always been devoid of controversy.

In the past, each club set its own rules for allowable modifications, such as the placement of weights to improve tractor balance.

Inconsistent regulations set off disputes — perhaps not serious enough to cause fist fights, but still capable of breeding resentment, Shaver said.

A solution surfaced nearly a decade ago, when a club in Kentucky developed rules that won widespread acceptance.

The rules were adopted so widely that they amounted to a national standard, dispelling the conflicts and letting tractor pullers focus on what's truly important.

"At the end of the day, we just want to play in the dirt and have fun," Shaver said.

Rewild: Rewilding campaigns ignore ranchers' contributions to keeping landscapes open

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livestock grazing threatens endangered species and contributes to climate change.

Grazing permits could be retired with an "economically and socially just federal compensation program," according to the authors.

The paper's lead co-author, OSU ecology professor William Ripple, was

unavailable. Co-author George Wuerthner of Public Lands Media in Bend said removing cattle from federal lands would have the most impact.

"If I were king, that would be the first thing I would do," he said.

"This is sort of a big-picture proposal. I think all of us realize a final version will have a lot of political compromises," Wuerthner said.

"You throw it out there and it takes a while and provides a target that you can have as a goal."

National Cattlemen's Beef Association natural resources director Kaitlynn Glover said rewilding campaigns ignore ranchers' contributions to keeping landscapes open.

"Removing livestock grazing — a valuable tool to reduce fuels for wildfires

and an important protector of biodiversity — will lead to new and exacerbated threats to vast areas of the West," she said in an email.

The paper called for wolves to be federally protected throughout the country. Currently, wolves in the Rocky Mountains are not federally protected.

Restoring beavers would repair riparian habitat and enrich fish habitat, accord-

ing to the authors.

Ashe was USFWS director from 2011 to 2017 during the Obama administration. He is now president and CEO of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums.

Other authors include five other OSU scientists and Aaron Wirsing of the University of Washington School of Environmental and Forest Sciences.

Other authors are from

the Ohio State University, Virginia Tech, the University of Victoria, Michigan Technological University, National Park Service, Earth Island Institute of Berkeley, Calif.

Also, Turner Endangered Species Fund of Bozeman, Mont.; Florida Institute for Conservation Service, and RESOLVE, a conservation group based in Washington, D.C.