

Farmers, customers scramble to make plans after flour mill fire

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

PENDLETON, Ore. — Pacific Northwest wheat farmers are making plans to cope with the fallout from a massive early-morning fire Aug. 10 that left the Grain Craft flour mill in Pendleton a “total loss.”

As of 2 p.m. Aug. 15 the mill was still smoldering due to the amount of grain and finished flour in the building, Pendleton Police Chief Chuck Byram told the Capital Press.

Representatives of Grain Craft, insurance adjusters and state fire marshal investigators were on site to develop a plan to secure the building and put out the fire, Byram said.

“They’re just in the initial stages of trying to implement a plan to figure out what we’re going to do with the rest of that building,” he said.

The company is working with farmers to handle the excess supply, said Natalie Faulkner, director of communications for Grain Craft, based in Chattanooga, Tenn.

The building was more than 100 years old, Faulkner said. Twenty-two employees worked in the mill. There were no injuries in the fire.

Byram said the mill was a “total loss.” The fire is “one of the most significant” in his more than 20 years in law enforcement and in Pendleton.

“It’s one of those things where people are going to have to adjust,” he said. “Hopefully, Grain Craft is able to get back in business here in Pendleton. Not only are they an employer, but a lot of farmers depend on them for their services.”

The company does not disclose the production capacity of the building, Faulkner said. The extent of the damage and possibility of rebuilding are not yet known, she added.

“It’s still an active situation, we are still evaluating everything, just trying to understand the cause and circumstances,” Faulkner told the Capital Press.

Ben Maney, president of Oregon Wheat Growers League, farms north of Pendleton.

He doesn’t take his grain to the facility, but “a substantial amount of farmers” in the area do, he told the Capital Press.

“It’s been a staple for the Pendleton community for an awfully long time, generations, and it’s always



Kathy Aney/EO Media Group
Flames shoot from the Grain Craft flour mill in Pendleton, Ore., on Aug. 10.

been a central location (in) town,” he said.

The fire is the latest hit for growers, after experiencing severe drought last year, Maney said. Many crops had rebounded this year with spring rains.

“A lot of farmers don’t have home storage, and they can’t store that grain on their farm,” he said. “For this heartbreaking event to hap-

pen today, it puts the community and a lot of the farmers in a tough situation. It hits the community hard.”

Jeremy Bunch, CEO of Shepherd’s Grain, a farmer-owned flour company, sent an email to customers about the fire.

“We are working on a contingency plan now and getting wheat staged for movement to another Grain Craft mill,” Bunch said. “Unfortunately, there will be an interruption in flour supply as we work through these details. We apologize for the inconvenience this causes. We are working hard to minimize this flour supply interruption and will provide a timeline update very soon.”

The cause of the fire was “mechanical failure,” Byram, the police chief, told the Capital Press.

On Aug. 9, dispatchers received a report of black smoke coming from the mill, “with no visible flames,” according to a police department press release. The fire department responded, extinguished the small fire and remained on fire watch.

The fire subsequently reignited at about 4 a.m. Aug. 10 and the mill became fully engulfed due

to the dry grain and the wooden structure, Byram said.

Employees identified the source of the fire, Byram said.

“It happened in the mill itself, with one of the pieces of equipment, with a rubber bushing or housing that obviously got too hot and started the fire,” he said.

There were no injuries, he said. It’s the middle of harvest, Byram said, so the mill was processing a lot of flour. He didn’t have an exact figure, but said Grain Craft employees estimated there were “hundreds of thousands of pounds of processed flour in the bins.”

Some surrounding buildings have been damaged by water and smoke, Byram said.

The Pendleton Fire Department, Umatilla Tribal Fire Department, Umatilla County Fire District No. 1 and other agencies responded to the scene, at 501 S.E. Emigrant Ave.

Pendleton Assistant Fire Chief Tony Pierotti told the East Oregonian newspaper the silos were full of finished grain, so the fuel load was “extreme.”



Juliet Marshall/University of Idaho

Barley growing in eastern Idaho.

NASS reduces Idaho barley production estimate by 14%

By **BRAD CARLSON**
Capital Press

USDA’s National Agricultural Statistics Service has reduced its Idaho barley production estimate for this year, but the crop will still be much larger than the drought-stricken 2021 harvest.

NASS said its Aug. 1 forecast calls for production of 53.2 million bushels, down 14% from its July 1 prediction but up 22% from last year’s crop.

Yield is expected to average 95 bushels per acre, down 14% from the 111 bushels forecast July 1.

About 560,000 acres of barley are expected to be harvested this year, up 14% from 490,000 acres in 2021.

Mike Wilkins, a state Barley Commission board member who farms near Rupert in the south-central region, said his irrigated, spring-planted crop appears to be “a strong average — maybe a pinch better — and way better than last year.”

He said his yields are up 30 to 40 bushels an acre from last year, depending on the individual field. His yield last year was 30 to 40 bushels off the long-term average.

“Average yield pays the bills,” said Wilkins. “We’re pretty happy.”

Some winter-planted barley may not do as well as the crop planted in the spring, he said.

Newdale-area grower Dwight Little said neighbors tell him the dryland crop in eastern Idaho is headed for below-average yields, and the irrigated crop also is “seeing some effects of continual heat.”

Plants in the region emerged during the unusually cool, wet spring with extra horizontal tillers to fill. Hot, dry conditions followed quickly and have persisted. Little said in much of the dryland crop “there was not enough moisture to support what the plant thought it could produce.”

Results appear mixed in eastern Idaho irrigated barley, he said. The supply of irrigation water was larger than expected, thanks to the wet late spring, but a few growers were still short on water.

In soil with insufficient moisture, a stretch of high heat slows the plant, Little said. “Barley needs continuous replenishment of moisture it is losing.”

He said some growers in high-elevation areas near the state’s southeast corner got

good moisture at emergence, and beneficial monsoon rain more recently. That crop looks good but was planted late, so it will finish closer to the first frost.

“This thing just changes with the weather,” Little said. “You can’t ever sing your good fortune till you cash your check.”

Valley Wide Cooperative, Bleyhl Farm Service to merge

By **BRAD CARLSON**
Capital Press

Idaho-based Valley Wide Cooperative will gain locations in agriculture-rich central Washington while Bleyhl Farm Service will have access to more resources when they merge on Oct. 1.

Bleyhl fields Washington retail and energy locations in Sunnyside, Zillah and Grandview, where the cooperative also has its headquarters, agronomy operation and fertilizer plant.

Nampa, Idaho-based Valley Wide will add them to its current 80 locations on Idaho, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming. Sales for Valley Wide, which has just over 3,200 members, totaled \$598.8 million in the fiscal year ended Aug. 31. Segments include farm

supply, energy, agronomy and feed.

Bleyhl has over 800 members and more than 4,000 customers in south-central Washington. The combined cooperative will employ more than 1,300. Valley Wide said it will add the Bleyhl locations and maintain all other operations and staff at existing Valley Wide sites.

Bleyhl, by merging into Valley Wide, is positioning itself and its farmer owners “to take advantage of the leverage, scale and resources of a \$750 million farm supply organization,” CEO Joel Marcott said in a release. The merger will “empower our cooperative with the supply chain, capital and network to remain competitive against other agribusinesses while protecting the values associated with the cooperative

model.”

He said other benefits include greater buying power and seasonal risk diversification across a larger geographic area and “access to resources to meet the challenges of an increasingly competitive industry.”

Valley Wide’s mergers “are not about becoming part of a big organization that throws its weight around,” CEO Dave Holtom said, but rather “local cooperatives in communities across the PNW working under one brand, and leveraging that brand and unified volume to take the advantage back to all the communities and customers we serve.”

In global agriculture and energy enterprises, “it will take all of us working together to not only compete, but to flourish,” he said.

Valley Wide will increase its board of directors to 12 members by adding one from Bleyhl. The Valley Wide board added three members last year in its merger with Ag Link, a northeast Washington cooperative with seven locations.

The Bleyhl merger is a “natural step” following the Ag Link merger, Erica Louder, the Valley Wide communications director, told Capital Press. It substantially increases service opportunities in the Yakima Valley, and “we can serve a lot more of ag.”

She said Bleyhl’s orchard and vineyard supply segment provides a new opportunity for Valley Wide.

Bleyhl and Valley Wide members recently voted to approve the merger by 95% and 87%, respectively. Financial details were not released.

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