

# Farmers, customers scramble after flour mill fire

A major employer in Pendleton

By MATTHEW WEAVER  
Capital Press

PENDLETON — Pacific Northwest wheat farmers are beginning to cope with the fallout from a massive fire Wednesday that left the Grain Craft flour mill a “total loss.”

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

The building was more than 100 years old, Faulkner said. Twenty-two employees worked in the mill. There were no injuries in the fire. Pendleton Police Chief Chuck Byram said the mill was a “total loss.”

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, the 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,

**TWENTY-TWO EMPLOYEES WORKED IN THE MILL. THERE WERE NO INJURIES IN THE FIRE.**

generations, and it’s always 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 heart-breaking event to happen 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

mills, “with no visible flames,” according to a police department statement. The fire department responded, extinguished the small fire and remained on fire watch.

The fire subsequently reignited at about 4 a.m. Wednesday and 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.

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.”

There is no estimated cost of damage yet, he said.

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

The mill plays a “huge” role in the Pendleton community, he said.

“They’re a major employer. We are obviously an agricultural community that does a lot of dryland wheat farming,” he said. “Wheat farmers from the surrounding area bring their wheat in here to the Pendleton flour mill. It’s yet to be determined what the impact is, but I can gauge it’s going to be significant.”

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



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

A massive fire damaged a flour mill in Pendleton.

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