

Will smut destroy China connection?

Will a disease called TCK smut destroy Pacific Northwest wheat growers' multi-million-dollar China connection?

Yu Shan-Qian (pronounced "ooh san chien") did not offer many clues during a recent interview conducted through an interpreter at Oregon State University.

Just the same, the soft-spoken, friendly Yu, a plant pathologist from Fudan University in Shanghai, may be the first to know.

He is the first representative of mainland China's scientific community to come to the Northwest for an extended study of TCK smut, a fungus disease that historically has caused trade problems with China and this winter sparked a renewed Chinese ban on importing wheat from the Northwest.

The 44-year-old scientist was invited by U.S. Wheat Associates, a marketing organization whose Asian office is in Portland, to conduct two years of cooperative research—all expenses paid—in the OSU laboratory of Edward Trione, a U.S. Department of Agriculture botanist who is a TCK smut expert.

The hope of U.S. wheat, and Northwest growers, is that such joint research will help the Chinese adopt the view that TCK smut, which cuts wheat yields by turning the grain to a worthless black powder, is severely limited by terrain and weather conditions and poses no threat to China, said Trione after Yu's June arrival in Corvallis.

From his country's point of view, Yu later explained in the interview, China's scientists "have no way to judge" the danger of the disease, which is in virtually all wheat shipped from the Northwest in the form of microscopic spores.

Yu is the vanguard of an effort to educate Chinese scientists.

"We are starting our own research program at Fudan to study the possibility of TCK problems starting in parts of our country similar to here," he said. "We need this research background to know if what we are told is true or not."

Another incentive for studying TCK smut, said Yu, is that China is beginning to detect the disease in the millions of tons of wheat imported from areas other than the Pacific Northwest.

Specifically, Yu's reason for coming to Oregon is to learn how TCK smut develops—to verify under what conditions it germinates, he said.

After he completes an intensive, seven-days-a-week language course intended to overcome the communication barrier, and takes an introductory tour of the Northwest, Yu looks forward to setting aside the inevitable inquiries about his government's position on wheat imports and moving into the laboratory.

"I am a scientist," he said, admitting through a polite grin his discomfort with such inquiries. "I cannot say what my government will or will not do."

He explained that his visit to OSU was coordinated by the chairman of his university department, who headed a Chinese delegation that visited Northwest wheat growers and scientists last year, and not by the Chinese government.

Still, he added, the head of the Chinese Ministry of Agriculture's plant quarantine bureau met with him and his department chairman before he left home and spoke encouragingly of his research.

His very presence in the Northwest may be cause for optimism among wheat growers, he pointed out.

"I believe such cooperative research with Dr. Trione will not only enhance science but further the agriculture trade between our two countries," he said.

Trione agrees. The USDA botanist said "the science is on our side" in the debate over TCK smut.

spores enter China regularly from several sources—including contaminated cargo ships from Japan—without causing problems.

"The best way to counter their fear, though," he said, "is to keep talking to them and

encourage collaborative research.

"It is not my intention to try and convince Mr. Yu Shan-Qian of anything. I want to give him the opportunity to learn for himself about the disease—in the laboratory and

in the field."

In Oregon the disease is limited to a relatively small area in the northeastern part of the state, said Trione.

Mixing of wheat for export at Columbia River ports contaminates grain from the

Willamette Valley and elsewhere.

After Yu completes his language course in mid-August, Trione said he will encourage him to spend a month or so touring western states including Oregon,

Washington, Idaho, Montana and Utah and talking with scientists, growers and others in the wheat industry to

broaden his knowledge of TCK smut.

The USDA researcher, whose own research includes

trying to improve methods of detecting the disease and trying to find a way to control it, said it appears a second

Chinese scientist, a specialist from the country's plant quarantine bureau, will travel to OSU this fall to do TCK smut research under the sponsorship of U.S. Wheat Associates.

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