

One year later...

JANICE COOPER PUTS HER IMPRINT ON WHEAT MARKETING CENTER

By Scott A. Yates

There's an expression about how it's not where you start that matters, it's where you end up. In that case, the fact that **Janice Cooper** is a fifth-generation Californian shouldn't be held against her. She is, after all, completing her career in the Northwest, serving as the managing director of the Portland-based Wheat Marketing Center (WMC).

Cooper is a good sport about the irritation occasionally directed at transplanted Californians, but she remains grateful for the opportunities her upbringing in the "Golden" state afforded, including an undergraduate degree in political science and international relations from UCLA, which led to stints working in San Francisco, Sacramento, Washington, D.C., and New York.

But when all was said and done, she wed a fellow Californian. She and Jim Salisbury, a farm boy from the Sacramento Delta who works in a senior position with Bank of the West, have been married for 25 years. For a period of time, while their three children were young, everyone lived on the Salisbury family's 60-acre ranch in the delta, complete with a 25-acre pear orchard. It was Cooper's first real brush with agriculture on the ground, and she's pleased to have acquitted herself well, stepping in to organize harvest and other farming details for several years.



To make his wife's current job easier to navigate, Salisbury has arranged his schedule to work half time at his employer's Portland office. Meanwhile, his wife is a frequent flyer into the Sacramento airport.

It's been exactly a year since Cooper was hired as managing director of the WMC. Before that, she had served for six years as executive director of the California Wheat Commission (CWC) where she became well acquainted with the wheat industry and its players. Not only that, the CWC is the only commission in the nation that has its own in-house, full-scale baking and quality lab.

Cooper said her proudest accomplishment during her year-long tenure has been accomplishing all the tasks the WMC board set out for her when she arrived. She cites the No. 1 priority as "getting our house in order and restoring our strong ties with WMC's partners and stakeholders."

"That feels good, but we also just had a clean (financial) audit which was the cherry on top of the sundae," she said.

Bill Flory, a farmer from Culdesac, Idaho, near Lewiston, and a member of the Idaho Wheat Commission, serves as chairman of the WMC board. He said Cooper was one of several excellent candidates who applied for the position.

"It's a great thing during a CEO search when you have to have a long dis-

cussion among the selection committee and the board about who you make the final offer to," he said, adding that it was a tough decision that has been a wild success for the industry.

Unlike the previous executive director, David Shelton, who retired in July 2015, Cooper is not a cereal scientist, but her experience at the CWC means she understands scientific wheat measurements and the importance of end-use quality. Not to mention, Flory said, she has a staff of excellent cereal scientists. He cites business development and board governance as Cooper's major strengths.

"She knows how to use and work with a board of directors, something that not everybody understands or is capable of doing. It's a very constructive thing if you understand how to do it," he said.

Brit Ausman, who serves on the WMC board from the Washington Grain Commission (WGC), agreed. He has appreciated Cooper's efforts to involve the board more in everything from strategic planning and governance to marketing and customer development.

"The foundation was there, but Janice has super-charged it through developing a business plan and a strategic process that has taken the Wheat Marketing Center to a new level of productivity," he said. "There is a tremendous skill set on the WMC board, and Janice has reached into the board and grabbed those talents to put to use."

One of Cooper's first acts as the new WMC director was to hire an office manager, Gamble Wright. The rest of the staff remains the same. Gary Hou is technical director and Asian food specialist; Bon Lee is lab supervisor; Kathleen Gehring is lab technologist; and Caryn Ong is food technologist. In addition to the small staff, there are overseas visiting scholars and occasional part-time workers.

The Wheat Marketing Center was created in 1988 through an earmark (when there were earmarks) by Oregon Sen. Mark Hatfield. Seventy-five percent of its operating budget is supported by funding from seven states' wheat commissions with the other 25 percent coming from technical course fees from U.S. Wheat Associates and other groups and on-going special projects. Its 2016 budget is \$1.15 million. The WMC also has a for-profit entity, WMC Lab Services, which provides proprietary research to companies seeking specific products or practices.

The WMC charter states are:

Colorado
Idaho
Montana
Nebraska
North Dakota
Oregon
Washington

Other funding comes via an innovative arrangement in which the organization shares in the ownership of the building where it is located. The Albers Flour Mill, which was refurbished as part of the Hatfield grant, is a prime piece of real estate along the banks of the Willamette River in Portland. In the partnership arrangement with the Bill Naito Company, about \$400,000 in rental income flows into the WMC annually. That money had previously flowed directly into the WMC budget. As a way to "become more thoughtful about sources and uses of funding," Cooper has created a separate account.

"We don't want commissions to invest in the building. The rent revenue will cover capital purchases and fund building maintenance and renovations, including renovation of the displays out front which have remained unchanged for 25 years," she said, referring to the information kiosks in the lobby which traces the movement of grain within and through the Pacific Northwest to countries around the world. "We are thinking of something more interactive with flat-screen displays that are more compelling and dynamic," while using the same footprint that now exists.

Although the WMC has been primarily export oriented, Cooper said there has been discussion among her board to re-evaluate that emphasis, and there have been conversations with several states.

"Half of the wheat grown in the U.S. stays here," she said, adding, "I don't have to tell you that state commission revenues are being squeezed as the price of wheat declines along with reductions in MAP (Market Access Program) and FMD (Foreign Market Development) funds. At the same time, state commissions are being asked to do more and more. We think it's prudent to look for ways to diversify our sources of funding."

Nothing in the WMC's mission statement singles out an overseas or domestic focus, but the number of board members is currently capped by the articles of incorporation at 13. In addition to the seven charter states, board members represent the Port of Portland, BNSF, Columbia Grain and Grain Craft. Also serving on the board are Keith Bailey, manager of AgVentures NW, and Tom Zelenka, a long-time board member.

The WGC allocated \$267,502 to the WMC in the 2016/17 budget passed last May. In addition to providing general operating support, these funds are used to collect and analyze wheat from around the state, publish the annual Soft Wheat Crop Quality Report and promote utilization of the pilot-scale cracker line. ■