

## Portland hosts Latin American and Caribbean wheat buyers conference

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Eric Mortenson/Capital Press Ricardo Vargas, center, a wheat buyer with the Mexico-based Bimbo Bakeries, and Juan Marinez, right, a baker from Colombia, taste crackers produced on the pilot line at the Wheat Marketing Center in Portland. The men were among visitors attending the Latin American and Caribbean Wheat Buyers Conference held June 21-24.

PORTLAND — Visitors attending the Latin American and Caribbean wheat buyers conference got some laughs along with bites of crackers and cookies when they toured the Wheat Marketing Center in Portland's Pearl District June 21, but Idaho wheat grower Bill Flory said more may come of it.

Flory, chair of the center's Board of Directors, said he'd already had inquiries that may lead to additional purchases of Pacific Northwest wheat.

The Wheat Marketing Center is crucial to that effort, Flory said. The center's pilot line machines can replicate conditions at any milling or bakery operation in the world, he said, and help processors solve problems without shutting down production lines.

"Something as simple as making sure a product consistently fits in a package," Flory said. "We can help on the technical side of that. People here are looking for solutions."

In addition, the center can demonstrate how the Northwest's soft white wheat can be employed in various wheat blends to make products, he said.

"This has been very productive already," Flory said. "This is a huge opportunity to interface with our customers."

Ricardo Vargas, a buyer with the multinational Bimbo Bakeries, based in Mexico, sampled a cracker made with soft white wheat. Vargas said he his product check list includes color, texture, density and smell, and he gave the cracker an approving nod.

In the marketing center's test kitchen, lab tech Kathleen Gehring demonstrated how tortillas and flat bread are made. The Latin American guests enjoyed the demonstration, and several tried their hand at using the kitchen's tortilla press and sliding bread into a quick-firing oven.

Gehring said it's important for staff to explain the center's capabilities, which includes extensive testing equipment.

"We want them to understand how much effort we put into providing them high-quality wheat," she said. "It's important they know we have high standards."

In addition to tours of the marketing center and the Columbia Grain export elevator, the conference included two days of presentations in Portland on topics ranging from plant breeding methods and Russian wheat competition to food trends and the freight outlook. Grain sellers were set to discuss the attributes of hard red, Desert Durum, soft white and soft red wheat varieties.

On Friday, the group had the option of traveling east up the scenic Columbia River Gorge. They were scheduled to stop at Multnomah Falls, lunch at the Columbia Gorge Discovery Center in The Dalles, and take part in a tour and barbecue dinner at the home of grower Darren Padget, chair of the Oregon Wheat Commission.