

Growers follow wheat from farm to market

A group of 15 farmers from around the state attended the Oregon Wheat Commission 2018 grower workshop Thursday and Friday in Portland.

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Gary Hou, technical director and wheat foods specialist at the Wheat Marketing Center, makes crackers in the nonprofit center's food innovation kitchen.

PORTLAND — The end of harvest is just the beginning of the story for Oregon wheat, as farmers from around the state learned Jan. 18-19 at the Oregon Wheat Commission's 2018 grower workshop in Portland.

A group of 15 people gathered at the commission offices in the historic Albers Mill overlooking the Willamette River. From there, they met with experts and toured facilities to witness firsthand what happens to their crop once it leaves the farm.

Oregon farmers typically grow 50 million to 70 million bushels of wheat every year, with a total economic output averaging more than \$815 million. Tana Simpson, OWC associate administrator, said the commission assesses 5 cents per bushel, which pays for programs such as export market development, grower services and university research.

The annual workshop is intended to show farmers the value they get in return for their investment, Simpson said.

"These are your dollars that you're going to see over the next few days," she said.

The group made its first stop at the nonprofit Wheat Marketing Center, which does quality and product testing using wheat samples from across the Northwest. Janice Cooper, managing director at the center, said they also do hands-on training for overseas customers making products such as crackers, noodles and tortillas.

“Most of the work we do is with Asian and Latin American trade teams that come here,” Cooper said.

Laboratory supervisor Bon Lee demonstrated some of the high-tech equipment he uses to measure things such as gluten and starch content in dough. Lee explained in depth how he performs what is known as the “falling numbers” test, which checks for sprout damage in grain.

Low falling numbers has plagued parts of Washington and Idaho in recent years due to pre-harvest rains, Lee said.

“When it rains before harvest ... the sprouting process starts,” Lee said. “Even if you dry it, it’s too late.”

The vast majority of Oregon wheat — 85 to 90 percent — is shipped overseas. The U.S. Wheat Associates is the industry’s promotion arm, developing export markets in more than 100 countries.

Shawn Campbell, deputy director of the organization in Portland, said the most important thing farmers can do is maintain high quality, especially as the global marketplace for wheat becomes more competitive.

Countries such as Japan are particularly interested in buying high-quality soft white wheat from the Pacific Northwest, Campbell said, and consumers there have the income to pay for it.

“If we didn’t give our overseas customers what they wanted, they’d go elsewhere and find it there,” Campbell said.

Next, the group traveled to the Pacific Export Terminal at the Port of Portland, where employees work around the clock loading and unloading wheat shipments from around the region. The terminal is capable of moving 900 metric tons of wheat per hour, while also providing another layer of quality testing on site through the USDA.

Kim Harper, quality assurance specialist, showed how he pulls samples from wheat shipments and combs over each individual grain looking for things such as mold, insect and sprout damage.

“We’re seeing wheat come from across the West and Midwest,” Harper said. “We have to keep up on all that.”

The group wrapped up day one with a stop at a downtown Portland bakery, and spent day two aboard a river tugboat and chatting about the latest wheat research with Oregon State University scientists.

Blake Rowe, CEO of both the Oregon Wheat Commission and Oregon Wheat Growers League, said workshops are designed to give farmers a feel for everything that happens off their farm.

“They’ll actually get an appreciation of what a customer is looking for,” Rowe said. “I think that is something that is helpful to them.”