

# Farmers learn more about dams, falling number testing, Oreos

Washington wheat farmers took the Washington Grain Commission export tour and what quality workshop from Spokane to Portland, and got an up-close look at the way their wheat moves from field to customers overseas and at home.

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U.S. Army Corps of Engineers park ranger Monty Biggs, center, leads a Washington Grain Commission export tour through the hydraulic turbines at Bonneville Dam Nov. 28 in Stevenson, Wash.

A Washington Grain Commission John Day Dam Nov. 28 on the Co

PORTLAND — Some wheat farmers can now talk about the role their crop plays in making consumers' favorite cookies and crackers.

The Washington Grain Commission hosted its annual Pacific Northwest Wheat Export Tour and Wheat Quality Workshop Nov. 28-30. Roughly 24 growers and industry representatives traveled from Spokane to Portland.

The trip spanned the wheat production cycle, including visits to Bonneville Dam in Washington and Oregon; the Mondelez/Nabisco factory, Columbia Export Terminal and Federal Grain Inspection Service, Wheat Marketing Center and Shaver Transportation in Portland; and Full Sail Brewery in Hood River, Ore. They heard presentations from the Columbia River Pilots, Columbia River Bar Pilots and Pacific Northwest Waterways Association.

Jeff Malone farms in Douglas and Grant counties. He's always been interested in the path his wheat takes once it leaves the farm, he said.

"A lot of times we'll move our wheat on a semi down to Pasco, and I'm always curious to see exactly where it goes, how it travels from there out to the coast," he said. "This trip has been amazing, to be able to actually follow it one step at a time. How much labor goes into it is pretty impressive."

Ritzville farmer Justin Simonson farms with his family. His dad previously went on the tour and highly recommended it, he said, and his mom "has been pretty stern that I should come and see this," he said.

"I'm checking off boxes of things that I didn't know prior to this week," Simonson added.

It's important to have the information on hand when speaking to people as generations get more removed from the farm, Simonson said.

"The population of Portland, when they look out their windows, drive down their streets and see that port, I can say, 'I play some small part in that, getting jobs and revenue into your city,'" he said. "On top of the fact, (I can also say) 'Do you like Oreos?'"

The USDA Foreign Agricultural Service sends a representative on the tour each year to get a first-hand perspective, economist Graham Soley said.

"It's good to get us out of Washington (D.C.) and around the country to really witness whatever we're studying," Soley said. "That we're a part of it and we understand it, that we're not just sitting behind a desk trying to imagine how these things happen. We have to see them in real life."

Soley was impressed with the dam tour, a more in-depth look than he's ever had before. It helped him understand more about transportation, he said.

"We're always studying international markets, but we're also studying how domestic product gets to those international markets," he said. "Studying riverways and barges and what can hold them up and what makes the process more efficient, that definitely opened my eyes quite a bit."

Hartline farmer Russ Dingman was impressed by testing for falling numbers, a wheat starch quality problem, at the Wheat Marketing Center. He was one of the many farmers impacted in 2016. The enzyme alpha amylase can cause starch damage when triggered by temperature fluctuations at a key development stage in wheat; sprouting caused by rain also results in low falling numbers below industry standards required by customers overseas. The problem affects the milling characteristics and functions of the crop.

“When he pulled those test tubes out and showed how the one with high numbers was sticky and held, and the other one was just like liquid, water, I was shocked — now it makes sense,” Dingman said. “Because I’m wondering, ‘My wheat looks good, what’s the problem with it?’ But it’s a problem when you go to mill it. That really stood out, probably more than anything.”

Dingman looks for any opportunity to learn more about his industry. His wife Julie attended with him. He hopes to send his son on the trip next year to get more information, too.

“It goes beyond the field, and I think that’s what a lot of people need to understand if they want to get a grasp on what’s going on in our industry,” he said.

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