

## Gleanings from the Montana Wheat & Barley Committee

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**MONTANA**  
wheat & barley

As you read this, it's important to know that Thanksgiving pants are real. Real handy. Get some if you don't have any. I hope everyone had the best feast and dozens of dinner rolls.

About selling wheat, let's talk about our 2024 trade team season. We have largely crossed the finish line for Montana this year! While we did not receive the crazy totals of post-Covid travel like we did in 2023, we had enthusiastic and engaged visitors this year.

### Who visited?

Ten teams with a total of 33 people came to Montana in 2024. In April, the Japanese Consulate stopped at the MWBC office on their fact-finding tour. Hosted by the Montana Department of Commerce, MWBC was one of multiple visits they made to discuss trade opportunities between Montana and Japan.

Nippn, owner of Pasta Montana, brings a rotation of corporate staffers to see us on a regular basis. Their processing facility in Great Falls has been a standout edition for Montana's value-added ag economy since its inception in 1997. As they train in new managers in changing roles, MWBC is an important part of their education to better understand Montana durum conditions and quality. We visited with them in May, June, July and October.



*On the farm visiting all things barley.*

Constellation Brands, Mexico, arrived in late July. Home to brands such as Corona and Modelo, they are enjoying Modelo's rise to the top of the beer charts in the United States. They had members of their public and government relations teams with them which was a unique opportunity for us. In response to their needs, we built a tour to include Montana State University's malt quality lab and Post Farm; Montana Craft Malt in Butte; Sweet Grass Barley elevator; and grower operations in Sweet Grass and Cut Bank. MWBC Director Keven Bradley produced a fantastic handout at his farm. He impressed our guests with a look-back report demonstrating a piece of land under poor health, followed by positive results of good management over time, rebounding to productive ground. It included the production timeline, seeding practices including photos and heat map images, soil test reports and a study of field health. Our guests just loved it.

The southeast Asia market brought teams from Japan: Nisshin Flour Milling, CZL, Showa Sangyo, Chiba Flour Milling, Cargill-Japan, Sumitomo Corp. and Okinawa Flour (some of these are from Japanese Flour Millers); from Singapore: Agroc Corp. We could not host all of these visits without significant contributions from our grain industry partners and our growers who bring out their tractor to provide rides, or drive guests out to a field to show sawfly damage. Thank you to all of these folks. We also make an effort to get to the smaller cafés along the way, including some fantastic catering for our guests by Artha Dunk in Sweet Grass and Whispering Petals in Great Falls.



*Presenting the slide deck.*

### **What does a typical tour look like?**

Here's a rundown of a day-in-the-life when visitors land in Big Sky Country. Obviously we are limited by time constraints, but if they are here multiple days, we can expand their visits to include more stops. This is an example of a Great Falls arrival:

- Opening welcome – MWBC Executive Director Kent Kupfner presents a thorough PowerPoint covering everything from the Committee's focus to current crop data. Many questions arise from the guests, with extra time allowed for language translation.
- Montana State Grain Lab visit – Staffers cover the flow of grain inspection, how they grade, alveograph testing and more.
- Mill visit – Whether it's General Mills or Grain Craft, these good folks are happy to provide a full mill tour including presentations about their company background.
- Malt company visit – For our barley showcasing, we pick up a malt production stop. Buyers enjoy learning about the entire process from ingress of grain, through making the malt, to the many components in the supply chain.
- Elevator visit – We'll head north to any number of choices for an elevator tour. During harvest, guests really enjoy seeing trucks come in and if we're lucky, a rail car loaded.
- Seed sales – This year we added stops at seed dealers to deepen the experience.
- Farm visit – We wish we could get to more Montana farms, but distance keeps us within a reasonable radius of town. Guests love every part of this, but the family component is probably the most impactful. They greatly appreciate the generations of producers who have stewarded their land and constantly improve it with sustainable farming practices.
- Meals – We are typically able to visit the café atmosphere of Montana with good ol' cheeseburgers and French fries (they seem to love them!). In the evening, we return to town and invite MWBC directors, industry and hosting farmers to dinner for further conversations of the day.



*A stop at a seed dealer.*

When we have teams arriving in Bozeman, we spend lengthy time with faculty in MSU's plant sciences department seeing the greenhouses and labs. This usually finds us heading to the Post Farm to see the many varieties under trial.

### **What are the results of our efforts?**

Our stops along a tour at the Montana State Grain Lab, an elevator, or a mill are a bit challenging to account for in ROI (return on investment), albeit certainly these are eye opening for visiting teams from their product quality and operations staff. What we have found, however, is that grower visits make the largest impact. For example, follow-up conversations between the durum or barley contractor and producer have occurred even when a trade team was not able to physically visit the farm. This is good news for barley and durum growers. I call this the "but what if" opportunity. "But what if" we could find market growth to all grains in such non-traditional sales measures?

With spring and winter wheat sales currently handled in the commercial mainstream (more of a B2B relationship) not under direct contract, we lean in with our customers while we visit with them, either here or abroad. In his November report, Kent wrote about buyers' inquiries raised regarding quality and we continuously adjust our slide deck to reflect those interests so that a customer is secure in the advantages of purchasing Montana wheat and barley. We also work closely to align their requests directly to what MSU research is up to, and MSU does a fantastic job inquiring – nonstop – with our customers to ensure they are breeding for that perfect milling or baking outcome.



*Visiting the labs at MSU Plant Sciences.*

### **Sustainability Matters**

Capturing knowledge is exactly what happened during our Constellation Brands visit. We all hear much about sustainability as a buzz word, and sometimes being on the ground "in the moment" sheds more light on just such a topic. In this case, they were very surprised to learn how much of Montana barley production (about 80 percent) is dryland. In their minds, most U.S. barley is irrigated. This discovery turned heads; they are concerned about quality ingredients of course, but water use is near the top of their list for promoting sustainable features of their product lines. As we stood in the field that day, they were thinking about what a label might look like. "Barley grown in Montana using natural rain water" or similar. Here is where Montana wheat and barley might have a leg up, while helping a customer concerned about trending marketing advantages.

### **Wrapping it up**

The cultures of each team are very different from one another, but all appear to have the same response. They are impressed with Montana agriculture and the role of each entity. Above all, they see a window into a farmer: mechanic, electrician, agronomist, financier, risk-taker, operator and family above all. They understand the compassion to feed others, which translates into loyalty to our wheat and barley.