

Idaho farmer touts 'importance of export' as U.S. Wheat chairman

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Idaho Wheat Commission Clark Hamilton, U.S. Wheat Associates chairman and Idaho Wheat Commission board member, is well aware of the importance of exporting American wheat overseas, even though much of the grain he raises on his farm is bound for local milling.

RIRIE, Idaho — Clark Hamilton wants fellow farmers to know how hard U.S. Wheat Associates is working on their behalf.

As chairman of U.S. Wheat, the overseas marketing arm for the industry, Hamilton traveled the globe over the last year. He visited U.S. Wheat offices, attending conferences in Asia and South America and meeting customers, hearing from them about the importance of quality and reliability of America's wheat crop.

"I didn't realize when I first took this on how important U.S. Wheat is to exporting our product," Hamilton said. "It's been a pleasure to learn what they do on behalf of us farmers." Hamilton, 59, raises wheat, barley, potatoes, canola and alfalfa on about 6,000 acres. He farms in Ririe, Idaho, with wife Kristi, sons Jordan and Logan and long-time employee Mitch Landon. His term as chairman ends July 1.

Hamilton joined the Idaho Wheat Commission board in 2015. Prior to that, he served on the Idaho Grain Producers Association for five years.

"He is a dedicated leader who brings unity, wisdom and energy to everything he does," said Jamie Kress, a Rockland, Idaho-area farmer and vice president for the National Association of Wheat Growers. "Clark is passionate about agriculture and the wheat industry has benefited greatly from his service."

"Clark brings a pragmatic perspective to every discussion and puts in the effort to understand all sides of an issue before he makes a decision that will impact farmers," said Britany Hurst Marchant, Idaho Wheat Commission executive director. Hamilton has proven his commitment to keeping Idaho family farms and the wheat industry "viable, profitable and sustainable" across 15 years of service, Hurst Marchant said. "The one thing I think Clark cares about the most is relationships — coming to the table, picking up the phone, having a conversation, listening, sharing and being open to the experiences and perspectives of other people," she said. "That characteristic, probably more than any other, is what has made Clark a valuable and respected leader for many years. He has friends everywhere, he will talk to anyone and he cares about people, and that, ultimately, is what matters most."

Hamilton spoke with the Capital Press by phone Feb. 25. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: Why go through the U.S. Wheat leadership positions?

Hamilton: Idaho is a state that exports about half of its crop. So does the U.S., so we're kind of on the same (page). So I always knew the importance of export. Maybe the irony of that, too, is I'm from east Idaho; not very much of our grain makes it to export, it ends up in local mills. But I know the importance of exporting to our market and whatever happens here. We've got to export this product to keep our industry healthy. That interest alone made me have interest in participating with U.S. Wheat Associates. I'm fortunate, I have a great team at home. My sons are here running the farm. They make it clear to me, I'm not irreplaceable, so I can participate and do this. It's been a great opportunity.

Q: Did you have priorities coming into your year as chairman?

Hamilton: Not really. My main priority was I wanted to come in and learn and listen, and hopefully continue to build on what's been done, as far as building these relationships with our customers.

Q: What is the biggest need you see?

Hamilton: That's a tough one, because I look back and I think of the offices that have been in place over the years. We've seen big changes coming out of Russia. In the 1990s, Russia was an importer, now they're the biggest exporter. I think some of these changes will continue. I think our challenge going forward is to continue to improve our quality. We have two competitors we have to watch pretty closely, that's Canada and Australia. Continuing to compete with those guys is a main focus and something that we need to be aware of. And some things we need to listen to, as far as quality and bringing (that feedback) back to our breeders and evolving to remain competitive.

Q: Tariffs and food aid have been in the news. Any thoughts on those potential trade impacts?

Hamilton: I don't think anybody knows. I hate to speculate on it. We've been through this before in 2016. I felt like it was a short-lived worry, things came out better but then COVID hit us and the world kind of turned upside down. I'm optimistic that if there is negative from these tariffs, it will be short-lived. I'll say that much.

Q: Thoughts on a farm bill?

Hamilton: I don't get too involved with the politics, but the importance of a farm bill is clear. That's part of where (U.S. Wheat's) funding comes from, with the Market Access Program, Foreign Market Development and Regional Agricultural Promotion Program. I just appreciate the work the National Association of Wheat Growers does on behalf of promoting this farm bill. It's important, we need it.

Q: What's your favorite part of farming?

Hamilton: I've been at it a long time. I'm a third-generation farmer, so I grew up not knowing anything different. Not everybody is cut out for production agriculture, in my opinion. We all have to love our way of life, because sometimes the return on investment from a business standpoint can be a little dismal. So what drives this is this way of life, and love for the land and producing things, and also family. We've been a family business and we remain to be so, so that's part of my passion for being in agriculture.

Q: The American Malting Barley Association has reported an "alarming" decline in acreage, down to 1.85 million acres in 2024 from nearly 7 million in 1994. Barley is the biggest part of your operation. Any thoughts?

Hamilton: Some of the industry has felt a little bit of a change in just the overall demand for beer. The younger generation, there are a lot of other choices now, whether it's seltzers or wines. I think we'll feel a little bit of a hit. Anheuser-Busch now is a global company, and it's not Anheuser-Busch, it's InBev. [Belgium-based InBev took over Anheuser-Busch for \$52 billion in 2008.] I think that puts a little different twist on how they buy barley. We're going to compete on the world stage when it comes to our barley prices. That's been a little bit of a change, too. I don't want that to sound negative, it's just a different dynamic. There's other competition out there as far as importing barley.

Q: From a farmer perspective, does barley still make sense? Are you profitable?

Hamilton: Yes. Especially in east Idaho. We still have — well, I'm going to promote it as the best quality in the world. For Anheuser-Busch to get barley, they're going to buy the acres from wheat. So whatever the wheat market does, barley is going to be right there with it.

Q: Thoughts on general costs versus cost of production?

Hamilton: We're not in the best shape right now. Equipment especially, I don't know if we're going to see any relief. We've seen some relief from fertilizer, but these prices have declined and continue to go down. It's not a very profitable time right now. Given conditions in our world, all commodities are going to be more volatile than we've ever seen. I think a grower has to be better prepared to manage the margin and really use risk management, (which is) more important than it's ever been.

Q: When you complete your term, what would make this past year a success for you?

Hamilton: A success for the whole industry, not just me, because we're such a team: If we can look back and say, 'Look, we increased exports,' and we're doing that, exports are up. That's a bit of a function of the market, we know that, but still, the relationship-building and the education ... I can say that (the South American office) has done great things, they've increased the market even to salmon feeding. For me personally, I just want to be a team player. [Use of U.S. hard red spring and soft white wheat to mill flour for salmon feed in southern Chile could reach 220,000 metric tons per year, according to U.S. Wheat. The use of U.S. wheat for this purpose has increased in recent years due to its "superior and unique performance" in feed pellets. "Our primary mission is promoting wheat for human consumption," U.S. Wheat vice president of communications Steve Mercer said. "This is a 'nice to have' market and may help the team there continue promoting multi-customer/multi-cargo loading to help reduce the cost of importing less-than-full vessel loads."]

Q: How does your crop look this year?

Hamilton: A little bit too early to tell. The fall wheat's just starting to show. I'm optimistic that the fall wheat survived the winter and it looks pretty good.

Q: Message to farmers?

Hamilton: Their checkoff dollars they invest to U.S. Wheat and NAWG are well-invested. The people in our overseas offices are working so hard on our behalf. They do great work.