

By Barb Bierman Batie

Midwest Producer

When Dan Hughes takes the helm of the U.S. Wheat Associates (USW) board June 29, he will bring years of experience on county, state and national wheat boards and related organizations to the chairman's role.



Hughes credits his involvement to values shared by his parents and an uncle at an early age. "My parents were active in giving back to the community and instilled in me that desire to serve," he said. "My uncle, Herb Hughes, was instrumental in getting the initial wheat check-off passed in 1955."

A graduate of Venango High School, Hughes received an associate's degree from Northeastern Junior College at Sterling, Colo. He got involved in the then Chase-Dundy County Wheat Growers Association right out of college. "I worked my way through the county, state and national Wheat Growers Associations," he said.

In addition to being USW's chairman-elect, Hughes is a commissioner of the Nebraska Wheat Board and served as its chairman from 2008 to 2010. He also served a stint on the national ethanol board and locally spent 12 years on the Perkins County School Board.

Hughes grew up in northwest Chase County and is the third generation to operate the family farm. He raises irrigated corn, wheat, dry edible beans and pinto beans, as well as dryland millet, corn, wheat and sunflowers.

His operation includes hard red winter wheat for domestic use and export and his family also raises irrigated hard white wheat for the whole grain market under contract for ConAgra.

With the variety of crops under cultivation, Hughes is pleased that both of his children have been able to return to the farm and become the fourth generation of Hughes on the land. Daughter and son-in-law, Ashley and Tim Coglazier, along with son, Tyler and his wife, Ellen, farm some ground individually, as well as with the family corporation.

One challenge Hughes noted he would face during his year as chairman is the current popularity of a gluten-free diet. While he acknowledges there are people with serious diet considerations such as celiac sprue disease, many are chucking wheat products because media hype associates eating wheat with obesity.

"I liken it to a fad. Wheat is not what is making people fat, it's an issue of portion control. In France they eat twice as much wheat as we do and their obesity rate is half of the U.S. Likewise, Italians eat three times as much wheat and their obesity rate is one-third of our average."

Another sensitive issue in the wheat industry is whether to adopt genetically enhanced hybrids, said Hughes. "Currently there aren't any GMO hybrids, but a few companies are researching those options. There is no question in my mind that we'll need to have some genetically enhanced wheat to feed the world's growing population."

Hughes' involvement in the commodity groups has allowed him to travel extensively to promote U.S. wheat. "I've been blessed to have the opportunity to travel to several continents," he said.

Because USW is the wheat industry's market development organization, most of his travels deal with buyers of U.S. wheat, as well as millers and bakers, as they bring supplies,

information and training to USW customers in more than 100 countries.

“Generally the United States is the largest exporter of wheat in the world, unfortunately we are generally a residual supplier,” said Hughes.

This is because the cost of shipping wheat to some of the world's biggest wheat customers - Middle Eastern and Pacific Rim countries - is so high. “This is an obstacle, as we certainly have the best quality wheat in the world, but because of the distances involved we are higher priced than the world market. So part of what USW does is help people in other countries understand how they can blend that high quality product with the wheat they have and improve both their product and bottom line.”

In his travels Hughes has learned some interesting things about international politics. “Most of the wheat around the world is purchased by governments. Egypt is the world's largest importer of wheat. The Egyptian government subsidizes wheat to keep the masses fed for pennies. Ironically, Egyptian livestock producers figured out this made cheap livestock feed, so about half of the subsidized bread in Egypt is fed to livestock.”

The weeks leading up to USW's annual summer board meeting in Rapid City, S.D., will be busy for Hughes and other wheat association leaders.

He will join a team traveling to Mexico mid-May to meet with millers and bakers promoting hard white wheat and the first week in June his family will host a trade team from Nigeria at their farm as part of that team's U.S. trip visiting wheat farmers and agricultural research facilities.

Whether hosting international guests at home or spending time in U.S. wheat customer's countries, Hughes notes he has discovered people are more alike than different.

“I've found worldwide that basically all people want is a good job and the ability to feed their family three squares (meals) a day,” and that is the mission he hopes USW can fulfill.