By Russ Pankonin
The Imperial Republican

When it comes to talking wheat, the Hughes family name remains one of those names synonymous with wheat production in southwest Nebraska.

And like family before him, Chase County farmer Dan Hughes of Venango continues to promote wheat production, both in the U.S. and abroad.

In early December, Hughes traveled to Abu Dhabi in United Arab Emirates to extol the virtues of all U.S. varieties of wheat to the International Association of Operative Millers.

The conference drew many African and Middle Eastern wheat buyers, he noted.

Hughes said people would be surprised at the amount of U.S. wheat consumed in those countries. In fact, Nigeria is the largest buyer of U.S. hard red winter wheat in the region.

Egypt is the largest buyer of wheat in the world. They use it for a flat-bread product, which is then provided to the citizenry by the government.

Hughes travels on behalf of U.S. Wheat Associates and presently serves as vice-chair of the national entity.

For the past seven years, Hughes has served on the board of directors of the Nebraska Wheat Board. The Wheat Board is the entity that administers wheat check-off funds in Nebraska.

On Oct. 1, 2012, state law changed how the check-off is collected. The new formula calls for collecting 4/10th of 1 percent of the per-bushel price at which the wheat is sold.

Funds from the check-off are used to promote wheat both domestically and internationally.

To Become Chairman

As one of four officers of U.S. Wheat Associates, he represents a 19-state organization of wheat-producing states who elected him to the position.

He serves as the vice chair and will become chair of the board in July, 2013.

U. S. Wheat Associates promotes all of the six different classes of wheat grown, including winter and spring varieties of red, white and durum.

When stumping for U.S. wheat, Hughes' mission is to assure the quality of the pro-duct, the availability of stable supplies and price transparency.

Hughes touts the fact that the U.S. does not use wheat as an embargo tool when sanctioning countries.

In addition, U.S. contract law governs the sale of wheat and insures buyers they are protected.

He also promotes the quality of the product which is maintained by strict grading standards.

He said these standards of quality also insure the buyer that the U.S. product will meet or exceed the buyer's specifications.

His job is to convince buyers that U.S. wheat is the best product in the market for their needs.

Hughes served on a panel at the conference, updating buyers on the quality of the 2012 crop.

During his time with U.S. Wheat Associates, he has traveled to South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Peru, Columbia and Ecuador on behalf of American producers.

U.S. Largest Wheat Exporter

While the U.S. remains the largest exporter of wheat, China and India are the largest producers of wheat. However, much of their production is consumed domestically.

Presently, Mexico and Japan represent the biggest buyers of American wheat.

The Mexican-based Bimbo is the largest baker in the U.S. and the world. In 2010, they acquired the baker, Sara Lee.

Nebraska ranks around 10th in wheat production in the U.S. with Kansas and North Dakota at the top.

Domestic Promotion

Hughes also works to protect wheat domestically.

Wheat has come under increasing pressure on gluten-free and dietary issues.

Granted, some people are allergic to gluten, a protein found in wheat-based foods, Hughes noted.

But some food writers and authors promote that wheat in the diet leads to obesity and should be totally removed from the diet.

However, research by the U.S. Wheat Foods Council indicates that wheat-based foods is not a factor in obesity in the U.S.

Wheat consumption per capita in the U.S. is down 16 pounds since 1997 while obesity continues to climb.

The council noted the French eat almost twice as much wheat as Americans (110kg/per capita compared to 60 kg in the U.S.) and have an obesity rate of 17 percent compared to our 36 percent. Italians eat three times as much wheat (148 kg/per capita) and have a 9 percent obesity rate.

“It is a stretch to blame wheat for the obesity epidemic in the country,” said Judi Adams, MS, RD with the Wheat Foods Council.

U.S. Wheat Associates also arranges foreign trade missions to the U.S. so buyers can see where their wheat comes from, and how.

That creates a person-to-person relationship that is beneficial down the road, Hughes noted.

While on his visit to Abu Dhabi, he saw a member of a Yemen trade mission that came to Nebraska several years ago.

During the Yemen trip, Ellen Leibbrandt, an intern for the Nebraska Wheat Board, helped coordinate their activities in Nebraska.

The man remembered Ellen well. Hughes was proud to tell him that she is now his daughter-in-law, married to his son, Tyler, who has returned to join the family farming operation.