When the subject of agriculture comes up the focus usually starts with corn. It is the price of corn or the genetic modification of corn, ethanol (food vs. fuel), trade or the regulatory process here in the US and its synchronization with other countries. Just last month, the US-China trade talks centered on China’s arbitrary rejection of US corn. The agriculture conversation may then expand to include soybeans, cotton or animal agriculture. Rarely, however, does the conversation include wheat. Have you noticed?

Wheat remains both the most overlooked commodity produced in the US and, at the same time, the staff of life.

The United States is a major wheat-producing country, exceeded only by China, the European Union, and India. Wheat ranks third among U.S. field crops in both planted acreage and gross
farm receipts, behind corn and soybeans. The total value of the wheat crop in 2012 was approximately $18 billion, most of which was winter wheat. In fiscal 2012, total US agricultural exports reached $135.8 billion, supporting 1 million jobs for U.S. farmers and ranchers. The US is consistently the world’s largest wheat exporter, exporting almost half of the U.S. wheat crop. In 2010, wheat exports contributed $5.9 billion to the U.S. economy. We are, literally, the world’s breadbasket.

Wheat is the principal grain produced for human consumption in the United States, grown in 42 states. In the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s, world wheat consumption continued to expand in response to rising incomes and the expanding world population.

Wheat accounts for 20% of all the calories consumed worldwide, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization. While there are more than 50,000 edible plants, most of the human population lives on a diet of wheat, rice and maize, along with roots and tubers (including cassava), soybeans, sorghum and animal products. The relative importance changes with geography. "In Africa, wheat is most important in Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania and Rwanda and seed research is being conducted in Ethiopia" said Dr. Joe DeVries with the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa. In 2011, wheat comprised 46% of all U.S. food aid donations; worldwide food aid donations were 40% wheat.

Wheat accounts for 20% of all calories consumed worldwide. FAO
Our major wheat producing states tend to be Kansas, North Dakota, Montana, Oklahoma, Washington and South Dakota. Each of these states produces over 100,000,000 bushels, averaging 47 bushels per acre. We produce all 6 classes of wheat and can export all 6, making us a unique and reliable supplier.

Over 160,000 farms in the United States produce wheat with a total production of 2.2 billion bushels. The National Association of Wheat Growers serves as the national advocacy organization for wheat farmers composed of 22 different state wheat grower associations.

Wheat is essentially a grass that can be traced back to the cradle of civilization. Within the US, wheat was first planted in 1777 and one of the first Americans to plant wheat was George Washington. Disappointed by the returns he was getting on tobacco, Washington experimented with different cereal grains and then selected wheat as his major cash crop.

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans urges all Americans to “Consume 3 or more ounce-equivalents of whole grain products, per day with the rest of the recommended grains coming from enriched or whole-grain products. In general, at least half of the grains should come from whole grains.” Unfortunately, as was noted recently by Dr. Joanne Slavin on behalf of the Grain Chain, only 12% of grain consumption is currently in the form of whole grains. So, we have a ways to go in this area.

Is wheat the staff of life? The facts are compelling. Research into, and commercialization of, new and improved varieties of wheat must continue, in the spirit of Dr. Norman Borlaug and Edgar McFadden of South Dakota State University. (McFadden developed Hope Wheat which gave Dr. Borlaug the basis for his historic research and the Green Revolution.) Later this month, the Borlaug Summit on Wheat for Food Security will be held in Mexico; in the fall, SDSU will host the inaugural McFadden Symposium. It would be very helpful if Congress considered forming a Wheat Caucus to focus on wheat research, trade and other issues that are important to the production and promotion of wheat.

Historically, the amount of funding dedicated to wheat research has been dwarfed by the funding dedicated to the other major crops. Increasing public and private research in wheat is important to sustaining a world population expected to reach 9 billion by 2050.

Mark Gaede, a long time Farm Hand on the Potomac at the National Association of Wheat Growers passed away on Christmas Eve at 60. He is fondly remembered and will be missed.

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