

Wheat checkoff increase means boost in research

By PAULA MOHR

FUTURE wheat industry growth and research investment is in the hands of 4,000 Minnesota wheat growers.

As *The Farmer* went to press, wheat growers were scheduled to vote Dec. 10 and 11 at the 2008 Prairie Grains Conference in Grand Forks on a proposal to change the wheat checkoff calculation, which hasn't changed since it was initiated 30 years ago.

The proposed change — basing the checkoff on net market value rather than volume — would boost annual revenues for the Minnesota Association of Wheat Growers from \$939,000 to just over \$2.5 million. Of that projected new revenue for 2010, based on \$6 wheat, 66% or nearly \$1.7 million would be spent on research.

Within the next 15 years, the spring wheat research goal is to increase yields by 27%, or 12 bushels per acre.

The Farmer asked Bryan Hest, MAWG president, and Jim Anderson, University of Minnesota wheat breeder, about the proposed checkoff and its implications for the state's wheat industry.

Why hasn't wheat kept pace with corn and soybean yield increases over the past few decades?

Hest: Wheat relies mostly on public wheat breeding programs for variety development. About 60% of the wheat acres planted in Minnesota have come from a public breeding program, which depends on funding from federal, state and checkoff sources.

Federal funding is declining, state funding is flat to declining, and checkoff dollars have been declining. On top of the actual funding cuts, 30 years of inflation have reduced the value of research dollars.

What is the average bushel-per-

acre yield for Minnesota wheat?

Hest: The average 15-year yields from 1994 to 2008 were 43 bushels per acre for spring wheat in Minnesota.

Why are you proposing to change the checkoff from volume-based to net market value?

Hest: A percent of the net market value provides an opportunity for the organization to increase its dollars and make it an equitable program with the growers. Wheat prices vary from year to year and region to region.

With the value-based checkoff, growers will invest less as the price of wheat declines, and the investment increases as market prices increase. It makes sense that growers are more willing to invest more when the price and total revenues are higher.

The infusion of potential research dollars is huge — going from \$298,000 to nearly \$1.7 million per year. What are the immediate research priorities for the next three to five years?

Hest: The increase in funding will help Dr. Jim Anderson double the capacity of the University of Minnesota breeding programs to deliver higher-yielding wheat varieties. Beyond that, there will be investment in a research program that develops higher-yielding wheat that fits into an intensive wheat management program.

We are also discussing the potential to help fund a regional winter wheat breeding program. Winter wheat is being planted on more acres in Minnesota, because it has been providing higher yield potential in some areas of the state. If funds are available, we would also look into funding additional production research and collaborating with other regional breeding programs that work closely with the U-M wheat breeding program.

What are the research priorities over the next decade?

Hest: Throughout the next decade, we will continue to focus our research



on increasing yield and disease management.

In addition to expanding the initial research, we will be collaborating and assisting others with regional winter wheat breeding programs. Dr. Anderson



ANDERSON

is currently using molecular markers to make his breeding program more efficient. This technology is being used by corn and soybean breeders to increase yields by 40% in the next 10 years. We may have to invest in this new

technology as it becomes available.

Any additional researchers and staff to be hired?

Anderson: The University of Minnesota's research program has several qualified employees, graduate and doctorate students. Expanding the number of breeding crosses and evaluation locations will take additional researchers. We would plan to hire an assistant researcher in Crookston to assist with the additional seven plot locations. There would also be a need for technicians, equipment and land.

What is the proposed U-M "parallel breeding program" that would develop high-yielding varieties for use in intensive disease management?

Anderson: Many growers are consistently using a fungicide to control scab, and this fungicide application will control leaf rust. Since leaf rust resistance is a constraint in the breeding program for higher yields, it makes sense to offer growers a variety that may offer higher yields with the fungicides they are using.

To date, we have not released varieties that do not have strong resistance to leaf rust. With this new strategy, we would advance and release high-yielding varieties that would rely on fungicides to control leaf rust instead of building in resistance to leaf rust.

Will the southern Minnesota wheat growers' group receive any research funds?

Hest: Yes, wheat growers throughout the state and through the southern portion of Minnesota will benefit from current and new wheat variety development. As the number of wheat acres increases in southern Minnesota, we are developing more research and outreach programs for that area.

If approved, the checkoff calculation would go into effect July 1, 2009. The volume-based checkoff collected 1 cent per bushel. The proposed value-based checkoff would collect on the net sales price at 50 cents for every \$100 of sales.



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