

[Home](#)[About](#)[Departments](#)[News & Events](#)

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Western Washington Bakers Interested in Using Local Grain

MOUNT VERNON, Wash.—Wheat growers west of the Cascades could bring in more profit by supplying wheat to local bakers, according to the results of a recent survey conducted by Washington State University graduate researcher Karen Hills. Sixty percent of western Washington commercial bakers said they are interested in purchasing locally sourced wheat and flour for their products. Those bakers presently use 5 million pounds of non-local flour annually.

“For the world of grain on the west side, that’s a significant number,” said Hills, based out of the WSU Mount Vernon Northwestern Washington Research and Extension Center. “As the local grain movement goes forward, this will be useful information for growers to know about what bakers are looking for. I want this information to further the local grain movement on this side of the state.”



WSU graduate researcher Karen Hills. Click image for a high-resolution version. Photo: Brian Clark/Washington State University.

In Washington, agricultural communities usually rely on large commodity supply chains for marketing their crops, especially small grains, Hills said. In addition, wheat is primarily grown as a rotation crop in northwestern Washington counties, with



little economic return for growers. Yet the region’s consumers are passionate about eating locally grown food. West side commercial bakers not only supply a means for getting local grain to consumers, but they also serve as one measure of consumer interest. Ironically, most of these bakers must order organic wheat and flour from outside their region.

“The local food movement here made sense to study, but so much of the research on local foods was geared toward produce and livestock,” she said. “Local grain production and bakers’ perspectives about it hadn’t been explored. So I thought they would be a good addition.”

Hills said she also wanted to learn what bakers were most concerned about when considering future purchases of regionally produced flour, what the barriers would be for using it and what they considered “local.” She and Jessica Goldberger, a WSU rural sociologist in Pullman, developed a questionnaire to obtain the information, as well as demographics about bakery locations, distribution, percentage of sales direct to customers and whether flour was milled on-site.

Last March, Hills surveyed more than 250 commercial bakers from 19 counties west of the Cascade Mountains, with 73 completing the questionnaire. Surveyed bakers were required to live in western Washington, purchase flour or wheat berries, and produce a broad range of bread and pastries. Eliminated from the pool were bakeries that are part of large national chains or that sell cakes, cupcakes, donuts or pies exclusively.

While 60 percent of the respondents were interested in purchasing wheat or flour from western Washington, 36 percent indicated they didn’t know, which Hills said she wasn’t surprised to see. Only 3 percent answered no.

“There’s a lot of uncertainty because (local) wheat and flour are not widely available at this point,” she said. “That came through in other parts of the survey.”

Surveyed bakers listed consistency of flour quality, quality of flour, a reliable supply, price and flavor as their top five factors in purchasing regionally produced wheat and flour in the future. The top five barriers that would prevent them from doing so were cost, availability/quantity, suppliers/delivery, quality (gluten and protein content), and climate.

“Some of these factors would be greatly affected by the scale of flour processing and become more favorable for the bakers as the volume of western Washington flour processing increased,” Hills noted.



Home

About

Departments

News & Events

Center for
Transformational Learning
& Leadership ↗



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Asked to define “local” wheat, 43 percent of bakers answered wheat grown within state boundaries, but Hills said she also received a wide spectrum of responses, ranging from within the Pacific Northwest to a specific county.



Wheat trial growing at the WSU Mount Vernon Northwestern Washington Research and Extension Center. Click image for a high-resolution version. Photo: Brian Clark/Washington State University

Hills’s research also ties in with the work of her adviser, a wheat geneticist at and director of the WSU NWREC, Stephen Jones. He is working with local growers to bring back a once-prolific west side wheat growing heritage. Jones and others have identified 163 wheat varieties grown in the Pacific

Northwest between the 1840s and 1955. They are crossing these historical varieties with modern ones to come up with wheat breeds best suited for growing in wet, cool coastal climates and conditions that can also resist diseases, compete with weeds and produce high yields.

To showcase these efforts and spark more interest in local grain systems, WSU NWREC hosted the inaugural Kneading Conference West Sept. 15–17, which drew 250 participants from 15 states and two Canadian provinces to attend workshops on baking, milling, farming, and malting. Jones and Hills were presenters at the conference, and Hills discussed her survey findings on a panel for small-scale grain growing that also included bakery owners.

“It’s not that we can’t grow grains here,” Hills said. “We have so many options for growing food here. There’s an excitement around rejuvenating a tradition that was important here 100 years ago and reclaiming something that was lost.”

For more information about the WSU NWREC plant breeding program, visit plantbreeding.wsu.edu.



Home

About

Departments

News & Events

Center for
Transformational Learning
& Leadership ↗



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