

Colorado Chapter Summer Ag Tour “Grain to Glass...and a Little Grass”

On July 20 and 21, the Colorado Chapter held their Ag Tour and Marketing Meeting in Greeley, Colorado. The Colorado and Kansas RLI chapters have made this an annual event the last few years and both chapters were well represented. The tour was hosted by Kirk Goble, ALC from Greeley, assisted by Tom Rainbolt of American Ag Credit in Greeley, a long time RLI sponsor. There were 35 participants representing 5 states. Kirk's stated goal was to “show off Weld County agriculture!”

Weld County is the top producing agricultural county in Colorado at about \$1.9 billion/year and is consistently ranked in the top 6 ag counties in the country. Additionally, Weld County is the top oil and gas producing county in Colorado and the area's early settlers were influential in establishing western water law and development of irrigation systems.

The tour started at the Colorado Model Railroad Museum, the largest model railroad layout in the world, with introductions and a preview of the day's activities. After a light breakfast and a chance to see the museum, everyone boarded a bus for the remainder of the day.

First spot to drive by was Leprino Food's newest mozzarella cheese plant located in Greeley. The \$275M facility supports the local dairy industry and will produce 2.9 billion pounds of cheese per year. If you've eaten pizza, you've had Leprino cheese, as they are the largest mozzarella producer in the world.

Next stop was at Fritzier Farm's Scream Acres to view a large “agri-tainment” venture that supplements and sometime exceeds farm income from a fall corn maze that features many activities and supports over 300 seasonal employees.

The tour passed the JBS Gilcrest feedlot (60,000 head) to view large scale beef production. JBS is one of the largest meat and livestock companies in the world. They have a large presence in Weld County with 2 feed yards (60,000 head and 100,000 head), beef and sheep processing plants, and a transportation company. The Brazilian based company's U.S. headquarters is located in Greeley.

The next stop was at Binder Farms in Milliken to meet with Coors Agronomist Levi Walker to see a field of malting barley. He explained the Coors Brewery barley growing requirements and treated the group to a morning “snack,” courtesy of Molson-Coors Brewing.

On to Windsor, Colorado to visit G5 Hops farm. Owner Jeremy Gourd explained their goal of raising locally grown hops to support the Colorado craft beer industry. After G5, the bus traveled to Island Grove Regional Park in Greeley, home of the Greeley Independence Rodeo and the Colorado Farm Show. A quick box lunch and then on to the afternoon session.

The tour drove past the JBS Beef Plant in Greeley where about 5,000 head of cattle a day are processed into steaks and burgers to supply supermarkets and restaurants across the country. Colorado is also the top lamb feeding and processing state. All the Weld County JBS operations were formerly Monfort of Colorado.

Next up was a stop at Fagerberg Farms to see large scale farm drip irrigation systems. Farm manager Rod Weimer explained the setup, costs, and benefits of drip irrigation which results in greatly increased irrigation efficiency for their onions and other

produce crops.

As the bus toured Weld County, the group also saw and heard about sugar beets, dry beans, corn, onions, lettuce, alfalfa, and other crops, as well as the beef, dairy, and lamb operations that contribute to the diversity of Weld County agriculture.

Tour attendees were then treated to a stop at Great Western Dairy, a 3,600-head operation owned by Casey DeHaan. Casey showcased their 80-cow rotary milking parlor where the group could observe a modern, automated dairy operation up close. The cows enter a revolving carousel to be milked 3 times a day. Colorado is 3rd in the U.S. in milk production and Weld County has over 60,000 cows to support the industry. Throughout the day, attendees could also clearly see the impact of the oil and natural gas industry in Weld County and its integration and impacts to agriculture. The group observed drilling rigs, well head equipment, and the many trucks required by the industry. Weld County is 4,000 square miles in size and contains more oil and gas wells than Saudi Arabia.

Next stop: Industrial Hemp. Passage of Amendment 64 in 2012 legalized cannabis in Colorado for adult recreational consumption; the amendment also legalized industrial hemp under a program administered by the Colorado Department of Agriculture. Colorado Cultivars is the largest industrial hemp farm in the U.S., at over 1,000 acres. Our host was Colorado Cultivar's Damian Farris along with the farm owner, Tyler Dyer. Damian told about the 50,000 uses of the hemp plant, current markets, issues and conflicts with Federal law, and how their operation is vertically integrated through contracting, planting, harvesting, processing, and marketing. There was much interest from the group and lots of good questions about this burgeoning alternative crop. Also, a popular photography spot.

Our last stop after a 90+ degree day was at Weldwerks Brewing Company in Greeley. Colorado is the top beer producing state in the U.S., with large brewers Molson-Coors and AB-InBev Budweiser, together with 384 craft breweries, and growing. Weldwerks was named Best New Brewery in the U.S. for 2016 by USA Today and they have amassed many top brewing awards and medals since their opening. Hosts Kristen Popcheff, Ethan Schneider, Trey Weatherwax, and their brewhouse and taproom staff provided a tour of the brewery and the group enjoyed tasting the wide variety of award winning craft beers created at Weldwerks.

Participants agreed that the tour lived up to its moniker, "Grain to Glass...and a Little Grass," and all went away with newfound knowledge and appreciation for our ag producers.

Friday featured a morning meeting with participants from several states describing their markets, RLI chapter development, and a chance to market some property listings. All in all, the tour and meeting was a great success. As a bonus, Colorado licensees received 6 hours of CE credit for the tour day!

The tour and program could not have happened without the effort and support of our valued sponsors: American Ag Credit, Farm Credit of Southern Colorado, Lands of America Land Magazine, and Bart Miller, Managing Broker of Mason & Morse Ranch Company. Big thanks also to the "Organizer in Chief" - Colorado Chapter Administrator, Maggie Thomas.

by Kirk Goble, ALC