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We'll be all-white despite US push

By PETER HEMPHILL

AUSTRALIA has little to fear from the US switching to producing white wheat, a US plant breeder says.

Syngenta senior development manager Rollie Sears said the US would never be able to produce enough hard white wheat to export to traditional Australian markets in large quantities.

AWB (International) Limited has sent alarm bells ringing in Australia in recent years over increasing production of white wheat by the US.

Australia has traditionally been a supplier of white wheat, and the US has focused on hard red wheat.

Dr Sears said Kansas State University, where he spent most of his plant breeding career, began a white wheat breeding program in 1975.

But it was a slow development program, and it was not until 1990 when the university released its first varieties.

Dr Sears said if hard white and hard red wheat had the same quality characteristics, millers would always opt for the white grain over red because of superior flour yields.

He said millers were able to mill closer to the seed coat in white wheat than in red wheat.

But red wheat had quality and production advantages over white wheat.

One drawback of white wheat was its susceptibility to pre-harvest sprouting, Dr Sears said.

''If Australia can reduce the issue of pre-harvest sprouting, then you will make a big advance in the overall marketability of the crop,'' he said.

US white wheat has a sweeter and nuttier taste than red wheat. Red wheat is more bitter, due to the tannins which give the grain its red colour.

But Dr Sears said hard white wheat had higher fibre and natural vitamin contents and a low glycaemic index, a measure of the sugar level in the grain.

The US baking industry has suffered a downturn in recent years, mainly because of the Atkins diet.

It is only beginning to regain lost ground.

''Now, US baking companies and millers are increasingly interested in white wheat as 100 per cent whole grain products,'' he said.

Dr Sears said the US Wheat Associates were hoping the US could produce enough white wheat to supply overseas buyers all year.

There was a growing customer base in Mexico and South America, he said.

''But our domestic millers will buy 75 per cent of the extra production,'' he said.

''And they will pick the best of the market.

''We do compete with Australian hard white wheats in the Middle East.

''But it's going to be a fairly long time before Australian markets are impacted by hard white wheats from the US.''

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