Elevator Operators Await Word on Grain Rail Service

By PAT McGRAW
Denver Post Agriculture Writer

East-central Colorado grain-elevator operators were still waiting Tuesday for word on whether the Interstate Commerce Commission will approve rail service for the area. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of bushels of wheat is being stored in the open for want of transportation to market.

Rod Rawson, president and general manager of Plains Grain Co. of Burlington, said rain which fell there Monday night and Tuesday morning added to the problem. The 30,000 bushels stored near his elevators could begin to sprout.

But snow could cause real problems, according to Rawson and elevator operators in Arriba and Seibert. The piles of wheat have developed crusts during the three months or so they have been stored outside, and rain runs off that. However, snow sticks to the wheat and melts slowly,permeating the grain and ruining it.

JOHN DOLAN of the Colorado Highway Department's planning office said he was told Tuesday that a decision on whether to accept the Burlington Northern Railroad's offer to operate wheat trains between Seibert and Gem, Kan., on rails formerly occupied by the bankrupt Rock Island Railroad, would be handed down Thursday or before by the Interstate Commerce Commission.

About 116 miles of track is involved, and the Union Pacific Railroad has been running trains on 41.5 miles of it between Colby, Kan., and Caruso, Kan. Union Pacific has indicated that it doesn't want to serve the entire length, but has also said it will cede its portion of the track to the Burlington, which is willing to run the entire route.

Essentially, Dolan said, the situation is the same as it has been since midsummer. The ICC keeps saying, "Well, next week, well next week, well next week," when asked when a decision will be handed down, Dolan said.

Since the Union Pacific has indicated its willingness to get out of the picture, the only remaining problem in getting grain trains rolling is satisfying the officials presiding over the Rock Island bankruptcy that they are getting a fair deal for the use of the track. That shouldn't be too hard to resolve, Dolan said.

HE REPORTED that he is trying to reach another arrangement for transporting grain from Limon west. Limon and Seibert neighbor each other, but there is a railroad bridge which needs repairs between them, and no one seems willing to spend the $150,000 that is needed. So grain on the west side of the bridge would have to be shipped west, and grain on the east side would have to go east.

Dolan said he estimated that about 800,000 bushels of wheat was being stored outside in Colorado three weeks ago, but he presumes some of that has been trucked out, which was confirmed by the three elevator operators.

The problem will become more complicated in a month or so when other crops — mainly corn — need the storage space now occupied by the wheat.