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Contributed by Tim Alexander
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For Central Illinois Farmers & Rural Dwellers
By Tim Alexander for the News Bulletin

A-Way Grain Saga Ends in Prison Sentences

PEORIA - Lengthy prison sentences were handed down by both federal and state judges last week to the former president of A-Way Grain, Inc., and his wife, after the couple plead guilty to charges including felony theft, money laundering, bank fraud, embezzlement by a bank employee and two felony violations of the Illinois Grain Code.

Mikel Freeman, 57, and Dianne Freeman, 57, of Milford, Illinois were sentenced to federal prison terms on Monday, September 21 in Peoria's federal courthouse by U.S. District Judge Joe Billy McDade. The couple were also ordered to pay \$4,839,858 in restitution to victims of the fraud scheme. The Freemans plead guilty in April to the charges, admitting they participated in a money laundering conspiracy involving \$11 million that resulted in losses of nearly \$5 million by A-Way Grain, Inc. and its stockholders, two central Illinois banks, the Illinois Grain Insurance Fund and others.

As part of the federal sentencing, Mikel Freeman, who owned and operated A-Way Grain, an employee-owned grain company with elevators in Crescent City and Onarga, must serve 120 months in prison. Dianne Freeman was sentenced to 97 months in prison. Over \$2.8 million was used from the Illinois Grain Insurance Fund to cover losses suffered by A-Way's grain depositors. Stuart Selinger, IDOA Bureau of Warehouses chief, said the Freemans were ordered to make restitution to the fund.

"Within the federal sentencing the Freemans were ordered to pay \$4.8 million in restitution; of that amount \$2.85 million is for (reimbursement of) the Illinois Grain Insurance Fund," said Selinger, adding that the couple was ordered to surrender "50 percent of their disposable income" for restitution once they are released from prison. "The (IDOA) is happy to finally bring this situation to fruition through the sentencing of the individuals involved, and we hope that it demonstrates that we take seriously pursuing any individuals that misuse the public trust and defraud Illinois grain producers," Selinger said during a phone conversation last week. The state's sentence-- against Mikel Freeman only-- will run concurrently with the federal sentence, said Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan.

IDOA Announces Grain Inventory Program

SPRINGFIELD - A pilot program that could lead to grain elevators conducting their own monthly grain inventories was recently revealed by the Illinois Dept. of Agriculture (IDOA). Their Grain Inventory Accountability Pilot Program is intended to produce a more accurate accounting of both the quality and quantity of stored grain, according to an IDOA news release. IDOA director Tom Jennings said the department believes the implementation of the program will result in tighter control over stored grain. "It will provide timely, historical grain inventory data and serve as a powerful tool that the Illinois grain warehousing industry, the (IDOA), licensees, auditors and lenders all will benefit from," Jennings stated.

Elevators participating in the program will be required to conduct monthly grain measurements for entry into an ExamNet software program. They also must maintain a monthly measurement archive as well as suggest changes and report problems with the system to the IDOA. Around 20 elevators have agreed to participate in the pilot program and have been equipped with the software program. Those elevators-- and others who wish to participate-- are trained in how to record and archive data by the IDOA. Grain elevator operators wanting to learn more about the program should call Stuart Selinger, IDOA chief of warehouses, at (217) 782-2172.

Grain to Flourish After Another Late Planting Year?

BLOOMINGTON - More and more experts are agreeing that for a second consecutive year, farmers should reap large grain harvests despite late and staggered planting of crops. USDA predicts Illinois farmers will harvest 2.17 billion bushels of corn, with an average yield of 179 bushels per acre. Illinois soybean farmers can expect to harvest around 398.2 million bushels, with an average yield of 44 bu./acre, according to USDA projections. However, this year's late crop plantings-- which occurred because of record-setting, early-season rainfall amounts throughout much of the state-- could set harvest back until nearly Thanksgiving in some areas, said Kim Holsapple, grain department manager for Total Grain Marketing. "As strung out as planting was, I expect harvest to be even more strung out," he said.

"We've got the potential for a big one," added Bruce Bastert, first vice president of the Illinois Grain and Feed Association. (Ill. Farm Bureau News Service)

State Commodity Conference Set for November 24

BLOOMINGTON - The annual Illinois Commodity Conference has been scheduled for Tuesday, November 24 at the DoubleTree Hotel and Conference Center in Bloomington, from 7:30 a.m. until 3:30 p.m. The conference represents a

great opportunity for members of different state commodity groups to come together each year to learn from experts, swap ideas and discuss agricultural issues, according to Ron Moore, chairman of the Illinois Soybean Association. "The agenda is packed with knowledgeable speakers who will share information that is relevant to today's producers," said Moore. "It's a great opportunity for livestock and grain producers to build relationships that foster growth for the entire agriculture industry." Rob Elliott, president of the Illinois Corn Growers Association (ICGA), said he's looking forward to hearing a presentation by John Carter, a Brazilian farmer, on his ideas on indirect land use and the impact the biofuels industry is truly having on Brazilian rain forests. "I suspect (Carter) will have a lot of valuable insights for Illinois growers," said Elliott. For registration information or more details on the conference, call Nicole Branum at (309) 557-3343. A brochure may be downloaded from the ICGA's website, www.ilcorn.org. (ICGA news)

Illinois Farm Fact:

The total sales value of Illinois' grains, oilseeds, dry beans and dry peas was \$10,257,765,000, ranking first in the U.S., according to the 2007 Census of Agriculture.

(Tim Alexander is a freelance reporter who writes agriculture, news and feature articles for News Bulletin, Farm World and many other publications. He is the recipient of the Illinois Corn Growers Association's (ICGA) 2008 Excellence in Print Media Award.)