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Thomas J. Hammond, CEO of Columbia Grain and 'grain merchant,' dies



By [The Oregonian](#)

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Thomas J. Hammond, longtime chief executive of Portland-based exporter Columbia Grain, died Thursday in Portland after a sudden illness. He was 60.

Hammond was head of [the grain export company](#) since 2000, and involved in the company's management since its very beginning in 1978. At Columbia Grain, a subsidiary of Japanese trading company [Marubeni Corp.](#), he led a company responsible for nearly 15 percent of all U.S. wheat exports.

"This was a big shock to all of us. Columbia Grain was one of the most important players in the U.S. grain industry," said Bill Wyatt, executive director of the [Port of Portland](#), where the company leases the land under its towering North Portland grain silos.

Hammond, who was raised in Florida, got his start in the grain business in Iowa. With a freshly-minted master's of business administration from Vanderbilt University, he joined Cook Industries and was shortly thereafter transferred to Portland. That company sold its Portland grain export to Marubeni, which formed Columbia Grain.

For most of his life Hammond introduced himself to others as "a grain merchant," said his wife, Cheryl Hammond, even as he rose through the ranks of the company.

"He wouldn't ever say, 'I'm president of and CEO of a company,'" Cheryl Hammond said. "He'd say, 'I'm a grain merchant.' It really is a very old profession, and it's a very honorable profession. People don't understand how the bread gets on the table."

He was also an advocate for American exports and traveled the world to promote American products.

Hammond traveled frequently to Japan, where Columbia's corporate parent was based, and where the Northwest's soft white wheat exports are extremely popular for their use in noodles.

"Tom was an extraordinary leader," Wyatt said. "He understood the Japanese way of doing business so well and so efficiently."

Wyatt, along with Gov. John Kitzhaber and others were in Tokyo several months ago on a trade mission. They dined with the head of Marubeni's food division, an executive described by Wyatt as "a very significant

fellow."

"He said he thought Tom was more Japanese than he was," Wyatt said, recounting the executive's remark. "The differences in style and approach between U.S. and Japanese business people is considerable. It's extraordinary that someone of such stature would recognize Tom for being able to operate so successfully in both worlds."

Hammond is survived by his wife of 33 years; his son, Robert Hammond; and his daughter, Katherine Hammond. His brother, Kenneth Hammond, died earlier.

A celebration of life for family, friends and business associates will be held March 9.

-- [Elliot Njus](#) and [Dana Tims](#)

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