

Company officials weigh options after fire destroys fresh potato facility

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

UCON, Idaho — Company officials are considering their options after a Dec. 26 fire destroyed the Snake River Plains Potatoes packing facility that employed about 65 workers.

Dave Beesely, a Rigby potato farmer who is also president of the company, said 4,000 hundredweight of

unprocessed fresh potatoes and 3,000 hundredweight of packaged potatoes were in the building.

Beesely said the main building was built more than a century ago as a grain elevator. The portion in which the fire originated was built 23 years ago. His best guess is that a heater in the truck shop may have started the fire.

"I'm finding work for as many of the employees as I

can in other places," Beesely said. "Some of the employees are going to be involved in the cleanup."

Nine Eastern Idaho potato farmers are the company's stockholders. They sell mostly Russet Burbanks to markets throughout the country, with most of their volume shipped to the East Coast.

Beesely said the company hasn't made plans for the future but has "some options

where we may consolidate with another operation or rebuild."

The Ucon Volunteer Fire Department responded to a passing motorist's report of the fire at 12:40 a.m. Dec. 26 and arrived to find the roughly 100,000-square-foot building fully engulfed in flames, said Fire Chief Scott Norman.

Norman said the cause had not yet been determined as of Dec. 28, and the owners were

awaiting an investigation by their insurance company.

Norman said the factory was closed for the holidays when the fire broke out and employees hadn't been inside in a few days. He said 30 mph winds rapidly spread the flames.

Norman said eight engines and three fire tenders were brought in to fight the fire. He had all of his crews at the scene and was assisted by the

Ammon Fire Department and the Jefferson County Fire District.

It took firefighters four hours to control the flames, and crews who had remained to put out "hot spots" finally left the scene on the night of Dec. 27.

"The problem is the building is so big and there were so many spots that hadn't collapsed, so I could not send people inside," Norman said.

Washington high school greenhouse vandalized

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

Vandals have damaged plants that students were raising in partnership with a local seed company in the Moses Lake, Wash., High School greenhouse.

The school's agriculture teacher and FFA adviser, Tony Kern, told the Capital Press the damage occurred Dec. 29.

"Stuff was just chucked on the ground," he said. "It's just frustrating. You just want to go, 'What are you doing? What is the purpose here? Really?'"

The vandals also spray-painted graffiti in the greenhouse.

Half of a science class' geranium projects were also damaged.

School officials are reviewing security camera footage, Kern said.

The plants were part of a genetics study done in partnership with the McKay Seed Co. in Moses Lake. The seed company hoped to use the greenhouse space to help develop new lines of wheat, barley, buckwheat and quinoa, and partner with the school to provide experience and internship possibilities.

Kern said the seeds were planted in September.

Fabio Pedraza, a plant breeder at McKay Seed, estimated roughly 50 percent of the plants were salvageable.

Kern and Pedraza said the cost of the damage is relatively small.

Much of the damage is time lost, Pedraza said.

It takes a year to make an experimental cross, raise it in a greenhouse and have something to plant in field trials the following year, he said.

Some identification tags were also removed, making it difficult to tell which plant is which, Pedraza said.

Pedraza expects the partnership with the school to continue.

"Hopefully it will blossom into something that ends up being really neat and beneficial for our kids as well as McKay Seed," Kern said. "It's really a neat opportunity."

McKay plans to update equipment and install new lights over three years in the school's older greenhouse, Kern said.

The partnership will help FFA students learn from "real, true scientific studies," Kern said.



Courtesy Tony Kern/Moses Lake FFA

Vandals damaged plants raised by the Moses Lake, Wash., FFA in partnership with McKay Seed Co. School officials are reviewing security camera footage as they investigate the case.



Courtesy Tony Kern/Moses Lake FFA

Vandals also spray-painted graffiti in the Moses Lake FFA greenhouse, where students were growing plants in partnership with McKay Seed Co. No suspects have yet been found.

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South Willamette Valley OSU Extension agent moving

By MITCH LIES
For the Capital Press

Clare Sullivan, south Willamette Valley field crops extension agent, is leaving Western Oregon to take an extension position in Central Oregon.

She will start in the newly created Small Farms and Community Food Systems position Feb. 1.

Her departure marks the second time a south valley field crops extension agent has left since Mark Mellbye retired from full-time duty in 2008. Paul Marquardt filled the position for less than a year, starting in March of 2012 and leaving in January of 2013, before Sullivan came on.

Her exit leaves the Willamette Valley with just one field crops agent, Nicole Anderson, who is based in McMinnville and has field crop extension responsibilities in Washington, Yamhill and Polk counties.

Sullivan said it was a difficult decision to leave the valley, where she has served as an extension agent since June 2014.

"It was a very, very tough decision," Sullivan said. "I loved working with the farmers here. Basically, I feel like



Courtesy of OSU

Clare Sullivan, the Oregon State University Extension field crop agent in the south Willamette Valley, will soon move to a new position in Central Oregon. Extension administrators say filling the vacancy is a top priority.

I was brought into a family. It makes it very tough to leave."

Sullivan holds a master's degree in soil science from the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, and a bachelor's degree in global resource systems in agriculture from the University of British Columbia.

Derek Godwin, extension administrator for the West Central Region, which includes Marion, Yamhill, Polk, Benton and Linn counties, said refilling the south valley position, as well as filling a vacant

field crops position in Marion County, are top priorities.

"Because so many large farms grow field crops, our field crops faculty are sort of first in line when it comes to working with growers and connecting with OSU," Godwin said.

"Growers that have field crops may also be growing hazelnuts or blueberries or Christmas trees, but they tend to think of the field crops person as their kind of high priority person to go to," Godwin said.

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