

## Oregon

## Earl Brown & Sons sells to Washington fruit grower

Family members remain in place at business

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**  
EO Media Group

MILTON-FREEWATER, Ore. — Earl Brown & Sons, Oregon's largest grower and packer of fresh apples, has sold to another family-owned fruit enterprise in Wenatchee, Wash.

Members of the Foreman Fruit Co. purchased Earl Brown & Sons in October, though the deal keeps the Browns in place to manage local operations on more than 1,000 acres of apples and 115 acres of wine grapes.

Ron Brown, whose father, Earl, started Earl Brown & Sons 40 years ago, said the families worked out a partnership that allows the business to retain its name and employees.

"Nobody lost their jobs. We're moving along just like we did before," Brown said.

The biggest difference, Brown said, is Foreman Fruit will provide additional capital for continued growth. The company is already planting 60 acres of apples and 10 acres of grapes.

"We've already taken on leasing more ground than we had," Brown said.

Financial terms of the sale were not disclosed. Earl Brown & Sons has also spun off several other businesses, including Blue Mountain Cider and Watermill Winery in Milton-Freewater, though Blue Mountain Cider was not included as part of the sale.

Earl Brown & Sons employs about 160 people. Ron Brown predicts the company to be able to tap into even more niche markets with the backing of Foreman Fruit.

"Both families are real forward-thinkers," he said.

Alan Groff, president and CEO of Foreman Fruit, said they first heard Earl Brown & Sons was for sale in April 2016. Though it was well off their radar — Wenatchee is 200 miles from Milton-Freewater — Groff said they drove down for a meeting, and the two families immediately hit it off.

"They've created a number of businesses, and a number of very excellent orchards and vineyards," Groff said. "There's a nice intersection of our capabilities."

Foreman Fruit was founded in the early 1980s by Dale Foreman, a Wenatchee attorney and former chairman of the Washington Apple Commission. Groff, who is Foreman's son-in-law, said the business started out primarily growing pears before branching out into apples, cherries and grapes.

Earl Brown & Sons is Foreman's first Oregon acquisition. Groff said they were impressed by the people, and wanted to keep their current team together.

"We share a common set of values and purpose in business," he said.

Earl Brown & Sons was founded in 1977, and now packs between 850,000 and 1 million boxes of fresh apples every year. Varieties include Honeycrisp, Red Delicious, Golden Delicious, Granny Smith, Fuji and Lady Alice.

Watermill Winery has sold roughly 3,500 cases of wine in past years. Groff said they are still in the early phases of looking at the wine business, though they are excited to be working in The Rocks District of Milton-Freewater and believe the product has plenty of upside.

"I think this is really great wine that is, perhaps, under-sold," Groff said.

Brown said the has been smooth, and will ensure that Earl Brown & Sons has the resources to stay competitive.

## Timber companies partner to improve water sources

By **GAIL OBERST**  
For the Capital Press

DALLAS, Ore. — A distant helicopter rises suddenly from a Coast Range forest above Dallas. A log dangles beneath it, hanging from a cable.

"It's a bonus!" says Lucas Hunt, project manager for the Rickreall Watershed Council and the Polk Soil and Water Conservation District. "There are two logs in that load!"

Hunt has reason to be excited. This project will help control sediment that is slowly filling Mercer Reservoir, the source of the City of Dallas' drinking water. To accomplish improvements to nearly five miles of upper Rickreall Creek, Hunt has enlisted help from nearly a dozen private and public timber management organizations, along with a new partnership of permitting and granting agencies.

Improving drinking water is no small feat, but the Drinking Water Providers Partnership formed last year is bringing landowners and managers together with funds that can support projects. The



Gail Oberst/For the Capital Press

Polk Soil and Water Conservation District staff tour a helicopter log placement project on private and public forest lands that will help improve City of Dallas drinking water.

Rickreall Creek project was recently lauded as a model. Over the past five years, the project placed 522 logs in 34 structures above Mercer Dam, which holds back Mercer Lake.

Placing logs across or into the creek aims to slow waters and create pools that trap silt and gravel that can muddy and fill reservoirs, as in Dallas' case. The log structures serve a double purpose, providing spawning beds for native fish.

The projects mimic what might have occurred if streams had not been scoured to bedrock and logged to the banks, the result of past practices. State and federal rules adopted in the 1980s and '90s now regulate logging in watersheds, but many timberland managers go beyond requirements, said Hunt. Looking over a map of the 12,300-acre Rickreall watershed, Hancock Forest Management wildlife biologist Jen-

niffer Bakke pointed to parcels of about 10 forest landowners for whom her company manages forestland. To help with the project, Hancock allowed access to the creeks flowing through those lands, contributed trees to place in streams, donated money and contributed time to review plans.

"Our investors expect a certain level of stewardship in the management of their assets," she said. "This project

is an opportunity to show the public that managed forests are entirely compatible with clean drinking water, fish habitat and stream health."

The Rickreall project was one of 11 launched in Oregon in 2016, the first year of the unique Drinking Water Providers Partnership, a public-private collaboration aimed at funding municipal water improvements. Other projects included agricultural fencing, culvert repairs and riparian improvements to Fiddle and Billy Moore creeks in Lane County, and plans to build cattle fencing to protect Baker City's municipal watershed.

All of those projects were made possible by voluntary cooperation between private landowners, public managers and nonprofit agencies, according to Cathy Kellon of the Geos Institute. Kellon helps coordinate the Partnership, which includes the U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Bureau of Land Management, Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, Washington Department of Health, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Wild-Earth Guardians.

## Onion facilities collapse under weight of snow

By **SEAN ELLIS**  
Capital Press

ONTARIO, Ore. — About 18 onion storage and packing facilities in southwestern Idaho and Eastern Oregon have collapsed over the past week from the weight of snow and ice, knocking out about 25 percent of the region's total onion processing capacity, industry sources say.

"This is major. There are a lot of them down," said Murakami Produce General Manager Grant Kitamura.

The price onion shippers are receiving for the Spanish in Milton-Freewater, though Blue Mountain Cider was not included as part of the sale.

Heavy snowstorms since December were followed by near-freezing rain last week and then more snow. That has caused many structures throughout the Treasure Valley area to collapse.

Kitamura, chairman of the Idaho-Eastern Oregon Onion Committee's promotion committee, said several other onion packing or storage facilities are on the brink.

"Some are still standing but they're not looking too straight," he said.

Partners Produce's main onion packing facility in Payette, Idaho, collapsed and will be out of commission for at least seven months, said co-owner Eddie Rodriguez.

"I have 25-30 million pounds of onions that were destined to run through that line," he said.

The company's empty inventory holding facility also collapsed.

The roofs of at least four onion packing facilities have collapsed because of the weight of snow and ice.

"At least three of them will be out of commission the rest of the season and several are wounded," Kitamura said.

At least 14 onion storage facilities have collapsed as well.

The disruptions will affect growers as well, said Oregon farmer Paul Skeen, president of the Malheur County Onion Growers Association.



Submitted photo

This onion storage facility near Ontario, Ore., is one of about 18 onion storage and packing facilities in Southwestern Idaho and Eastern Oregon that have collapsed under the weight of snow and ice. That has resulted in major production disruptions and a big jump in onion prices.

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