

Washington Fruit cultivates reputation as trend-setter

By **DAVE LEDER**
For the Capital Press

Washington Fruit & Produce Co. is one of the oldest fruit growing and shipping operations in the Pacific Northwest. But by no means is the 102-year-old Yakima, Wash., company showing its age.

If anything, Washington Fruit has fortified its reputation as a trend-setter in the industry, leading the way with innovative growing techniques, packing-line technology and storage methods.

The family-owned company, founded in 1916 by Fred Plath, moved most of its packing, shipping and storage functions to a 111-acre campus off U.S. Highway 12 in 2011. A state-of-the-art administrative headquarters followed in 2015.

Meanwhile, a series of new controlled atmosphere (CA) storage facilities are currently under construction, allowing Washington Fruit to keep pace with an increasing volume of apples and cherries year after year. The company partners with Underwood Fruit in the Columbia River Gorge to pack and ship its assortment of pear varieties.

Washington Fruit also has been adding to its acreage around the region in recent years, while trying to max-



David Leder/For the Capital Press

Washington Fruit & Produce Co. employees sort apples for packaging at the company's headquarters in Yakima, Wash.

imize its haul from existing orchards by planting trees closer together.

By taking advantage of the latest growing trends and packing technologies, the company has been able to maintain its foothold in a competitive market.

"We are one of the largest fruit companies in the Northwest, especially when it comes to vertical integra-

tion," said Frank Davis, vice president of sales at Washington Fruit.

"We're always looking to improve our efficiency in all aspects of the operation, whether it's with growing, packing, shipping or sales. We want to be innovators in everything we do, and we believe staying ahead of the curve is what will help us remain strong as a company."

With 1,250 year-round employees — and as many as 7,500 during harvest — Washington Fruit is one of the largest employers in the Yakima Valley.

At the same time, the company is always looking at ways to streamline its operation.

Advancements in robotics and fruit-scanning equipment may eventually limit

the need for so much manpower, but when you have as many orchards as Washington Fruit does, the need for labor remains ever-present.

Providing a superior-quality product to its customers will always be the priority.

"We try to stay ahead of technology in our packing facilities so we can continue to deliver the best-qual-

ity fruit around the world," Davis said. "We want to be on the leading edge, and that commitment has made our operational efficiency very high."

Washington Fruit also has an eye on the future when it comes to growing, recognizing the increasing demand for organic fruit around the world.

The company has planted some new organic apple orchards in the past year and will be converting some of its traditional orchard land to organic — a process that takes three years.

"That's where the industry is going, and we want to satisfy the growing need for organics in our product mix," Davis said. "Our organic program will grow significantly in the 2018 crop year."

Washington Fruit is also looking forward to crop year 2019, when it will have the newest apple variety, Cosmic Crisp, developed at Washington State University and only available to Washington growers.

"We offer a good balance of all the major varieties, but we think the Cosmic Crisp will make us even more competitive," Davis said. "We're very excited about the next few years."

Joyce Capital

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