

## People &amp; Places

## From drywall to soil amendment

## Urban Gypsum opens new facility in Portland

By GEORGE PLAVERN  
Capital Press

PORTLAND — An excavator sits atop a large pile of crumbled drywall at a North Portland warehouse, where Casey Lane, president of Urban Gypsum, explains how the rubbish is actually a valuable commodity for farmers looking to grow healthier crops.

Rather than sending wall-board to the landfill, Urban Gypsum is reaching out to local building contractors to bring the material into its 75,000-square-foot facility, where it is processed into a flour-like powder consisting of nearly 100 percent recycled gypsum for agricultural and industrial uses.

Gypsum, a soft mineral composed of calcium sulfate, is a widely used fertilizer that provides plant nutrition while improving aeration in compact soils, allowing better drainage and deeper root penetration.

It is also the primary ingredient in drywall, of which 15 million tons is currently sitting in landfills across the U.S., Europe and Asia.

Lane is familiar with the struggle. Urban Gypsum is just one division of Willamette Construction Services Inc., which includes general contracting and demolition. Lane figures the company was spending upwards of \$500,000 a year hauling heavy drywall to the dump.

Not only does weight at the landfill equal dollars, but Lane said a potentially lucrative business opportunity was slipping through their fingers.

“To turn our garbage into a commodity, and to turn our waste stream into a reusable (product), really was the key,” Lane said.



George Plaven/Capital Press

**Casey Lane, center, is president of Urban Gypsum, a Portland-based company that recycles drywall to make agricultural gypsum. His son, Taylor, and mother, Bonnie, also work at the family-run business.**

**The company**

It was Lane’s parents, Jerry and Bonnie, who established the family’s first business, Lane Concrete Cutting, in 1977. From there, they began to diversify, adding demolition services in 1994 and branching further out across multiple divisions.

Willamette Construction Services now includes Laneco, which does demolition, concrete cutting, underground utilities and excavation; GDSI, which handles demolition and asbestos abatement; JDL General Contracting; and Urban Gypsum, a single-source drywall recycling center.

The company moved into its new building in 2018, with more than 10 times the space of its former location in Portland. After just a few months, Lane is already envisioning nationwide expansion.

“We expect to open multiple facilities around the U.S.,” he said.

**Patent pending**

The patent is pending for the recycling process at Urban Gypsum, but in essence drywall is run

through machinery that separates the gypsum from the paper backing and collects the resulting powder in large bags. The paper is also collected and can be used to make products such as animal bedding and packaging, making the process zero waste.

Urban Gypsum has a fleet of trucks and Dumpsters that can haul drywall directly from the construction site to its facility, ensuring material bypasses the landfill. Lane said the product is rigorously inspected, and companies that send loads must fill out a survey to ensure the gypsum meets a minimum purity of 99.3 percent.

“We can categorically say that we have done all of our proper testing and planning before one load even enters this facility,” Lane said.

Scott Freeman, operations manager at Urban Gypsum, said it took months of planning and working with the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality and Metro, which covers land use and development across the Portland metro area, to get the recycling center permitted.

“It’s something they’ve

been wanting for a long time,” Freeman said. “This has been tried before and failed by other companies.”

Urban Gypsum has a full-time agronomist, Wade Schirmer, on staff reaching out to agricultural suppliers who have expressed interest in carrying the product. Gypsum is 150 to 200 times more soluble than lime, Schirmer said, and its aeration properties could be especially useful in the wet, heavy soils of the Willamette Valley.

“The growers have a real keen interest,” Schirmer said. “Just getting them trained, it actually has the potential to displace significant other products as a plant food.”

**Cost-effective**

By capturing gypsum from local drywall scraps, Schirmer added the company can provide a much more cost effective supply of product, as opposed to buying and shipping it from mines in Nevada, Utah and Canada. He said the added freight makes gypsum twice as expensive from those sources as it would be from their company.

**Western Innovator****URBAN GYPSUM****President:** Casey Lane**Opened:** 2018**Location:** North Portland**Size:** 75,000 square feet**Services:** Processing drywall into recycled gypsum**Capacity:** 140,000 tons annually**Employees:** Approximately 180 across all divisions under Willamette Construction Services Inc.

“It’s a rather inexpensive product, but the handling and trucking makes it cost prohibitive,” he said.

Tom Wimmer, chief operating officer at Marion Ag Service in St. Paul, Ore., says they have had conversations with Urban Gypsum since the new drywall recycling center opened. While there have not yet been any field tests between Urban Gypsum and Marion Ag Service, Wimmer said he does believe there could be a profitable market.

“There is a lot of benefit for that, to help build the soil integrity,” he said. “I think the market is there, if you have a readily available source.”

At full capacity, Urban Gypsum will create up to 140,000 tons of gypsum powder annually. Lane said the goal is to get to full production, and envisions opening a second facility within the next year.

“We have turned a lot of heads and gained a lot of attention in a very positive way,” he said. “This will be a nationwide product.”

## CSS Farms grows seed potatoes as part of its portfolio

By ERICK PETERSON  
For the Capital Press

With seed farms and production facilities in nine states, CSS Farms stretches across the U.S. and it prides itself on having a culture of “doing it right.”

Its vision statement includes a commitment toward “cultivating people, leadership and new technology,” as it seeks to be their customers’ preferred supplier. It also defines its core values as a commitment to excellence, teamwork, integrity, entrepreneurial drive, innovation and farming lifestyle.

For Laurie Widdowson, CSS marketing and development manager, that vision statement and core values are not mere filler material for the company website’s “About” section. They represent strong feelings that she and other CSS employees feel toward their company. CSS, she says, is a special organization that is devoted to quality.

In 1986, CSS began by the Carter and Spevak families in the small town of Watertown, South Dakota. Soon afterward, it expanded to Nebraska, Texas and other states, while creating new

**CSS FARMS****Founded:** 1986**Locations:** Colorado, Nebraska, Wisconsin, Oregon, Idaho, Texas, Washington, Florida and South Dakota**Acres:** 14,000 (nationwide), 750 (Ione Seed Farm)**Products:** mostly potatoes, but also organic green peas, sweet corn and wheat**Employees:** 300 (regular full-time nationally), 800 (seasonally nationwide)

partnerships and building its customer base. Today, CSS operates on a total of 14,000 acres of farmland and employs 300 full-time employees through the year.

When Widdowson and other CSS management speak of company staff, they are particular about the words they use. They are not just “employing workers,” they are “cultivating” and “nurturing” them.

“It takes quality people to create a quality product,” she said. And in order to have quality people, a company must assist them in developing skills, leadership abilities and community activism. “Our communities are everything,” she said.

As part of nurturing staff, CSS sends its employees through training courses, such as annual agron-

omy programs. Leaders, researchers and workers gather for studies and discussion. They learn about the condition of the year’s potato crop, and they seek methods for improving their company.

Other employee education programs include studies in new technology and worker safety. Widdowson said that this learning is vital.

“This is how we go from good to great,” she said.

In addition to having top-notch people and programs to develop those people, CSS also concentrates on technology. Widdowson said that the company has excellent “clean seed protocols.” That is, it excels at keeping its product virus free.

“We make a large financial and personnel investment to accomplish,” she

said. CSS strives to zero infection, even when legal requirements are less strict.

The CSS commitment to order is on display at its seed farm and sorting facility in Ione, Ore. The company moved into the location five years ago. Protective masks, booties and gloves are worn. Conditions are clean and tidy.

“We maintain a sterile environment here,” said Don Atwood, Ione seed farm storage manager, speaking of the operations at the Boardman sorting facility that he helps to oversee.

He explained that cleanliness is especially important for Ione operations, since that place deals in seed, rather than food products. Seed is grown in Ione, distant enough to avoid contamination from other potato growers. There, it produces chip, russet and specialty varieties on 750 acres before trucking them to a sorting facility in nearby Boardman.

Mick Peck, Ione seed farm manager, shares Atwood’s pride concerning cleanliness. He has been with the company five years, and he boasts of sterilization processes, employee safety and many other aspects of CSS. He is impressed by

much of the company’s work, including the decision to begin operations in north-eastern Oregon.

He started at CSS just when it was developing the concept of its current Ione work. Starting a seed farm just outside the Columbia Basin was ingenious, he said. Its position, upwind from other ag producers, provided low insect and disease pressure. This would be beneficial to making good seed, and this plan has turned out well, according to Peck.

“Many people were skeptical when our owners had the plan to grow seed potatoes this close to the Columbia Basin,” he said. “All of their reasons for why they thought it would work have turned out to be true.”

For Peck, the CSS foresight in knowing good opportunities is a large part of what makes it an excellent company. He is also impressed with the technology that preserves product, the professionalism of his coworkers, the long shipping schedule and the willingness to take chances on good opportunities.

“I feel really good about being here,” he said. “We all do.”

**CALENDAR****SUNDAY, MARCH 10**

**Community Supported Agriculture Share Fair:** 10 a.m.-3 p.m., Ecotrust’s The Redd, 801 SE Salmon St., Portland. Share Fair gathers more than 40 regional farmers, ranchers and fishermen who serve the Portland area. The Portland Area CSA Coalition promotes Community Supported Agriculture by connecting local CSA farmers with households, educating the public about the CSA experience and the benefits of healthy eating and providing farmers with opportunities to learn, grow and meet their business and sustainability goals. www.portlandcsa.org.

**Home Orchard Society Annual Fruit Propagation Fair:** 10 a.m.-4 p.m., Clackamas County Fairgrounds, 694 NE Fourth Ave., Canby, Ore. Hundreds of varieties of free scions and cuttings will be available. If you graft, this is paradise. Or you can choose custom grafting by experts for only \$5. Free with admission are hundreds of varieties of apple, pear, cherry, plum and persimmon scions; cuttings of grapes, kiwis and figs; and experts to answer your fruit growing questions. Joanie Cooper, host-rees@gmail.com, 503-434-7643. \$5 for members (family \$10), \$7 for non-members (family \$12). Admission is free if you join HOS at this show. www.homeorchardsociety.org.

**SATURDAY, MARCH 16**

**Amity Daffodil Festival:** 8 a.m.-5 p.m., Amity Daffodil Festival, 401 S. Trade St., Amity, Ore. View numerous varieties of daffodils showcased by the Oregon Daffodil Society. Children through adults are encouraged to participate by bringing in a home-grown daffodil for judging by 11 a.m. Grab lunch at one of the local eateries and round out the day with wine tasting at the local wineries. Experience the fun of a small town festival, celebrate spring and learn about daffodils. Eve E Silverman, eesilverman@yahoo.com, 503-835-0374. www.AmityDIG.org.

**FRIDAY, MARCH 22**

**Oregon FFA Convention:** Deschutes Fair & Expo Center, 3800 Southwest Airport Way, Redmond, Ore. This convention is the culmination of the year’s work for FFA members across the state. https://bit.ly/2EarKxo

**Northwest Horse Fair and Expo:** Linn County Fair and Expo Center, 3700 Knox Butte Road, Albany, Ore. Horse-related education, entertainment and shopping. http://equinepromotions.net/northwest-horse-fair/.

**SATURDAY, MARCH 23**

**Oregon FFA Convention:** Deschutes Fair & Expo Center, 3800 Southwest Airport Way, Redmond, Ore.

https://bit.ly/2EarKxo

**Northwest Horse Fair and Expo:** Linn County Fair and Expo Center, 3700 Knox Butte Road, Albany, Ore. http://equinepromotions.net/northwest-horse-fair/.

**Clackamas Tree School:** 8:15 a.m.-5:15 p.m., Clackamas Community College, 19600 S Molalla Ave., Oregon City. Oregon’s largest forestry and natural resource education event. There are 650 spots available and this event typically fills up fast. Tree School attendees can choose from a range of topics to support successful management of their woodlands Clackamas County taxpayers \$55; non-residents \$70; ages 6-20 \$25. http://bit.ly/TreeSchoolClackamas.

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