

WCT Marine finds niche in the middle at North Tongue Point

Story & Photo by Edward Stratton

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estratton@crbizjournal.com

Drive down U.S. Highway 30 east of Astoria and you might see a growing number of ships parked along the piers of North Tongue Point, a World War II-era shipyard.

American Cruise Lines has homeported all four ships in its Columbia River fleet at North Tongue Point, where shipwright WCT Marine & Construction has created a niche taking on small-to-mid-size maintenance and supply jobs around the region.

Hyak Maritime, a boat builder and leaser, took on Tongue Point from the Port of Astoria in 2017. By that point, WCT had bought out former shipwright J&H Boatworks, becoming one of the region's few remaining shipwrights.

"We've historically always maintained cruise ships, doing emergency repairs to small fabrication projects," said Willie Toristoja, a co-founder of WCT.

Kevin Sealy, who handles bidding for WCT and used to work for J&H, said American Cruise Lines has long called on local shipwrights.

When American Cruise Lines launched a new ship, the American Song, in the Columbia a year ago, WCT built the ship an articulating gangway so it could dock anywhere around the crowded 17th Dock, where the Coast Guard also moors two cutters. WCT is building another articulating gangway for the American Harmony, the cruise company's second contemporary ship.

American Cruise Lines used to moor at Fred Devine Diving and Salvage in Portland before repositioning to North Tongue Point in 2020. All four ships — Queen of the West, American Pride, American Song and American Harmony — have since moored in Astoria, turning one of the finger piers into a dense corridor of floating staterooms.



Kevin Sealy, in charge of bidding at WCT Marine & Construction, shows off the sternwheelers the company is repairing for American Cruise Lines at North Tongue Point.

"American loves working with Bob Dorn and the guys at Tongue Point," said Alexa Paoella, a spokeswoman for American Cruise Lines. "It is a great partnership and our four small riverboats will remain there until we are able to operate. We continue to work diligently and respectfully with both

local and state officials in order to resume our personalized explorations throughout the region."

While in port, WCT has been busy with various maintenance projects, from decks and guardrails to replacing the large bearings that run the sternwheelers.

"We did the handrails replacements. We fixed some causeways," Sealy said. "Really anything they need, they just let us know."

Parked down the pier from the cruise ships is a growing collection of boats WCT has acquired to expand its suite of services, from tugs and a workboat to a landing craft it charters to carry people and equipment to islands in the Columbia. Toristoja and Sealy said WCT has found a niche in the short-term projects too big for the average boatyard and too small for large dry docks like Vigor Marine in Portland.

WCT has transported thousands of plants for Sound Native Plants, an ecological restoration contractor working on Sand Island, a dredge spoil deposit near Ilwaco, Washington. It regularly transports cleaning crews and equipment to and from freighters anchored in the Columbia off of Astoria, and tugs equipment for Bergerson Construction, a local marine contractor based at North Tongue Point, as far upriver as Lewiston, Idaho.

"A lot of times, we go after the projects that a lot

of the other groups aren't going to want," Sealy said.

While transporting crews and equipment helps keep WCT diversified and busy, the company's marquee service is building new boats. The company recently finished a new tug for the Army Corps of Engineers that will soon head up the Columbia to Little Goose Dam in eastern Washington.

Like many other companies, WCT laid off most of its staff during the coronavirus pandemic, going from 45 at its peak to fewer than 10. The company is back to around 26 employees and still hiring.

"We're looking for experienced people, experienced welders and painters," Sealy said.

WCT is waiting until business recovers further to spend a \$573,000 grant it was awarded in April from the U.S. Maritime Administration to build a contained work tent on the tarmac at North Tongue Point. The grant requires WCT to match \$121,000 but will provide a covered area to work on tugs, barges and commercial fishing boats. Toristoja said companies are starting to schedule more fabrication work they put off during the pandemic.

"There's a couple of sponsors and potential lengthening projects coming up that should have hit in 2020, but they never did," Toristoja said. "The (marine) community got hit just like everyone else, so they're not wanting to spend money if they don't have to."

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