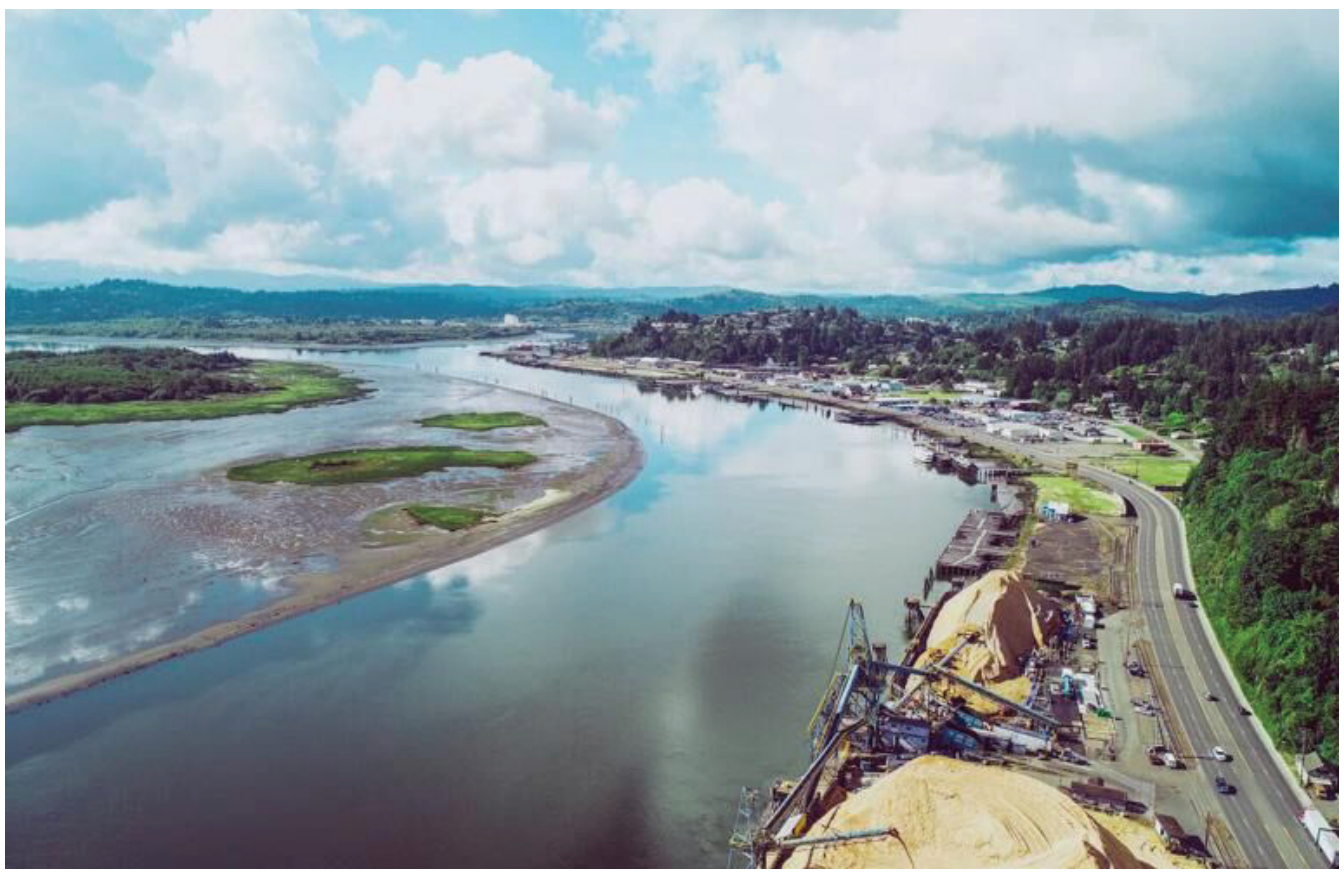
Expansion planned for Coos Bay port

By SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN
Capital Press



Oregon International Port of Coos Bay

Coos Bay is seen from the air.

Officials and developers for decades have talked about expanding the Port of Coos Bay in southern Oregon, turning it into one of the West Coast's shipping giants.

Now, the proposed project has a major developer-investor behind it.

The developer is a Missouri-based firm called NorthPoint Development, which Real Capital Analytics in 2020 named the No. 1 industrial developer in the U.S. The company has developed more than 140 million square feet of industrial space for about 465 businesses, including Fortune 500 companies such as Walmart, Amazon and FedEx.

Last week at the Agriculture Transportation Coalition's conference in Tacoma, Washington, NorthPoint Development unveiled its plans for Coos Bay.

The plan is to develop a rail-served, deep-water port with a three-berth terminal. A berth is where vessels are secured when they're not at sea.

Once constructed, the facility could serve agricultural exporters nationwide and move more than 1 million 40-foot containers annually.

Chad Meyer, president and founding partner of NorthPoint Development, said he believes the port expansion will help relieve congestion and meet future shipping demand.

"What we're going to do is be a pressure release valve," said Meyer.

Meyer said NorthPoint Development has been working behind the scenes for months to scope out the ideal location for a West Coast port.

"We've made a pretty massive investment in our research and data team," said Meyer. "So, quietly, for about a year and a half, we studied the entire West Coast … and figured that the only option that could geographically handle a deep-water port was already in existence, and that was the Port of Coos Bay."

AGRICULTURAL EXPORTERS ARE WATCHING WITH INTEREST.

The site is ideal for several reasons, he said. The location already has a federally-managed channel, a private rail line that could connect to Class I railroads, hundreds of acres of undeveloped industrial property — "and most importantly, a willing community."

The plan would likely include building cold storage facilities and connecting the Port of Coos Bay's private rail line to Union Pacific Co.'s Class I railroads in Eugene and elsewhere. Meyer said Union Pacific so far has been "a very willing partner and very supportive of the project."

Meyer estimates construction will begin in two years and facilities will be operational within five to six years.

In total, developing the port is estimated to cost $1.7 billion. Meyer said he anticipates the project will need private investment coupled with federal grant money, potentially from the infrastructure law Congress passed in 2021.

During President Joe Biden's visit to Portland in April, U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley and U.S. Rep. Peter DeFazio, all Oregon Democrats, asked the president to use infrastructure dollars for Coos Bay's port expansion. The president made no immediate promises.

NorthPoint Development says it's committed to the project.

"This is a when, not an if. We're privately going to invest hundreds of millions of dollars in making sure this thing happens," said Meyer.

Experts say unexpected world events could still slow the project.

Prior to 2008, according to John Burns, the port's CEO, Maersk, then the world's largest shipping company, was preparing to invest in a Coos Bay container port. Then the Great Recession struck and the company withdrew.

Economists surveyed by the Wall Street Journal this month predicted a 44% chance of recession in the next 12 months.

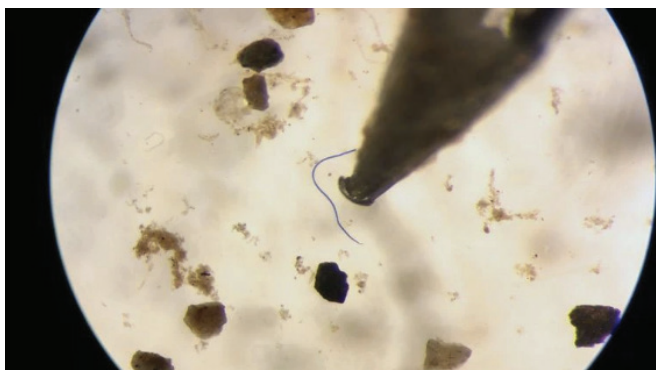
However, the port's staff and Meyer say they're optimistic.

Agricultural exporters are watching with interest.

"That's incredibly exciting," said Peter Friedmann, executive director of the Agriculture Transportation Coalition. "I mean, we're looking for alternative solutions. We're doing some nibbling around the edges and maybe moving some boxes off terminals to another place a mile away or something like that, but this — this is visionary, I would say, and ambitious."

Researchers track microplastic pollution in river basin

By CASSANDRA PROFITA
Oregon Public Broadcasting



Todd Sonflieth/Oregon Public Broadcasting

Microplastic fibers are less than 5 millimeters wide and often appear in vivid colors when viewed under a microscope.

The evidence is mounting: Microplastic pollution is pretty much everywhere.

Studies around the world have found tiny plastic fibers and particles in rivers and lakes, in the ocean's seafood, floating in the air above remote mountaintops and in freshly fallen snow in Antarctica.

Testing shows they're making their way into human bodies, too. Scientists recently found microplastics in people's lungs and blood.

Researchers at Portland State University want to know more about where microplastic pollution is coming from and how it's getting into the air and water — right here in Oregon.

They recently launched a yearlong effort to track the sources of microplastics in the Columbia River basin, a massive network of rivers and streams that covers much of the Pacific Northwest. In addition to sampling the air and water to identify the biggest sources of microplastic pollution, they're working to build a network of people in government, industry and education who might help manage the problem.

Elise Granek, professor of environmental science and management at Portland State University, said she's hoping to track the "microplastic cycle" from sources such as wastewater sprayed on agricultural fields, car tires that wear down and contaminate stormwater, clothes dryers that spew airborne fibers, and wastewater treatment plants that empty directly into rivers.

"In order to manage the microplastics, we need to understand the most significant sources," she said.

Granek has already done multiple studies on microplastics in the ocean and has consistently found it in marine life such as clams, crabs and oysters.

In 2019, she helped Oregon Public Broadcasting sample for microplastics in rivers across Oregon in a citizen science project that found microscopic plastic fibers and particles in the Columbia, Willamette, Rogue and Deschutes river basins.

Now, Granek wants to take a closer look at how microplastics are getting into those rivers, all of which eventually lead to the ocean.

"We do know there are microplastics at least in our waterways," Granek said. "But we don't know what the dominant sources of microplastics into the Columbia River basin are. People have speculated about a number of sources."

Granek is working with Heejun Chang, a Portland State geography professor, to sample for microplastics in the air and water near likely sources of microplastic pollution.

"We plan to collect samples from a number of different sites that represent urban lands and farmlands, recreational sites, industrial sites, households as well as waterways and motorways," Chang said. "From the most remote rural area to the most urbanized sections."

To find out what's in the air, researchers plan to collect and analyze moss samples. Moss is a natural air pollution monitor because it gets all of its nutrients from the atmosphere. A landmark study in Portland in 2016 used moss to uncover previously unknown hot spots of toxic air pollution around the city.

Chang said they know weather factors like rain can play a role in spreading microplastics, so they'll be collecting samples over time to compare microplastic pollution across wet winters and dry summers.

"This is looking at the whole microplastic cycle from the source to the transport and destination in a more holistic way," Granek said. "By sampling both the air and water, we hope to get a better understanding of what the atmospheric contribution is versus what the landscape contribution is."

To learn how much microplastic pollution is traveling through the air and water, Granek said, they'll be collecting samples at different distances from suspected sources.

"We're hoping to understand how far microplastics are traveling from those particular sources," she said. "So, in a land application of biosolids onto a field, for example, we want to know the amount that gets aerosolized and blown further out. Maybe that's different than what's being blown out of the dryer vent."

The yearlong sampling effort will allow the researchers to map a research project that spans the 258,000 square miles of the Columbia River basin. Granek and Chang are working with a research team that includes Sarah Carvill, an environmental science instructor at Portland State, Nancee Hunter, director of the Center for Geography Education in Oregon at Portland State, Jordyn Wolfand, assistant professor of civil engineering at the University of Portland, and Janice Brahney, associate professor of watershed sciences at Utah State University.

Chang said to start working toward solutions, they're also holding workshops for scientists, wastewater managers, government and industry leaders. This week, they're launching a class for teachers that will provide them with lessons on microplastics that they can bring to their classrooms.

"Unless we change behaviors and change policy, we won't be able to solve this issue," he said.