

Fresh pack goes high-tech

River Point Farms opens new facility in August 2015

By GEORGE P LAVEN

A twisting maze of conveyor belts winds around the new fresh pack plant at River Point Farms, carrying all sizes of red onions from 1-inch boilers to 5-inch colossals.

This is where America's largest onion producer works around the clock bagging millions of pounds of fresh onions for some of the country's most popular restaurants and retail giants, including Subway, Frito-Lay, Costco and Applebee's.

River Point Farms, based in Hermiston, harvests 6,000 acres of onions in Umatilla and Morrow counties, as well as Benton County, Washington. The company opened its new high-tech packing facility in August, located off Westland Road.

Plant manager Sean Curren said technology was the main driver behind the \$17 million project. Packing whole onions used to be a more labor-intensive process, but now everything in the plant is fully automated — save for a handful of workers along the conveyor line culling bruised or defective bulbs.

The new system is three times as fast and one-third as expensive, Curren said. That allows greater flexibility to fill last-minute orders and keep up with customer demand.

"If you're going to be competitive, technology is what it's going to take," he said. "It all comes down to price per pound."

The plant is expected to handle 240 million pounds of onions every year. The process begins in the receiving room, where open top semis roll in by the hour hauling 60,000 pounds of onions per load from the farm.

Onions are unloaded into each of two white canopied bunkers, and from there they begin their journey tumbling down the conveyor. Some days, it's all reds. Other days, it's



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Workers sort red onions on a conveyor belt while working at the River Point Farms packaging facility outside of Hermiston.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

An automated machine packages and seals bags of red onions at the River Point Farms packaging facility outside of Hermiston.

whites, yellows or sweets.

"I love it," Curren said with a smile. "It's like harvest every day."

The technology itself is capable of sorting onions by size to within an eighth of an inch. Down the line, sharp-eyed employees work at a constant pace pulling onions with visual defects, such as cuts or bruises. Those will be sent instead to the company's own processing plant, peeled and sliced for other products. Nothing at River Point goes to waste, Curren said.

"We use all our byproduct," he said. "That's why we have our own processing plant."

Once sorted, the conveyor rides to the top of a massive scale with 15 individual hoppers programmed to drop a certain amount of onions into mesh bags bearing the River

Point label. Bags are then loaded into crates or onto pallets and wrapped for shipping.

Workers used to hold each bag and tie it by hand, Curren said, but the automated system has cut down significantly on labor. The plant has a total of 32 employees.

The system was custom designed, starting out as a drawing on the whiteboard in Curren's office. He said River Point worked diligently over three years putting together the most sophisticated and technical packing facility in the U.S.

"This is a very exciting experience and opportunity" he said.

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