

Food industry must adapt to long-term labor shortages

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

PORTLAND — The worker shortage isn't a temporary trend that farmers and food processors can hope will soon blow over, experts say.

As insufficient labor plagues the agriculture and food industries, employers must persistently compete for workers while investing in automation, according to experts at Food Northwest's annual processing and packaging expo Feb. 3 and 4 in Portland.

"This is the new normal. Things will not go back to how they were before," said Osvaldo Granillo, sales director with Redzone Production Systems, which helps companies with worker productivity.

Retaining employees is key — apart from the expense of recruiting and training workers, companies face an "opportunity cost" when they can't fill orders due to an insufficient workforce, he said.

Employee retention doesn't just boil down to spending more on wages, especially with the new generation of workers, Granillo said.

A survey of young work-

ers found pay rates are 14th on their list of concerns, while enjoying their job is the top consideration, he said.

"Employees are becoming the new customers. We have to make them happy," said Steve Childs, a production manager for Chaucer Foods in Forest Grove. "Employees aren't something you do once and then put on a shelf."

Roughly 70 million workers from the baby boomer generation are projected to retire during a time period when only 40 million new workers will enter the workforce, said Brian LaPlante, district account manager with FANUC America Corp., a robotics company.

Retirements have increased in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic, accelerating changes in the workforce that were already underway, LaPlante said.

"COVID has done automation a favor," he said. "The pandemic is continuing to influence the reluctance to return to work. People don't want to come back."

Robots have a history in food processing that dates back to the 1980s, when they started stacking boxes on pallets, LaPlante said. Since then, the machines have been moving "upstream" to interact directly with food.

"They are cleanable. They



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

Participants examine food processing equipment in early February 2022 at Food Northwest's processing and packaging expo in Portland.

keep things from coming into them and keep things from coming out of them," he said.

Some robots can learn how to accomplish tasks through physical training rather than traditional programming, he said. "It

streamlines the process, makes it a lot easier."

In agriculture, robots already have been deployed to harvest peppers, for example, but the technology still is at a relatively "infantile" stage, LaPlante said.

The challenge is creat-

ing software for robots to successfully interact with the environment, he said. "The robot can do what you tell it to do, but you need someone to tell it what to do."

Robotics offer a way to make up for the shortfall in workers and automate dull and unpleasant tasks, LaPlante said. Existing employees then can engage in more productive and rewarding duties.

"It's not our enemy. Automation is our friend," he said. "It's more of a tool to use than a threat to people's jobs."

Workplace culture is a crucial consideration for employers who are competing against other companies whose workers perform similar tasks, said Matt Crabtree, sales director with Redzone.

Given a choice between filling boxes with products or peeling onions, for example, a worker may choose the company "where people want to go and spend their time," he said.

"Retention is the cheapest thing you can do to maintain productivity," Crabtree said.

It's worth spending the time to continuously educate and train employees, focusing on communication and soliciting feedback on work processes, said John Damon, workforce development manager for Food Northwest,

a food industry group.

Workers are less likely to jump ship if they see a future at the company, he said.

"In this environment, you've got to keep engaging them and make them feel important," he said. "If they feel like family, they will stay."

Bright employees can act out and become "smart alecks" when they're bored, so it helps to provide them with a purpose and opportunities for advancement, Damon said, so they "see a career path where they didn't see one."

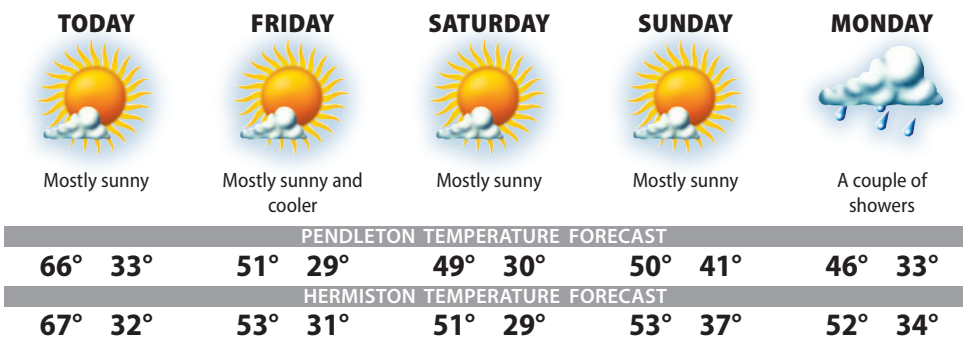
Promoting people from within the company ensures that employees in leadership roles know "every crack and cranny" of the operation, said Debbie Radie, vice president of operations at Boardman Foods.

"My top mechanic today started on my trim line," Radie said.

Boardman Foods has a generous paid time-off policy and started an all-day child daycare program to retain female employees who'd otherwise be compelled to stay home during the pandemic, she said.

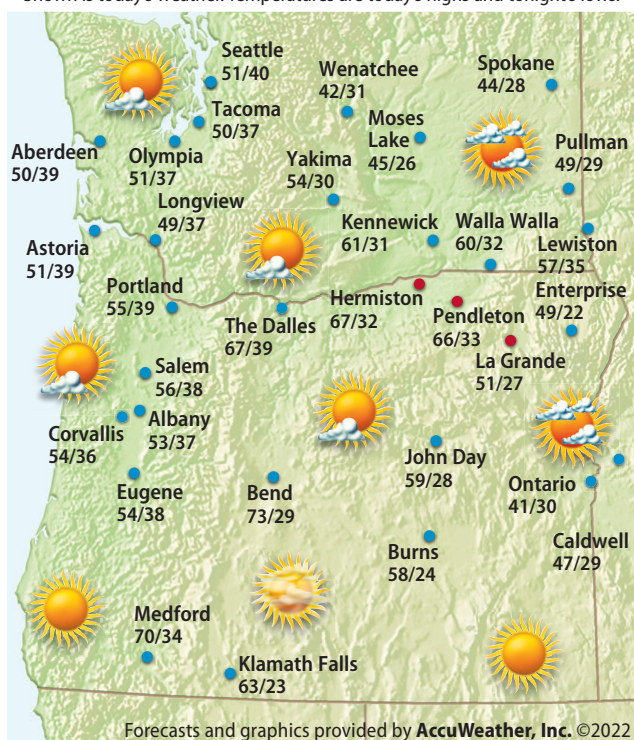
"We find creative ways for people to have that work-life balance," Radie said, "even on the work floor trimming onions."

Forecast for Pendleton Area



OREGON FORECAST

Shown is today's weather. Temperatures are today's highs and tonight's lows.



ALMANAC

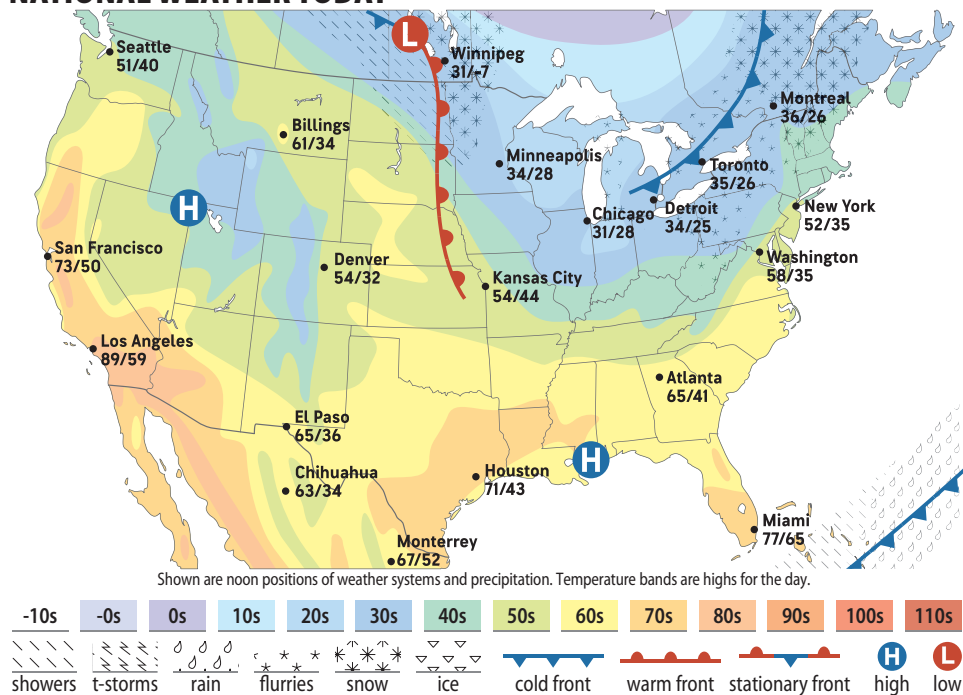
PENDLETON through 3 p.m. yest.				
TEMP.	HIGH	LOW		
Yesterday	64°	40°		
Normals	45°	29°		
Records	73° (1996)	-20° (1929)		
PRECIPITATION				
24 hours ending 3 p.m.	Trace			
Month to date	0.04"			
Normal month to date	0.39"			
Year to date	1.57"			
Last year to date	0.99"			
Normal year to date	1.93"			
HERMISTON through 3 p.m. yest.				
TEMP.	HIGH	LOW		
Yesterday	66°	33°		
Normals	47°	29°		
Records	70° (1996)	-24° (1929)		
PRECIPITATION				
24 hours ending 3 p.m.	Trace			
Month to date	Trace			
Normal month to date	0.31"			
Year to date	0.93"			
Last year to date	0.71"			
Normal year to date	1.45"			
WINDS (in mph)				
	Today	Fri.		
Boardman	WSW 4-8	NE 4-8		
Pendleton	WSW 6-12	N 3-6		
SUN AND MOON				
Sunrise today	7:05 a.m.			
Sunset tonight	5:14 p.m.			
Moonrise today	11:42 a.m.			
Moonset today	3:00 a.m.			
	Full	Last	New	First
	Feb 16	Feb 23	Mar 2	Mar 10

NATIONAL EXTREMES

Yesterday's National Extremes: (for the 48 contiguous states)

High 91° in Santa Ana, Calif. Low -10° in Angel Fire, N.M.

NATIONAL WEATHER TODAY



Discovery of coyote carcasses distresses Walla Walla man

By **EMRY DINMAN**
Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

WALLA WALLA — A Walla Walla man running his dogs near Kibler Road the morning of Friday, Feb. 4, came across a startling scene: four dead coyotes stacked on top of each other in a ditch between the road and an adjoining field.

"It is sickening to say the least," said Steve Rusch. "I've been running my dogs on that road for 20 years; I have never seen anything like this. It's barbaric."

The coyotes appeared to have been dumped relatively recently, with one showing signs of scavenging, and were along Kibler Road, a dead-end country road near a weigh station on the side of U.S. Highway 12

east of Walla Walla.

Rusch said he was distressed to see the carcasses dropped on the side of a remote road, calling it disrespectful to the animals and to people in the area.

"They're close to the highway. Someone probably just pulled in there to dump them," he said.

Not certain if any laws had been broken, Rusch reached out to federal agencies and the Walla Walla County Sheriff's Office, where staff referred him back to the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, he said.

That agency regulates coyotes in Washington, but until officers observe the site to determine if the carcasses were illegally dumped, it's not immediately clear that anything criminal occurred,

wrote WDFW enforcement liaison Becky Elder in an email.

Coyote hunting regulations are some of the least restrictive in Washington state, with no bag limit and a year-round hunting season. While a small game or big game hunting license is required to hunt coyotes, coyotes are not classified as game animals, which means that existing laws against wastage do not apply, Elder said.

"Currently no statute exists that would prohibit a person from lawfully shooting a coyote and letting it naturally degrade," she wrote.

"The unlawful take of a coyote would include poisoned, trapped, or that any other unlawful means of harvest were used."

DEQ announces new leadership in Eastern Region, Water Quality Program

East Oregonian

SALEM — The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality in a recent press release announced it has new leadership in its Water Quality Program and Eastern Region offices.

Jennifer Wigal is the new Water Quality Program administrator, replacing Justin Green, who left DEQ to pursue other interests; and Shannon Davis is the Eastern Region administrator, replacing Linda Hayes-Gorman, who is retiring from the agency.

The two administrators come from within the managerial ranks at DEQ and bring a wealth of experience to their new jobs.

Davis has led the Lifecycle Programs Team in DEQ's Materials Management Division for the past four years. The program studies environmental impact of the full

lifespan of materials and products, from manufacture to disposal.

Davis has worked in the materials management field for 15 years. In addition to her work at DEQ, she has tackled environmental issues for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the state of Arizona and in the halls of Congress. While at EPA, she contributed to national materials management policy development and co-led the West Coast Climate and Materials Management Forum.

As director of Arizona DEQ's waste programs and Pima County's air quality program, Davis focused on environmental policy development and implementation. She also served three elected officials, including chief of staff to a member of the U.S. House of Representatives. She also had the privilege of supporting indigenous

communities throughout the Southwest in the stewardship efforts of their land.

Wigal has more than 20 years' experience working in water quality programs at the state and federal level. She's been at Oregon DEQ since 2008, and most recently served as Water Quality deputy administrator.

In her tenure at DEQ, she's held several roles within the Water Quality Program, including managing Oregon's Water Quality Standards Program and the Water Quality Assessments Program. Prior to DEQ, she built her expertise in water quality programs at EPA headquarters, working in water quality standards and permitting. Wigal also has held national leadership positions, including serving as the president (2017-18) and vice president (2016-17) of the Association of Clean Water Administrators.

EAST OREGONIAN
— Founded Oct. 16, 1875 —
211 S.E. Byers Ave., Pendleton 541-276-2211
333 E. Main St., Hermiston 541-567-6211
Office hours: Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Closed major holidays

EastOregonian.com

In the App Store:

East Oregonian (USPS 164-980) is published Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, by the EO Media Group, 211 S.E. Byers Ave., Pendleton, OR 97801. Periodicals postage paid at Pendleton, OR. Postmaster: send address changes to East Oregonian, 211 S.E. Byers Ave., Pendleton, OR 97801.
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Circulation Dept.
For mail delivery, online access, vacation stops or delivery concerns call 800-781-3214

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