



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Maddie Ford, left, and Julie Bodfish pose for a photo at Fitzgerald Flowers on Adams Avenue on Monday, Dec. 27, 2021. Ford is on track to become a full partner in the longtime La Grande store when Bodfish, the owner, retires.

West Coast ports still are facing gridlock

Global shipping crisis snarls agricultural exports, increasing costs and delays

By **GEORGE PLAVEN**
Capital Press

TANGENT — As congestion at ocean ports along the West Coast has continued in 2021, Alexis Jacobson has seen her schedule thrown into chaos.

Jacobson is the international sales manager for BOSSCO Trading, a company based in Tangent, near Albany, that sells grass straw from farms around the Willamette Valley to customers in Japan and South Korea. The straw is used as feed for beef and dairy cattle.



Jacobson

Under normal circumstances, Jacobson spends roughly an hour a day working with ocean carriers to ensure their cargo makes it aboard ships bound for Asia.

That was before COVID-19 inflamed a nationwide shipping crisis that has snarled ports, catapulted costs and left agricultural exporters scrambling for options.

“We’re constantly making a plan, and then changing that plan because of circumstances out of our control,” said Jacobson, who now spends most of her time each day calling audibles whenever a vessel is late, or the booking is canceled. Timetables are constantly in flux, and often change with only a few days’ notice.

Ag exports impacted

BOSSCO Trading is hardly alone. Just about every Northwest farm exporter — from Oregon hazelnuts to Washington apples to Idaho potatoes — is feeling the pinch.

Shipping containers that once sat on the docks for three to eight days are now waiting a month or longer to be loaded onto vessels, depending on their destination.

In some cases, carriers are foregoing Asia-bound exports altogether, opting instead to send empty containers back to Asia, where they are loaded with higher-priced merchandise such as clothing, footwear and kitchen appliances. Critics of the practice describe it as a money grab, with the industry reporting record profits this year of more than \$200 billion.

The price of shipping exports from the U.S. is also skyrocketing. Jacobson said general rates that once ran \$400 to \$500 per container are now as high as \$2,000 to \$2,500.

While that added cost can be tacked onto the prices of most consumer goods, farmers

See, *Gridlock*/Page B2

BUSINESS IS BLOOMING

Maddie Ford joins current ownership as partner of Fitzgerald Flowers

By **DICK MASON**
The Observer

LA GRANDE — The future of Fitzgerald Flowers, one of La Grande’s older family-owned businesses, is becoming as clear as the glass vases that come with its popular Winter Splendor bouquets.

It’s a future Maddie Ford, the floral shop’s assistant manager and an employee for the past 10 years, will be a big part of.

Ford has entered into a partnership agreement with Julie Bodfish — the shop’s owner since the mid-1990s — that makes Ford a part owner.

Ford, who is also a professional photographer, will become a full partner at Fitzgerald Flowers in five years. Bodfish said she will likely retire about then. She is confident Ford will keep the floral shop in full bloom.

“It will be in her very capable hands after I retire,” Bodfish said.

The plan for Ford to eventually run the business is one Bodfish and Ford have been working on for some time.

“We have been talking about this a lot, especially the last several years,” Bodfish said.

Family approval

Bodfish is the daughter of the late Pat and Helen Fitzgerald, who started the flower shop in 1944. She said she has the blessing of her family in making plans for Ford to become the shop’s next owner.

“This is a huge deal for our family,” Bodfish said. “Maddie has the stamp of approval from



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Julie Bodfish, left, and Maddie Ford smile outside Fitzgerald Flowers in La Grande on Monday, Dec. 27, 2021. Bodfish, whose parents opened the shop in 1944, is training Ford to take over the business.

everyone in our family.”

Ford is touched by how graciously members of the Fitzgerald family have reached out to her.

“They have adopted me as a part of their family,” she said.

Bodfish gave Ford a job at Fitzgerald Flowers less than a month after Ford graduated from Cove High School in 2012. Bodfish said Ford and Courtney Miles, who is an assistant manager at Fitzgerald Flowers and has been with the shop for about 20 years, are the two best hires

she has made.

Ford said she applied at the store in 2012 because her older sister, Mollie, had worked there previously, enjoyed the experience and spoke highly of the shop’s staff. Maddie Ford initially looked upon the job as a means of helping her work her way through college while earning a degree in art from Eastern Oregon University.

She had no intention to someday own Fitzgerald Flowers.

“Absolutely not,” Ford said. Bodfish had other ideas,

though. She soon saw that Ford had the talent needed to become a floral designer and a future owner. Bodfish began giving Ford the training she needed. Today, Ford knows floral design and all elements of the flower business.

“She clearly understands every job in the shop,” Bodfish said.

These jobs include preparing floral bouquets for weddings — ceremonies Ford often photographs for families as the owner of Blackbird Photography, a business she has owned and operated since 2013.

“I love having the chance to do both at the same wedding,” Ford said.

She said she views photography as an extension of what she does when creating floral designs for weddings.

“The two go hand in hand,” Ford said.

Embracing a motto

Outside the entrance to Fitzgerald Flowers is the motto of Bodfish’s mother: “Treat your customers as friends and your staff as family.”

Ford said she is impressed with how Bodfish has taken the motto to heart.

“Julie has absolutely adopted it,” Ford said.

Ford said that when she becomes the owner of Fitzgerald Flowers she will continue to strive to live by this motto while also tapping into her passion for artistic expression.

“I love being able to create for the community,” Ford said. “It is fun to bring beauty into people’s lives.”

Biden sets agenda to boost meat processing competition

By **CAROL RYAN DUMAS**
Capital Press

WASHINGTON — The Biden administration announced on Monday, Jan. 3, its new plan to boost competition in the meatpacking industry and reduce meat prices to consumers.

The plan includes \$1 billion in American Rescue Plan funding to expand independent processing capacity, strengthening rules that protect producers and consumers, promoting vigorous and fair enforcement of existing competition laws and increasing transparency in cattle markets.

President Biden met with family farmers in a virtual roundtable to discuss the plan. Also participating were Attorney Gen-

eral Merrick Garland, Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, and National Economic Council Director Brian Deese.

Scott Blubaugh, president of the Oklahoma Farmers Union, said more local processing of livestock would allow producers to retain more of the retail food dollar at their farms and ranches, in the family operation and in their rural communities.

“For too long, we have seen the multinational meatpackers suck out all of the wealth of rural America and put it in their corporate coffers — and in some cases, even overseas,” he said.

Producers are excited about being able to have processing done by local people and then selling directly to the con-

sumer, Blubaugh said.

“Whether we can sell to the grocery stores, the restaurants or the consumers directly, all of them will enable our rural communities to be lifted out of poverty,” he said.

Expanding local processing is critical to keeping dollars in the communities where that wealth is generated, Vilsack said.

“For far too long we’ve had an extraction economy in rural America where these guys work 24/7, 365 days a year raising these cattle, and then they transport them hundreds of miles away and the profits basically go thousands of miles away,” he said.

Retaining profits in small



Baker City Herald, File

The Biden administration on Monday, Jan. 3, 2021, announced plans to increase competition in the meatpacking industry.

See, *Agenda*/Page B2