



STAFF PHOTO BY GARY L. WEST

Stefan Matheny, director of sales for River Point Farms, talks about the Hermiston Sweets onion variety produced and package by the farm. With Matheny are Jonathan Miller, plant manager for the fresh pack facility, and Mackenzie Mills, who works in sales and account management for River Point Farms.

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River Point Farms is the largest onion producer in the country, farming more than 6,000 acres around the region. Sweet onions make up just 5-10 percent of what's planted, though orders usually sell for \$3-\$5 more than regular onions, depending on the markets.

Though they're close in terms of distance, Matheny said Hermiston Sweets don't compete directly against Walla Walla sweet onions. Walla Walla Sweets are largely grown over winter, he said, while Hermiston Sweets aren't planted

until February or March, meaning they hit shelves later in the year.

The result makes for a smooth transition from one Northwest-grown sweet onion to the next, Matheny said. Hermiston Sweets are also grown using a different type of seed, which gives them more of a globe shape and darker, tighter skin.

Jonathan Miller, who runs the production line at River Point's fresh pack facility, said this year's harvest has been one of the best in years. Mild temperatures over the spring and summer made for excellent growing conditions, he said.

"Two weeks ago is when we really hit our busy sea-

son," Miller said.

As for Hermiston watermelons, Jack Bellinger of Bellinger Farms said they also just finished up their busiest August ever. The mild weather actually delayed the start of melon harvest by several weeks,

Bellinger said, but that seemed to have no effect on quality.

"It was a better than average year," he said. "We've sent out quite a few loads for our Labor Day push."

By sharing the Herm-

iston name, Matheny said he feels they've been able to help grow awareness for local agriculture as a whole.

"I think it's kind of helped grow awareness of the versatility of commodities that can be grown in this area," he said.

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things like paperwork and inventorying supplies.

"My biggest challenge every year is trying to get volunteers," Rossell said. "People are very generous with writing a check or donating hot chocolate but we really need adults able to volunteer."

She said she hopes they will be able to add some new services this year, such as vouchers for rides and showers.

Last winter and spring a number of homeless campers were evicted from several popular but illegal encampments, including one along River Road near Umatilla. At the time the people evicted said they did not know where they would go or whether they would stay in the area, but Rossell said that should not have much of an effect on the Warming Station's numbers because the people who use the shelter tend to be recently evicted or otherwise newly homeless and not established in a tent.

For more information about volunteering or leasing a space to the nonprofit visit the Hermiston Warming Station Facebook page or contact Rossell at 541-720-1146.

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