

All aboard the Cap. Al James tugboat



The tugboat Capt. Al James on Thursday, Aug. 18, 2022, is a permanent display along the Columbia River Heritage Trail in Boardman.

The Columbia River is visible Thursday, Aug. 18, 2022, from the stern of the Capt. Al James tugboat on display near the Columbia River Heritage Trail in Boardman.

PHOTOS BY YASSER MARTE

Hermiston Herald



The Capt. Al James's steel pusher-style tug boat is ready for a closeup Thursday, Aug. 18, 2022, by the Columbia River Heritage Trail in Boardman. The ship was designed to withstand the currents of the Columbia River.



The sun glistens on the historical Capt. Al James tugboat display Thursday, Aug. 18, 2022, along the Columbia River Heritage Trail in Boardman.



The sun rises Thursday, Aug. 18, 2022, over the tiny white historical information hut alongside the Capt. Al James tugboat on display near the Columbia River Heritage Trail in Boardman.

Boardman Foods takes the spotlight on tour

BY JOHN TILLMAN
Hermiston Herald

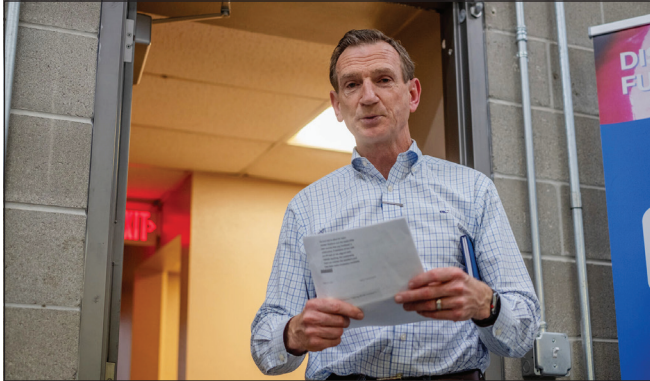
Boardman Foods at the Port of Morrow in Boardman was center stage Aug. 15 for Oregon Business & Industry's 2022 statewide manufacturing and innovation roadshow.

OBI asked elected officials, industry leaders and economic development partners from across the state to join its tour Aug. 3-17 of more than 2,000 miles and 20 stops. Boardman Foods and the Port of Morrow were the lone highlights in Northeastern Oregon.

The Port of Morrow is the second busiest of Oregon's 23 ports. Among its diversified industries are food processing plants; frozen, refrigerated and dry warehousing and Amazon Web Services data centers.

Boardman Foods' facility processes fresh and frozen onions, peppers and other produce and is at the intersection of two interstate highways, adjacent to a major rail line and the Columbia River. These transportation links support convenient shipping to regional, east coast and international markets.

It is a family business, not a



Yasser Marte/Hermiston Herald

Boardman Foods President Brian Maag hosts a tour of the facility Aug. 15, 2022, for the Oregon Business & Industry bus tour group at the Port of Morrow in Boardman.

subsidiary of a giant food company, Boardman Foods President Brian Maag explained.

"When my grandfather and his brothers came from Ireland around 1918, all the best land in Oregon had already been homesteaded," Maag said. "They took out some of the last claims on juniper, hard rock and rattlesnake land, but managed to make a go of it by raising sheep. One brother went back to Ireland. The others managed to buy out other scrub land claims and raise cattle."

The now predominantly onion processor employs 250 to

300 people, depending upon the season. The premises cover 15 acres. Floor space is devoted about equally to manufacturing and storage.

"In 1990 we moved to the Port of Morrow to be closer to potatoes," he said. "We were a private-public partnership, but it was hard to get ordinary commercial loans. U.S. Bank eventually took a chance on us."

The onion business comes in three main product lines, selling to about 50 companies, including giants such as Conagra Brands.

STATE-OF-THE ART OPERATIONS

First, Boardman Foods packs premium fresh onions to suit customers' specific quality, size and packaging needs in all colors, package sizes, flavors, varieties and ring specifications. Boardman Foods' state of the art storage facility enables the company to supply customers a quality fresh northwest onion year round. Its slogan is, "We give you the best, because we have a home for the rest."

Two other processes add value. Fresh whole peeled onions provide a firm, succulent product ready to slice and dice. Peeled onions are ideal for use in soups, sauces or any recipe needing a flavor kick. Upon entering the facility, the latest vegetable processing equipment sizes, tops, tails and peels onions to customers' specifications.

Individually quick frozen onions provide food manufacturers a steady, consistent year round supply at a competitive price. Sweet Spanish or Grano onions are cut to customers' specifications using the latest vegetable processing equipment.

"It takes a lot of energy to freeze onions and store them in a

warehouse kept below freezing," Maag said. "Going from 33 to 32 degrees is a lot less energetic than making the state change from liquid to solid."

Processing ready to eat products occurs in a sterile environment.

"We designed the facility in 2017 to minimize the possibility of coliform bacteria or other pathogens collecting on surfaces," Maag said. "Workers' shoes are scrupulously disinfected. The onions are cooked at 180 degrees. The overpressure our ventilation system provides is maintained at the highest level in the ready to eat space. We've never had a recall."

A powerful magnet removes any metallic fragments from processed onions before packaging. And robots have taken over much of the packaging process, Maag said.

"Packaging risks accidents, so we adopted robotics for safety concerns," he said.

Sam the Robot, named for the company's first employee, Operations Vice President and Debbie Radi's father, carried two 45-pound onion boxes.

Tom Flaherty, Maag's cousin

and sales vice president, emphasized the importance of transportation links.

"One railroad car carries as much as four trucks," he said. "When trucking companies were short drivers during the pandemic, then diesel fuel took off, we were able to take up the shipping slack thanks to our Union Pacific main line rail connection."

WORK ETHIC CONTINUES

Boardman Foods organized the Families First Childcare Center, 255 Olsen Road, to help retain and recruit workers during the pandemic.

"Forty to 50 school-age kids attend day care center," Radi said, "and up to 20 preschoolers will join them this year."

The next generation of his family has the same work ethic as their Irish immigrant ancestors, Maag concluded, citing his son Patrick, plant support manager.

Following the visit to Boardman Foods, roadshow participants had an opportunity to meet local business leaders at the nearby SAGE Center. The center is an interactive museum highlighting sustainable agriculture and energy in Morrow County.

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