

Oregon cold storage plant announces expansion

Expansion of SnoTemp's cold storage plant in Albany is seen as a sign of the continued economic health of Oregon's food manufacturing sector.

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Eric Mortenson/Capital Press SnoTemp CEO Jason Lafferty, left, and cousin Caroline Lafferty, the company's accounting and resource manager, look over plans for expansion of the company's Albany, Ore., cold storage plant.

ALBANY, ORE. — SnoTemp Cold Storage, which added 100,000 square feet just five years ago, will break ground this month on the eighth expansion of its Albany plant since 1974.

The work, expected to be done by May 2016, demonstrates the company's continued commitment to production agriculture and local food and beverage processors, CEO Jason Lafferty said.

The company freezes and stores bulk vegetables and ingredients for repackers such as NORPAC Foods Inc., the farmers' cooperative, and provides frozen or cold storage for other customers ranging from ice cream and dessert makers to craft breweries.

The company's storage capacity is the equivalent of 15 football fields, each piled 25 feet high with frozen food, Lafferty said.

SnoTemp, which began in Eugene in 1957 and still has storage facilities and administrative offices there, will expand the Albany cold storage plant by about 20,000 pallet positions arranged in vertical racks. The work will make it easier to accommodate small to mid-size processors that struggle to gain a foothold in the marketplace.

"In a bulk warehouse environment, bringing in a pallet or two or three is a challenge," Lafferty said. "We've had to say no to the smaller folks. We've been protecting space for our core customers."

The additional storage space may benefit processors, for example, who have put all their capital into kitchen facilities.

"What they need to get to the next step is cold storage," Lafferty said. "In Albany, we've had to turn people away."

Adequate and accessible cold storage is among the problems hampering "ag of the middle" producers and processors, according to a recent report by Ecotrust, a Portland nonprofit.

Small processors "always run out of cold storage first," said Amanda Osborne, Ecotrust's vice president of farms and food and lead author of "Oregon Food Infrastructure Gap Analysis."

The report examines the hurdles faced by small- to mid-size growers and processors who are too big to survive by farmers market and CSA sales but too small to joust with commodity and corporate competitors.

Additional cold storage is critical to support regional food systems, Osborne said. She is familiar with SnoTemp's relationship with small processors. "They're willing to work with very small players," she said. "I can't overstate how important that is."

Stahlbush Island Farms, of nearby Corvallis, has used SnoTemp for off-site cold storage of its vegetable, fruit, grain and legume products since 1990. Co-founder Karla Chambers cheered SnoTemp's expansion, calling the company "a really good family and a really good business."

The expansion also appears to be part of a continuing economic success story for Oregon food processors. A labor trends report issued by the state Employment Department in December 2014 showed that from 2007 to 2012, the depth of the recession, Oregon's manufacturing sector lost 15.8 percent of its jobs. But food manufacturing jobs increased 7.8 percent during that same period.

Lafferty, the CEO, said SnoTemp has doubled the combined employment at its Albany and Eugene plants in the past four years.

Lafferty is part of a third-generation wave that has assumed control at SnoTemp. His cousin, Caroline Lafferty, is accounting and resource manager; Willie Lafferty is facility engineer and Paula Lafferty, is vice president of finance and technology head.

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<http://www.ecotrust.org/publication/regional-food-infrastructure/>

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