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Snake River Produce cites benefit of Farmers to Families Food Box

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At Snake River Produce, in Nyssa, OR, both General Manager Kay Riley and Transportation Manager/Sales-Marketing Assistant Tiffany Cruickshank said in September they were glad to see steady demand for early onions out of Idaho-E. Oregon's Treasure Valley.



Tiffany Cruickshank

“I’m pretty pleased,” Riley commented mid-month, and Cruickshank said she was likewise happy and “pleasantly surprised.”

Markets were stronger than anticipated in the wake of COVID-19’s shutdown/slowdown of foodservice.

“Our crop was planted before the lockdown,” Cruickshank said. “Now we’re coming in with a normal crop and supplies.” The company started shipping on Aug. 11, within the normal window but a week to 10 days earlier than average. “And we’ve been pleasantly surprised with the market and demand,” she said. “When we stopped shipping 2019-20 in April, the market was not good.”

In July, Cruickshank had predicted the 2020 crop to be on time, which it was, and she observed, “The end of our 2019-2020 season saw a dramatic shift from foodservice to retail, when restaurants began shutting down and grocery store shelves were bare. With the current balance, I see retail becoming more of a key player in our mix — offering a wide variety of packaging and sizes, while maintaining our traditional foodservice accounts.”

Her prediction was on point, and in September she said foodservice demand is close to normal, and the uptick in demand stemmed from the USDA.

“With the additional round of Farmers to Families Food Boxes came quite a retail push,” she said.

The crop itself had flourished under “growing conditions that were nearly ideal,” Cruickshank said. “We had very nice weather, and our harvest conditions have been very pleasant as well. The onions are coming in with good size — really a variety of sizes through all three colors.”

Snake River Produce also has a sweet onion program, and she said this year’s “limited start was intentional.” Cruickshank explained, “We’ll have more sweets as the season progresses, and we expect to have supplies until February or March. This year we expect to have more options for the

sweets at retail, and we're seeing the biggest demand for 3-pound packs."

With its updated packing facility running full-steam in Nyssa, Snake River Produce is capable of packing anything from a 3-pound consumer bag to a 3,000-pound tote.

COVID-19 brought other challenges as well, including increased food safety protocol. "We took the opportunity in the off-season to install plexiglass barriers on the line. We also take temperatures of employees when they come to work, and everyone wears a mask and practices social distancing," she said.

On the matter of pathogen testing, Cruickshank said Snake River Produce is third-party tested to make sure each field is free of pathogens that include E coli and Salmonella.

"We do have less truck capacity," she said of the ongoing transportation issue. "As the weather cools, we won't have flatbeds. And Cold Connect's closing down will have an impact as well. There are many factors coming together to create a challenging season for transportation."

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