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# **‘Normal start’ for Baker & Murakami during extraordinary times**

By

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Although curveballs came at the produce industry from almost every angle this year, weather in the Treasure Valley of Idaho-E. Oregon wasn't one of the wild pitches, according to Baker & Murakami Produce COO Cameron Skeen.

Skeen said the region experienced a very good growing season, and Ontario, OR-based Baker & Murakami saw a "much more normal start" to the new crop.

He said that "2019 was a growing season we'd like to forget," adding, "We had beautiful harvest conditions this season compared to last. Other than a couple weeks of thick smoke layer in early September, weather conditions were ideal."

Going into harvest in late summer did bring some issues with labor, Skeen said. "Harvest labor continues to be a serious threat to our industry. Luckily Mother Nature played nice, and we were able to manage through, but labor is a serious concern moving forward."

And, with COVID-19 affecting the entire industry, protocol has since the outbreak always been top-of-mind. "We did continually remind our employees about the important of social distancing and mask wearing throughout harvest," he said.

The first loads went out Aug. 3, "which was five to seven days earlier than our normal start up," Skeen noted, and he said movement has been steady throughout the season.

"We had really strong demand for whites in September and October," he said. "Jumbos continue to be the strongest demand on all three colors."

Skeen said Baker & Murakami is part of the USDA Farmers to Families Food Box Program. He explained, "We have been supplying distributors who are part of the Food Box program, and we feel it's been excellent in keeping the wheels in motion and keeping demand at normal levels."

This Thanksgiving, which many Americans are celebrating by staying home and "gathering" with family and friends via social media and apps such as Facetime and Zoom apps, did see an uptick in onion demand. Skeen described the holiday pull as "similar to years past," and when asked if prices have held during the first half of the season, he said, "For the most part."

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As year 2020 comes to a close, the issues that are most impactful are likely to roll over into 2021.

Skeen said, “Labor and transportation have both been significant challenges, and if you add on top of the labor situation the precautions that are being taken to mitigate COVID-19 exposure to keep everyone safe and healthy, it’s been a challenging year.”

But the company is ready to take the new year on, and Skeen concluded optimistically, “It’s no secret trucks are tight and freight rates are high, but our transportation department has done a fabulous job of navigating the waters and getting our customers covered despite the serious headwinds.”

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