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Baker & Murakami cites 'steady, consistent' foodservice and strong retail demand

By

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As onion harvest 2021 continues in the Treasure Valley of Idaho-E. Oregon, Baker & Murakami Produce in Ontario, OR, is seeing some reduction in yields and a smaller onion size profile, but demand in mid-September was strong for all colors and in all markets.

According to COO Cameron Skeen, the full effect of this year's planting and growing season had yet to be determined. "Yields are off, and the size profile is smaller than normal," Skeen said on Sept. 13.

He continued, "As of today, our volume looks like it will be down for the season. By how much is a moving target. It will be less than we've had the past couple of seasons."

Skeen said certain sizes were tight at the outset and could become more so during the season. "Colossals and supers are both tight," he said. "I think anything jumbo and larger in yellows along with jumbo reds and whites could all become tight as we progress through the season."

But, he added, quality is good. "The storage crop finished off early because of the heat and has had plenty of drying time in the field. All signs point to quality should be very nice."

Trish Lovell in sales noted that sales have been going well, and she said, "Demand remains good on all colors. Foodservice has been steady and consistent like the past couple of years, and retail has remained strong, same as the last few years."

Transportation, Lovell said, is "still challenging." She said, "Rates remain high, availability very tight."

Lovell, who has 30-plus years' experience in the industry, works as part of the sales team established by father and son Jerry and Steve Baker. The Bakers, with Grant Kitamura, launched Baker & Murakami four years ago, combining their individual Ontario, OR, operations of Baker Packing and Murakami Produce. A five-entity grower-partner group provides Treasure Valley product.

Skeen bridges two of the company's bases, that of operations at the shed and also growing onions on his own. Earlier this year he spoke about the ongoing labor shortage in the industry, noting that Baker & Murakami, as well as most shippers in the region, is looking at automation to "do more with less people. He said in July, "Mechanization and technology will provide the means to get us where we need to go, but the challenge will be whether it pencils or not."

He added at that time, "Labor is a major issue, especially for harvest season. We continue to look at ways to mechanize or automate to try and manage through the shortage." And about transportation, he said Baker & Murakami has a "great transportation department that continues to step up day after day to keep us going."

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