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Snake River Produce adds acres, new varieties and titles for familiar names

By

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Continuing its forward motion into year two of new ownership and management, [Snake River Produce](#), based in Nyssa, OR, implemented a number of changes over the past 12 months.

General Manager Joshua Frederick noted, “We have made some changes on the farm with more acreage added by a couple of our growers along with some different varieties added to the early program which started the week of Aug. 7.”

In personnel, Frederick said he maintains his role as GM for the operation and also works sales.

“As we go into the 2023 season, every employee we had for 2022 is returning other than a very few — and that’s because they have either retired or are working for family now and/or found different jobs,” Frederick said.

“Kyle Erstrom, who has been with SRP for more than six years, will start a new role this season as a sales associate/new accounts and will continue to handle farm relations with growers. Kyle will also be assistant manager over farm and harvest along with shed and drivers for SRP,” Frederick said.

SRP payroll/accounting/bookkeeping has been handled by Tawni Maxwell, and this season Maxwell will continue in that capacity as well as taking the role of office manager.

Stephanie Barnes, who for the past 12 years had worked with Maxwell in the financial office, has become sales assistant and will handle customer relations and new accounts.

And 13-year veteran SRP team member Marisela Romero has stepped into the role of HR director and shipping manager. Food safety and assistant cropland auditing is being handled by Brenda Trujillo, who will also work in HR with Romero.

In the shed, Gordo Lopez, a 20-plus year SRP veteran, is assistant general manager.

Frederick commented on his first year, saying, “It was a great season in more ways than one for Snake River Produce. To begin, I came in with a bullseye on my back and big shoes to fill with the retirement of Kay Riley in 2022. Being new to the area, I also had to earn the trust of the existing growers that grow for SRP as well as the trust of our employees when I became their new manager.

“With that said, the season was also challenged for the first time in its 23-year history by not contracting onions exclusively as it had done at times during previous years.”

Changes since 2022 have been significant, but they are in keeping with the tradition of quality

assurance and commitment to full service that have been hallmarks of SRP since its founding in 1999.

SRP owners Kevin Corn and Chris Payne had been members of the company's owner group since 2015 prior to assuming full ownership last year, and the two brought in Frederick as GM.

Before it was SRP, the operation was part of Muir-Roberts headquartered in Salt Lake City, UT. In 1999 a group of Idaho-E. Oregon growers bought the company. Kay Riley, who had worked for Muir-Roberts at the Nyssa, OR, facility, was SRP owner/GM, a position he held until his retirement in 2022.

SRP's history book had new construction pages written in recent years. During Snowmageddon of 2017-18 the operation lost its packingshed and warehouse, and in 2018 a new 30,000-square foot warehouse/office facility and a 32,000-square foot climate-controlled storage were erected.

Additional warehouse upgrades have also been made since the 2022 season. "We started working with Volm Cos. of Idaho Falls in replacing equipment," Frederick said. The new equipment includes two 25-ton Holaras toppers with Wyma conveyance and JDC dust extraction, "We are also putting in a Sinclair labeling machine for stickering our onions into bag, cartons and RPC," he added.

Frederick added, "We have Global Gap for our food safety program for the shed and some of our farms, and we are currently installing Famous software for our program."

Another change in the past year came with Snake River Produce packing more for retail in 2022, and Frederick said the company is "slowly making the transition to offer more consumer packed items for our customers in the next couple of years."

He added, "We will be small for a while on consumer packs but will be providing what we can with the equipment we already have in place until we complete a consumer pack program hopefully within the next few years."

Of course foodservice remains vital for SRP, and Frederick said, "We have increased the volume with our foodservice customers as well. With more volume this season expected, we have also increased our storages."

The 2022-23 season, Frederick said, saw "a great steady market in my opinion, and the demand was incredible out of the gate and throughout most of the season with a decline toward the end as new areas started early around March."

The early start and market slowdown "didn't stop us," Frederick said. "We plowed forward with one goal in mind, and that was to continue to provide first-class customer service and quality. With great growers we are able to maintain that, and that goal will never change for SRP. I would much rather explain the price than apologize for the quality."

Like any other year, 2022 had its challenges, and Frederick said, "I would have to say rail was our biggest issue, including delayed cars for orders needing to ship and equipment issues in transit. But we are putting that behind us and learning from it, correcting the issues at hand and moving forward."

Frederick said, "We also made a change and went exclusively with Murray Trinity Logistics out of Austin, TX, to handle 100 percent of logistics for SRP."

Describing the planting and growing seasons of last season, when weather conditions were brutal to Idaho-E. Oregon, Frederick said, “The most significant impact of 2022 were the yields and quality in the Treasure Valley. SRP was honestly blessed by having a very decent crop and yields last season, but we also had some fields we had to market in other ways due to quality. However, with our growers working as a team, we all made that happen and overcame some of the challenges others around us also faced.”

He went on to say, “Labor, fuel, utilities, interest rates, lease ground and packaging have increased and continue to increase — and you ask yourself, ‘When will it ever end or settle?’” Frederick said, “Maybe a new election coming up and or a major crisis will be the key factor of that ever happening. Who knows?”

Company longevity, he said, is no secret but it does take perseverance. “To continue to grow and stay in business, you adjust and adapt, it boils down to raising the cost of goods whether in the grocery store or restaurant.”

Frederick said, “For a grower to survive and continue to grow, we must maintain the market needed in order to make that happen. We all should work together instead of working against each other.”

He said in August, “The most pressing thing I see for 2023 is determining what true yields are harvested and put in storage and then hopefully having a steady demand all around. Mother Nature can change the game in a matter of one storm, so I never get ahead of myself on speculating what our markets will be. But for a grower’s sake — along with all of us — with major costs and expenses, I pray the market is one that will allow us to continue to offer the finest onions grown!”

Photo: GM Joshua Frederick dubbed this group “the best crew in the Valley.” Arturo Diaz, Manuel Rodriguez, Juan Solano, Melecio (Gordo) Lopez, Raul Gonzales, Bill Stout, John Looney and Kyle Erstrom. Photo courtesy of Snake River Produce

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About Kathleen Thomas Gaspar |

Kathleen is a Colorado native and has been writing about produce for more than three decades and has been a professional journalist for more than four decades. Over the years she's covered a cornucopia of crops grown both in the United States and abroad, and she's visited dozens of states – traveling by car from her home base in Colorado to the Northwest and Southeast, as far as Vancouver, BC, and Homestead, FL. Now semi-retired, Kathleen continues to write about produce and is also penning an ongoing series of fiction novels. She's a wife, mother of two grown sons and grandmother of six, and she and her fly fisherman husband Abe reside in the Banana Belt town of Cañon City.

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