

Burbank's Railex adding shipping route

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Railex's unique approach to shipping fresh Mid-Columbia produce across the country by rail has been such a success that the company plans to add a second weekly route.

The company has talked about adding a second weekly route since sending the first train packed with fresh potatoes and onions from its Burbank facility to the East Coast in October 2006.

Now that second weekly train becomes a reality for the New York-based company in February. And by summer, Railex expects to have completed a distribution center in California and will run two weekly trains between California and Washington.

"Since August we have had full trains," said Jim Kleist, Railex's general manager in Washington.

Since Railex started making its five-day East Coast runs to Rotterdam, N.Y., it has shipped about 12,000 truckloads of Washington cherries, apples, wine, onions and potatoes, as well as California and Oregon fruit, nursery plants and flowers.

The cars have returned with more than 2,700 truckloads of beer, juice, seafood and fresh fruit.

Kleist said higher fuel prices and increased exports to overseas markets have increased demand for Railex's services. The company also had to prove itself to a produce industry skeptical of rail transportation reliability.

"Earning trust has been absolutely huge for us," Kleist said.

Traditionally, shipping by rail, though cheaper than trucking, has been slow and risky. It wasn't uncommon for a car filled with perishable product to be inadvertently left in a switching yard, which can cost shippers tens of thousands of dollars.

But Railex's closed-loop unit train stops only for maintenance and shift changes and the climate-controlled cars never are unhooked from each other during the trip.

"They have done what they said they would do," said Dave Carlson, president of the Washington Apple Commission. "They have been delivering on time with very few quality problems that I have heard of. So after a few experimental loads, retailers and shippers have gained confidence."

Jennifer Dietrich, a marketing specialist for Crunch Pak, a Cashmere-based processor that sells sliced apple products, has been looking forward to Railex adding a second train.

Crunch Pak has been shipping more than 2,600 cases of sliced Washington-grown apples to the East Coast via Railex for more than a year. Now the company will be able to send its weekly order on two trains.

That flexibility is important for produce shippers. Supermarkets don't have to store as much product and the product on the shelves is fresher.

"It's definitely going to be beneficial and will help our business on the East Coast," Dietrich said.

Kleist said Railex's 67th train heading for the East Coast leaves Thursday. Beginning Feb. 9, the trains will leave Burbank on Thursday mornings and Saturday evenings.

The westbound trains will depart from Albany, N.Y., on Wednesday afternoons and Friday nights. The Wednesday train will arrive in Burbank on Monday and Friday's train on Wednesday night.

The additional trains also means more employees were needed to load and unload the cars. Kleist said the Burbank plant has more than 80 workers, twice as many as when it opened.