

LOCAL NEWS



Part of what attracted Pacific Fibre to the Weiser site was its railroad siding. PHOTO COURTESY OF PACIFIC FIBRE

Pacific Fibre Products announces Weiser facility

BY SHARON FISHER

SPECIAL TO THE IDAHO BUSINESS REVIEW

A Washington-based bark company with facilities in Oregon is adding a facility in Weiser, and credits the state's ease of doing business as why.

"It doesn't have a Kate Brown or a Jay Inslee," said Mark Fahey, CFO of Pacific Fibre Products Inc., referring to the Oregon and Washington governors. The company is based in Longview, Washington. "Idaho welcomes business as opposed to setting up rules to chase them away. Every person, their first words have been 'Thank you for considering Idaho, and how can we help?' It's refreshing."

"We are excited to be working with this family company," said Kit Kamo, executive director of the Snake River Economic Development Alliance, which provides economic development services to the counties on the Idaho-Oregon border. It will fit into the community very well, offering excellent benefits and salaries higher than the average wage in Washington County, which was \$34,724 in 2020, she said.

The company is working with Washington County for a property tax exemption, and with the Idaho Department of Commerce on other incentive programs for which the company may be eligible, Fahey said.

New Weiser facility

The Weiser facility is intended to make "beauty bark." "We buy raw bark from area sawmills, as one of their byproducts, and we turn it into a variety of 'beauty bark' products, bark that may be in your front yard or around commercial buildings," Fahey said. He wouldn't say what volume he expected the Weiser facility to produce.

In its first year, the company hopes to create seven jobs, six of which will be hired

locally, with an entry-level wage of \$19.95 and an average wage of \$24.89 per hour, with an initial annual payroll of about \$400,000. The salary paid in Weiser will be the same as that in the company's Oregon and Washington facilities, Fahey said. In the second or third year, the company hopes to add four more positions, he said. All positions will be offered medical, dental, vision, 401K and a bonus, according to documents submitted to Washington County for the property tax exemption.

The company is bringing in one person, who had been intending to retire, to build out the site and run it for the first two years, Fahey said. Of the locally hired people, jobs include equipment operators, such as two people operating Caterpillar front-end loaders, a millwright and entry-level jobs like "stick picker." The raw material the company buys includes white wood, which needs to be pulled out in the process of manufacturing, he explained. "If (workers) can do that job for six, eight, 10 months, we'll train (them) to be a machine operator," he said.

In addition to jobs, according to the documents, the company expects to bring in \$1.532 million in equipment, \$150,000 for a rail scale and other rail costs, \$987,000 in rolling stock and \$600,000 in new asphalt and concrete for a total investment of over \$4 million, including the property itself. Other than the rail-related ones, all investments will be made this year, the documents said.

The company hopes to start building by the first of September, and making product in December or January, Fahey said. "A lot of work needs to be done" to the property, because the asphalt is broken up and structural work needs to be done inside the buildings, he said. "We've got to make everything safe before we start operating."

The property's previous use

The site, previously home to the Four Rivers onion processing facility, is an approximately 9-acre property (descriptions vary), about two or three miles south of Weiser, with several existing buildings totaling over 83,000 square feet, according to Colliers International. About 4 acres of additional yard space makes up the rest of the acreage.

"It's a distressed piece of real estate that KeyBank had foreclosed on," Fahey said. Pacific Fibre expects to close on the property later this month, he said.

It includes a railroad siding. "That was one of our must-haves," Fahey said. The company owns a fleet of gondola rail cars for shipping its product to other Western states such as California, Colorado and Utah, and will likely be bringing some raw material into Weiser as well, he said.

The property was listed by Colliers International Idaho at \$1.2 million. Fahey wouldn't say how much the company paid, but the property tax documents listed \$815,000 for the land and building acquisition. It was assessed for \$501,856, according to a property listing.

"It was a pleasure working with Pacific Fibre Products on their first acquisition in Idaho," Michael McNeight, of Colliers International, said in an email. "Pacific Fibre Products' professionalism, business success and experience will be welcomed in the Weiser, Idaho market."

Two of the buildings will probably be torn down, but the company will use the others for storing bark operations and finished goods, Fahey said. "They were not a must-have, but they lay out pretty well," he said.

The equipment for the former Four Rivers onion packing plant was sold at a liquidation sale in September 2019.

Internet on Idaho farms better than national average

BY CATIE CLARK

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The U.S. Department of Agriculture released its every-other-year report Aug. 18 on computer and internet usage on farms, with statistics for every state. The numbers in the report are based on a national survey of 15,000 agricultural operations throughout the nation conducted in June 2021. The big takeaway from this report is that Idaho agriculture is better connected than the national averages.

The first statistic is that 79% of Idaho farms had a desktop or laptop computer in 2021, which is better than the national average of 67%.

In Idaho, 95% of farm operations had internet connectivity where 99% paid for that access. This was also better than the national averages, where 82% of farms reported having access to the internet with 98% paying for access.

In terms of using the internet to purchase ag supplies in 2021, Idaho was no different than the national average, despite a large percentage of computer ownership: 29% of Idaho farms and 29% of farms nationally used the internet to buy supplies. In Idaho, 23% used the internet for agriculture marketing activities, which includes price checking, sales and online ag auctions, which was only 2% better than the national average.

Idaho farms that did business with non-agricultural websites fell from 68% in 2019 to 64% in 2021. This was still higher than the national numbers, where farms that conducted business with non-agricultural websites in 2021 decreased by 6% to 47%.

In 2021, 59% of Idaho farms had a broadband connection; 72% accessed the internet on a cellular device and 27% used a satellite connection. The Idaho numbers for farms with broadband were better than the nation's average, which was 50%. National cellular access of the internet was 70%.

The national 2021 average for farms with satellite access was 19%, which is a bit lower than Idaho. Idaho farm usage of satellite connection is likely influenced by the non-trivial number of farms and ranches in the state, which are far removed from any city or town. An interesting comparison is with California, where 32% of all agricultural operations reported a satellite connection to the internet, which was the highest percentage in the country. The second highest was Texas with 29%.

Last, 81% of Idaho farms reported possession of a smart phone and 37% reported a wireless tablet or other portable smart device. In comparison, the national average for farms with a smart phone was 67% and 29% reported possession of a tablet or other portable wireless device.



Four Rivers Production Facility. PHOTO COURTESY COLLIERS INTERNATIONAL