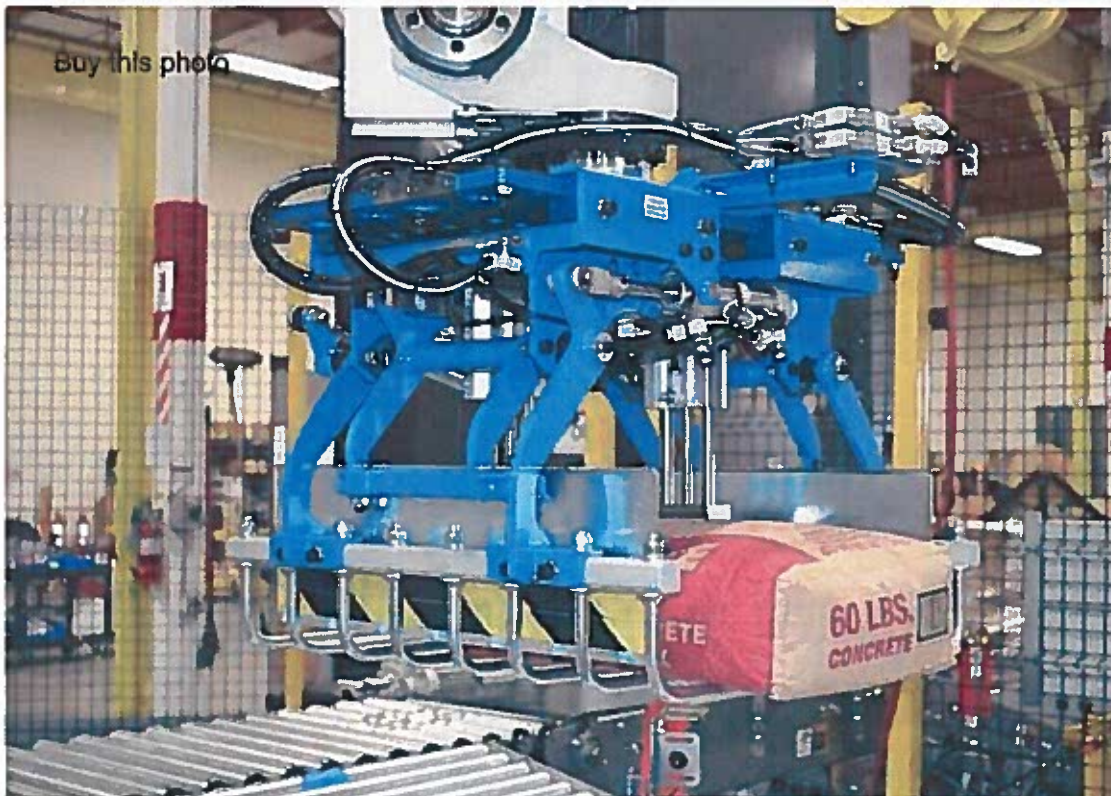


# Automation paves the way for West Coast Companies in Salem

West Coast Companies of Salem specializes in the design and sale of packaging, processing and storage equipment for agricultural products.

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A robotic palletizer, distributed by West Coast Companies, stacks 60-pound bags of concrete. Andrew Burleigh, general manager of WCC, said technology like this is helping agricultural industries overcome labor turmoil.

SALEM, Ore. — Andrew Burleigh knows the concern is there, that robots could soon replace many human workers in agriculture and food processing, but he insists that isn't the case.

Automated systems are not replacing people, Burleigh said, but redefining what they do. For example, instead of hoisting 50-pound bags of product and loading them onto pallets by hand, a machine can now do the heavy lifting while employees transition to more favorable, less physical jobs.

"I haven't seen technology be this big replacing entity," said Burleigh, general manager of West Coast Companies in Salem. "More and more, this is what customers are looking for."

West Coast Companies, which started in 1998 as West Coast Seed Mill Supply, specializes in the design and sale of farm factory equipment including robotic conveyors, sealers and stackers. The family-owned business works with more than 50 suppliers, distributing to customers from single growers to Fortune 500 companies.

It was Burleigh's father-in-law, Dwayne Hayden, who launched West Coast Seed Mill Supply to help grass seed growers adopt new equipment. Twenty years later, the companies have branched out to serve a variety of agricultural and non-agricultural products — everything from hazelnuts to concrete.

"If it's a material that needs to be processed, stored and packaged, we can work with anybody," Burleigh said.

The companies now include West Coast Seed Mill Supply, West Coast Nut Processing Supply, West Coast Packaging Solutions and American Ag Systems, which helps with installation and maintenance. Offices are in Salem, Twin Falls, Idaho, and Great Falls, Mont.

Burleigh said there is a growing emphasis on automation in agriculture to help the industry navigate labor turmoil, including worker shortages that have companies struggling to fill shifts on the production line.

"You have presidents of companies start breaking down and go stacking on the production line," Burleigh said. "That's usually when we get the call."

One piece of technology Burleigh highlighted was the robotic palletizer, essentially a robot arm with metallic "fingers" capable of stacking products onto pallets for shipping.

In the face of tightening labor, Burleigh said the palletizers can work around the clock, and certain models can even wrap the pallets as they are being packed.

The next big push, he said, is companies looking to vertical integration, owning more of their own manufacturing equipment to send their products directly to market.

"People want to produce their own label," he said.

Looking ahead, Burleigh said West Coast Companies is continuing to look at new markets and help serve a broader base of customers with automated lines.

"This is something the agriculture industry is really starting to embrace," Burleigh said.