



► From left to right, Andrew Burleigh, Dwayne Hayden and Merrissa Burleigh in front of a robotic palletizer.

West Coast Companies: A One-Stop Shop with Unparalleled Expertise

When Dwayne Hayden started West Coast Companies in 1998, robotic palletizing systems were the thing of science fiction. Today, according to Andrew Burleigh, general manager of the company, very few companies are building new seed cleaning plants without robotics in mind.

"Almost all new facilities are planning for a robot at some point," Burleigh said.

As technological advancements expand in the seed processing industry, having a partner to help design and integrate seed cleaning equipment into new and existing operations is vital for seed growers and seed companies.

One key partner for the industry over the last twenty-six years has been the Salem-based West Coast Companies. The company has developed partnerships with top-of-the-line seed cleaning equipment manufacturers, according to company Vice President Merrissa Burleigh, and has helped integrate the technology into the grass seed industry.

"We have built up a lot of great partnerships over the years," Merrissa said. "Dwayne refined who he wanted to work with, because we are the person, the face that the customer deals with. We wanted

to make sure that the equipment we're selling is the best and is going to withstand the wear and tear. And so, we've moved away from companies that weren't as desirable and went towards the ones that are the best in the market."

Merrissa, who is Andrew's wife and Dwayne's daughter, said West Coast Companies brings an expertise to the field that few companies can match, an expertise that has benefited both equipment manufacturers and seed cleaners alike. Seed cleaning equipment manufacturers, in fact, have sought help from West Coast Companies when developing equipment, Merrissa said.

Q-SAGE, a leading supplier of grass seed cleaning equipment, worked closely with Dwayne when it decided to expand from servicing corn and soybeans out of its Michigan headquarters to servicing grass seed. "The current operator of Q-SAGE came out here and ran around with Dwayne for a while, and he assisted in helping that manufacturer design the

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Andrew Burleigh

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equipment. They listened to the farmers about what they loved and what they hated, and they've been a wonderful partner for us since they started in grass seed," Merrissa said.

Cohesive Team

West Coast Companies also works closely with the robotic palletizing integrator Columbia Okura out of Vancouver, Washington. "They really appreciate the knowledge that we bring to the table," Merrissa said. "They're like, 'Ok, you guys understand this. Let's partner.' And they are wonderful partners. It's a pretty cohesive team."

"Our West Coast drafting team collaborates with the Columbia Okura drafting team to ensure our customers' floor plans and designs are well dialed

in. It's just another added level of service that we offer that makes a difference," she said. "We address things that you might not think about, even to the height of your workers versus the bars that are going to be overhead, meeting fire and safety codes through OSHA. That's what we're here for is to ensure that all those issues are addressed."

Merrissa noted that before West Coast Companies came on the scene, many seed cleaners would work directly with manufacturers, an arrangement that sometimes worked, and sometimes didn't.

"A lot of our customers were having to go out and try to make these contacts and then piece-meal the entire line together on their own, which was super time consuming," Merrissa said. "And a lot of these manufacturers know their equipment really well, but they didn't know the equipment upstream and downstream in the processing line. So, they were hoping the equipment was going to integrate seamlessly, but a lot of times it did not. But then we came along and could put a line together, save them time while they're out in the field working on their business and make sure it is more cohesive with the best clean out."

Bread and Butter

Launched in 1998 as West Coast Seed Mill Supply Company, West Coast Companies started in the seed cleaning business, but expanded over the years until today it works with processing, handling, packaging and storage equipment for multiple industries, including primarily agriculture, but also in the dog food, mining, cat litter and other industries.

Within agriculture, the company has expanded into working with hazelnuts, providing drying equipment, handling equipment and packaging solutions for the hazelnut industry. And an unaffiliated company, operated by Andrew and his brother-in-law, American Ag Systems, provides construction services for West Coast Companies, including millwright services, expansion and remodeling services, equipment removal, safety upgrades and others.

Still, according to Merrissa, the grass seed industry remains a significant priority for the company.

Dwayne noted that when he started West Coast Companies, the grass seed industry was way more hands-on than today. "When I started, I thought this industry was mainly a manual industry," Dwayne said.

"People stacked the seed, etc., etc. But through all of the different labor situations, plus the costs of labor, today you need to get automated."

Upgrading a seed line with automation, it turns out, is a very hands-on process, according to Andrew, and requires an expertise that can take years to develop.

"It is not an over-the-phone process," Andrew said. He added that at this point in his career, he can walk into an operation and quickly assess whether adding a robotic palletizer will fit into the current setting or whether the operator will need to add a lean-to structure or perform some other upgrades.

"We provide that local support about fit, about performance and warranty. And, in the case something does go wrong, we're here locally to address that," Andrew said.

The arrangement, Merrissa said, is a win-win for both manufacturers and seed cleaning operations. "It's better for the manufacturers to have someone close to the customers assisting them directly," Merrissa said. "Most manufacturers are based in the Midwest, and if there is something wrong with the machine, they don't want to fly out, and the customer isn't keen on paying for them to fly out. They call us, and we visit the customer directly."

West Coast Companies also keeps a sizable inventory of replacement parts on hand that it can deliver to plants in a matter of hours versus days and in some cases weeks, a critical advantage during harvest season.

"When people breakdown in harvest, it's quite often that we have the parts right on the shelf," Dwayne said.

West Coast Companies also can meet individual demands of its customers, like designing a magnetic separator to remove soil from bentgrass seed lots to reach soil content levels of less than 0.01 percent, something it did for a customer looking to ship seed to Japan. And the company works with customers hoping to add value to their seed products by producing smaller bags or helping with blending lines.

"A lot of people want to take control of that value-add step," Andrew said. "It got kind of centralized for a while, but then people saw how successful others were and they wanted to bring that value to their own families and companies."

As technological advancements continue to evolve in the seed cleaning industry, the advantages



West Coast Companies brings to the industry are ever expanding. And, something worth noting is the company continues to take an old-school, personal approach to its customer relations.

"We still shoot for old school," Merrissa said. "We want to see our customers face-to-face. We want to go visit. We want to offer that service that I feel like people are yearning for in an age where everything is so hands-off."

West Coast Companies services the Western United States from its headquarters in Oregon. The company can be reached at 800-970-7333 or in Salem at 503-581-7131. To reach American Ag Systems, call 971-301-3909. ♦