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FEATURED SPOTLIGHT

Yakima Kwik Lok facility part of tour promoting Washington manufacturers

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Kwik Lok co-owner Stephanie Jackson leads a group through the assembly building of the company's Yakima facility on Thursday, Oct. 13, 2022. Kwik Lok was one of Washington businesses visited on the Association of Washington Business Manufacturing Week tour.

Joel Donofrio, Yakima Herald-Republic

Manufactured goods in Washington come in all shapes and sizes, from gigantic Boeing 737 aircraft that carry passengers thousands of miles to small plastic clips to keep bread and produce fresh.

The latter product is produced in the Yakima Valley by Kwik Lok, a family-owned and -operated business that was part of the Association of Washington Business Manufacturing Week tour.

Kwik Lok's products include the plastic clips that close bags of bread and produce, along with related machinery. The business sends these clips around the world, CEO Don Carrell said Thursday as a group of 30 visitors toured the company's facilities just south of the Yakima airport.

“Manufacturing is a big part of our region’s economy — it’s not just agriculture,” Carrell said. “It’s a challenging (economic) environment out there. ... How do you take something that was invented in the 1950s and keep it relevant in the 2020s? That’s what we’ll show you today.”

Manufacturing in Washington

Finding and training employees was a popular topic at many of the 30 stops on AWB’s Manufacturing Week bus tour, which began Oct. 6. The tour’s conclusion on Thursday, Oct. 13, in Yakima County was no different.

Manufacturers employ more than 8,500 people in Yakima County, with an average annual wage of \$51,000, the AWB reported. Statewide, manufacturers employ 265,000 people, or roughly 8% of the statewide workforce, and the sector was responsible for nearly 11% of the state’s gross economic output.

“The last few years have been challenging, and there’s a lot of uncertainty about the future of the economy,” AWB President Kris Johnson said. “Through it all, Washington’s manufacturers have proven to be resilient. Manufacturing is already a major driver of the economy, and now the state is working toward a goal of doubling manufacturing by 2031.”

Johnson mentioned three public policy initiatives the AWB would push toward reaching that goal: investment in education and workforce training; protecting Washington’s affordable and renewable energy sources; and tax policies that allow the Evergreen State’s businesses to compete in a global marketplace.

Third generation of leadership

Kwik Lok is a third-generation, family-owned business founded in 1954 by Floyd Paxton, who invented the company’s first closure system as Washington apple distributors moved from boxes to bags.

The plastic closing clips have since become ubiquitous in grocery stores across the nation and world, with Kwik Lok products sold in more than 100 countries. More than 330 employees work in six factories, with 130 of those working in Washington state.

In 2015, a new generation of the Paxton family took over the business: sisters Stephanie Jackson, Kimberly Paxton-Hagner and Melissa Steiner.

“We made the decision to keep (ownership) in the family and continue my grandfather and father’s legacy,” Jackson said Thursday to those on the AWB manufacturing tour. “We’ve been doing it for seven years, and we want to stay here many more years.”

The company not only makes bag-closing clips in white and seven other colors, it also makes machines that print freshness dates and other information on them, along with equipment that applies the closures to the bags, Kwik Lok Engineering Manager Keith Kubishta said.

As Jackson led a group through Kwik Lok’s engineering department and assembly building, she mentioned several advantages of having long-serving employees, and even workers who span multiple generations.

“It’s a good family environment, and we pride ourselves on that,” Jackson added. “Things are changing rapidly, and having the ability to draw on that experience while also making changes quickly is so important.”

The company has recently put a focus on sustainability. New products include Eco-Lok, a sustainable bag closure made of a plant-based polymer that uses 20% fewer fossil fuels in the manufacturing process yet remains printable, reusable and metal-detector compatible. Another new product is Fibre-Lok, a closure made of 100% post-consumer recycled paper.

The company also has new closing machines featuring laser-stitch technology, which indicates if a bag has been opened while also preventing bags from tearing.

The three products were featured at the Sept. 18-21 International Baking Industry Exposition in Las Vegas, company spokesperson Karen Reed said.

Tour concludes at WestRock

The AWB Manufacturing Tour bus, decorated with hundreds of signatures from across the state, made its final stop Thursday afternoon at WestRock’s Yakima operation, which has been making corrugated cardboard containers since 1969.

WestRock has 50,000 employees worldwide who make items such as food service ware, produce packing and delivery boxes, and it is the second-largest corrugated packaging company in the country.

Its local factory is at 2001 Longfibre Road, just north of the Lowe’s Home Improvement store in Union Gap.

Much of the material used at the Yakima facility comes from recycled products, the AWB noted in a news release. WestRock manages one of the country’s largest recycling networks, recovering more than 7 million tons of recycled fiber per year to make new products.

About 90% of the power for WestRock's pulp and paper mills in Washington state is co-generation energy derived from renewable biomass steam, which does double duty to produce both renewable power and thermal energy needed to operate the mills.

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