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Port of Newport employees at work providing vital services

While many Oregonians are doing their part by staying at home during the Coronavirus outbreak, those who contribute to key industries are still at work. When it comes to the food supply chain, many people first think of grocery stores, but that chain actually has many vital links, including fisheries.

With both agricultural and transportation implications, the Port of Newport is considered part of the country's critical infrastructure as defined by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

"Although the Port is considered an essential public service provider, just like everyone we had to adjust to the pandemic," said Paula Miranda, Port general manager. "Our decisions have been made based on federal, state and local guidelines with consultation with other ports while maintaining the safety of our staff and the community as much as possible."

That decision-making led to keeping the commercial marina and international terminal operating while closing or significantly limiting some of the recreational facilities. The result is an "all hands on deck" call to which the staff has responded favorably.

"I can't praise our staff enough," the general manager said. "While many of them are afraid to come to work and expose their families, most of them have been doing their jobs and serving the community during this difficult time. We appreciate their hard work and will continue monitoring the situation in order to keep them safe."

As a maintenance technician at the commercial marina, Aja Burke has continued to maintain docks, clean restrooms, and run a forklift during these unusual times.

"I think I can speak for our whole crew. We are so happy to have jobs right now," she said. "The port has been absolutely incredible in keeping us all employed full time. We are all here and working and taking all of the protective measures to stay safe."

Not much has changed for her, she explains, except a much more vigorous cleaning schedule.

"We're definitely practicing more safety measures than usual, but everyone understands what's going on and how we need to stay safe," she noted.

While some aspects of the Port's operations may allow for a work-from-home scenario, Burke and others working on the docks don't have that option.



At the Commercial Marina, Maintenance Tech Cameron Brockway hauls equipment to dockside for a shrimp boat.

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“The fishing industry is an essential business. We need to keep them moving and keep the product being offloaded and moved into the supermarkets,” Burke said. “We’re here for the fishermen, to make sure that their livelihoods are protected.”

Inside the Port’s administrative offices, operations must also continue, although two staffers are now working from home. Mark Harris, the accounting supervisor, is one of the people still reporting to the Bay Boulevard office each day.

“As the Port remains open, dock crews and others are at work and a key function is payroll and benefits. As work continues, our employees are also generating service tickets tracking forklift time, vessel tie-up time, and all kinds of different services. If we were to wait to bill for those services, it would have significant cash flow implications. And, of course, with the Port using resources, those bills need to be paid, too, so keeping up on accounts payable is important,” Harris explained.

Additionally, this is also the time of year when the organization is working on the next year’s budget and also wrapping up any loose ends from audits.

“It’s been a little more stressful as we’re changing procedures rather quickly while trying to get our regular work done and while people are a little more fearful of what’s going on around us,” he added.

Over on South Beach, maintenance worker Andrew Meats has seen a bit of a lull in the pace since the recreational marina’s boat launch closed to the public and the RV park has eliminated short-term stays in accordance with local orders.

“Lately, our chores are significantly reduced. Work orders are also slower, but we’ve been working on landscaping, doing projects here and there, and I have also been doing some training at the NOAA facility,” he explained. The Port of Newport manages the facilities at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration offices on South Beach.

Meats recognizes how lucky he is to have a job during times of unexpected layoffs and high unemployment, but that doesn’t mean he is completely without worry.

“I used to be a cook at a country club and if I had my old job, I wouldn’t be working right now, but I am a little nervous and it puts me on edge. That doesn’t discourage me from going to work. As long as the Port is up and working and expects me to be there, I’m going to be there,” he said.

Director of Operations Aaron Bretz said he is proud of the men and women of the Port.

“They are the reason why we will come out of this scenario in a good way. The Port of Newport and Lincoln county in general will still have a strong maritime sector after this whole thing is done.”

He extended that positive observation beyond the employees of the Port to recognize all of the people who are still at work in grocery stores, electric companies, and elsewhere.

“There are people across many industries that are still hard at work so your daily lives can continue. They are the front lines of any kind of supply chain and they are a dedicated bunch of people working through a difficult situation,” he said. “We are thankful for them all.”

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