

Monday, July 15, 2019

# ColumbiaCounty Spotlight

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## NEXT signs neutrality agreement with labor union

👤 Anna Del Savio 📅 Friday, July 12, 2019



**Union, NEXT Renewable Fuels agree to be civil in potential future unionization efforts**

NEXT Renewable Fuels has agreed to remain neutral in potential organizing efforts between future NEXT employees and the United Food and Commercial Workers 555 union.

UFCW 555 represents more than 25,000 workers in grocery, retail, manufacturing, healthcare and other fields across Oregon and southwest Washington.

"Basically, a neutrality agreement is that we won't oppose our employees wanting to unionize, and the union won't badmouth the company. It's basically we'll both treat each other civilly," NEXT President Lou Soumas explained.



PMG PHOTO: ANNA DEL SAVIO - Lou Soumas, president of NEXT Renewable Fuels, speaks in front of the Port of Columbia County Board of Commissioners in June. NEXT officials amended the lease option with the port last month to move to a lot that is ready for development. This week, NEXT announced it had signed a neutrality agreement with UFCW 555.

The agreement applies to efforts to unionize operating staff at the biofuel manufacturing plant NEXT plans to build at Port Westward. The facility isn't expected to open until 2021. NEXT plans to employ 200 local workers for operations.

UFCW 555 already has a presence in Port Westward as the union representing employees of Columbia Pacific Bio-Refinery, owned by Global Partners LP. State Rep. Brad Witt, D-Clatskanie, was instrumental in connecting UFCW with NEXT, explained UFCW 555's secretary-treasurer, Jeff Anderson.

Federal labor law restricts how employers can respond to union organizing efforts. Employers are prohibited from threatening employees with consequences if they unionize or offering rewards in exchange for not unionizing. Employers can, however, advocate against a union in certain circumstances.

Under the agreement between NEXT and UFCW 555, "NEXT will maintain strict neutrality in connection with union organizing and collective bargaining," according to a press release about the neutrality agreement.

NEXT has also agreed to allow UFCW 555 to hold meetings on site and will share employee contact information with the union.

Under the agreement, UFCW 555 cannot "coerce nor threaten" NEXT employees, make disparaging remarks about NEXT, or picket on site.

A number of unions expressed interest in representing future NEXT employees, but UFCW's existing presence in the area made them a good fit, according to Soumas.

"We think they're going to be great partner in the community. We're looking forward to family-wage jobs being created," Anderson said of NEXT.

NEXT previously signed a memorandum of understanding with trade groups Columbia Pacific Building Trades Council and the Pacific Northwest Regional Council of Carpenters, which means they will work together on a project labor agreement for construction of the facility. That agreement will outline working conditions by which all contractors involved in construction of the facility must abide.

NEXT amended its lease option agreement with the Port of Columbia County last month to a parcel of land that is ready for development. With the parcel selected, NEXT can now move forward on design and permitting for the facility.

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- NEXT Renewable Fuels announces property purchase at Port Westward (<https://pamplinmedia.com/scs/420706-325059-next-renewable-fuels-announces-property-purchase-at-port-westward>)
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