

Senator Murray takes tour of Wallula Railex center



Senator Patty Murray & Jim Kleist, Senior Vice President of Railex

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U.S. Sen. Patty Murray stopped for a tour of the \$20 million Railex Wine Services center in Wallula on Tuesday.

The facility, built in 2013, is a temperature- and humidity-controlled wine storage and distribution center.

Murray helped secure the necessary infrastructure funding for the rail lines serving the center and an adjoining produce facility.

"This is a prime example of the economic story of America and why we need to invest in the infrastructure of the country," Murray said. "There are a lot of people with ideas, and the drive to carry them out. They just need some help getting started."

Right now, Ste. Michelle Wine Estates is the primary tenant.

"We may, in the future, work with others," said Jim Kleist, senior vice president of West Coast operations for Railex.

The facility is 500,000 square feet -- the size of 11 football fields -- and has the capacity to hold 5 million to 6 million cases of wine.

Two trains a week transport Eastern Washington produce to New York. That traffic is expected to increase this year as Railex opens a new distribution center in Jacksonville, Fla.

"When Jacksonville opens -- and we'll be breaking ground any day now -- that will increase to four trains a week," Kleist said.

One train can carry about 8 million pounds of produce in refrigerated, temperature-controlled freight cars.

The wine services center can ship as many as 40,000 cases of wine a day, said Ken Akar, director of operations at the Wallula facility.

They use a mix of railroad freight cars and trucks to transport wine across the nation.

"The number of cases we send out from here varies from day to day and season to season. Right before the holidays it gets crazy here," Akar said.

The Port of Walla Walla plans to add about 8,300 linear feet of new rail, rail switches and gravel services roads at a cost of \$2.4 million. The new tracks will accommodate the additional train traffic Railex expects later this year, said Jim Kuntz, the port's executive director.

"So far, that project is on schedule and should be completed by June," said Port of Walla Walla Commissioner Mike Fredrickson.