



Safe passage

Nurseries, freight brokers work to ensure product safety in transit

Mauricio de Jesus Rosendo (left) and Sebastian Lopes load plants into a truck at Bountiful Farms Nursery Inc. in Woodburn, Oregon. Getting plant material loaded properly is key to them arriving safely at the destination. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL

BY MITCH LIES

Getting nursery material from point A to point B safely and undamaged is a fluid process, according to freight brokers and nursery owners. It requires precision at the loading dock and careful monitoring during transit.

Often, what is done prior to calling a carrier is a vital first step.

Robert Bissell of **Left Coast Logistics** (Lake Oswego, Oregon), said he starts by talking with a nursery to get a sense of what they're shipping. "Is it durable enough for a dry van or even rail, or do we need to find a refrigerated trailer for the move?" he asks.

With that information in hand, he starts by matching carriers with the job, beginning with studying their safety ratings on carrier monitoring services like

Carrier411 and RMIS Carrier Directory.

"We look at a carrier's safety record, operation, insurance, authority, equipment and overall track record before putting them on a load," Bissell said. "From the brokerage side, safety really starts with selecting the right carrier."

Matthew Frederick of **K&M Distribution Inc.** in Rogue River, Oregon, said he is familiar with many of the carriers he works with. Even so, he too begins his selection process by turning to Carrier411. "It starts there," he said.

The platform is designed for brokers, shippers and other logistics professionals. It tracks carrier fitness in multiple categories, including driver safety and vehicle maintenance.

"Driver safety and vehicle maintenance are the two biggest indicators of how your carrier is going to be able to

make the transit," Frederick said. "If they have a bad driver-safety score and their vehicle maintenance is low, then those two combined are a very good indicator that there is going to be a problem in transit."

VIN verification

In addition to checking databases, qualifying carriers involves matching VIN numbers to the trailer hauling the load. "That is part of our due diligence," Frederick said. "We try to make sure we get the last five VIN numbers on the trailer, so we know that they're covered under insurance."

K&M also calls carriers to verify the identity of a dispatcher or a driver to ensure against double-brokering, or re-tendering of loads. This practice that has become more common and can increase risks with safety and liability. »

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“There is so much double-brokering going on, and so many people going around the rules these days, that it is a full-time job just qualifying carriers,” Frederick said. “Honestly, it’s the hardest thing we do.”

Bissell added that the dispatchers at Left Coast Logistics, which works strictly with nurseries, have a minimum of 15 years of experience in the shipping business. “That helps ensure that we get qualified, experienced carriers,” he said.

Once a freight broker qualifies a carrier, brokers work to align transportation equipment with the product being shipped. This is particularly so, Bissell noted, when dealing with refrigerated freight, which is particularly sensitive to damage during transit.

“Maintaining the required temperature throughout the trip is critical to getting the product to its destination in good condition,” he said.

At **Bountiful Farms Nursery Inc.** in Woodburn, Oregon, owner Todd Nelson said that when transporting material in dry vans, loaders work to protect product from temperature extremes by lining metal sides with four-by-eight sheets of cardboard to prevent plant material from touching the metal, which can become too warm or too cold during transit.

“It creates a small insulation barrier,” Nelson said.

Securing loads

The next big concern for freight brokers, as well as nurseries, involves properly securing loads with load locks, straps and other devices.

“Usually, when we are delivering to independent stores and retailers, the product is floor loaded, and we require four load locks and a picture of the load secured before they leave a site,” Bissell said. “If the material is ever on rolling racks, we would need a trailer with E-Track, and then that driver would need at least 12 straps to better secure the load.”

“Securing the load is a huge process,” Nelson said. “We know that the truck leaving our docks will be traveling potentially several thousands of miles to its des-



Crew Leader Celso Barron drives an articulated loader to carry a pallet of arborvitae into a truck at Bountiful Farms. For safety and efficiency, Bountiful Farms uses well-lit articulated loaders to load trucks and assigns a crew leader for each load to supervise loading. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL

tination and we just really want to make sure that the load is secured.”

Frederick said K&M requires its carriers carry a minimum of four load locks, in part to accommodate partial load drops. “I have a rate confirmation that says you have to have a clean trailer and minimum four load locks,” he said.

Load security also involves proper loading procedure. Nelson said his load supervisors start with heavier material if possible and add lighter material toward

the end of the loading process.

“There is a bit of an art to loading a truck, and our crews are trained how to put that jigsaw puzzle together so that the load rides the safest,” Nelson said.

Nelson added that Bountiful Farms assigns a load manager for each truck, and the nursery has instituted multiple safety features for the loading process, including using articulating loaders with reverse beepers and keeping well-lit machines on the docks. And loading supervisors at >>



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Above and below: Tracking is a big part of intermodal shipping at Independent Dispatch Inc. In the screen capture below, the company always knows where the containers are when they're on the railroad, whether they're moving, where in the shipping process they are. The tracker also indicates when doors have been opened or closed and the temperature inside the container. PHOTOS COURTESY OF INDEPENDENT DISPATCH INC.

Bountiful Farms bring years of experience and training into the process.

"There is a bunch of training that goes into the communication with the individual running the loader with the ground crew who are loading and unloading the pallets onto the semis," Nelson said.

Safety flags

The nursery also places safety flags in front of each semi at its loading dock and instructs drivers not to depart until that flag is removed.

"That way we don't have a truck driver mistakenly pull away from our docks thinking that his load is full," Nelson said. "There can at times be 20 trucks at our docks, and if you're just yelling or whistling and saying, 'Hey, you're good to go' two different drivers could take that information and mistakenly both leave."

Bountiful Farms also stays on top of shipments during transit with a monitoring system that allows the nursery to track the location and temperature of a load.

"We basically have live data as to where our load is and what the temperatures are so we can have that as an insur-

A Ping: City of Industry, CA 91744	BlumeIoT 
16844-16972 VALLEY BLVD, CITY OF INDUSTRY, CA 91744, USA Not moving.	2026-09-23 at 06:18 CDT
Temp is 64.6 F. Door is closed	
A Ping: Diamond Bar, CA 91789	BlumeIoT 
ORANGE FWY, DIAMOND BAR, CA 91789, USA Travelling 64.0 MPH. Temp is 64.6 F. Door is closed	2026-09-23 at 06:03 CDT
A Ping: Ontario, CA 91761	BlumeIoT 
CA-60, ONTARIO, CA 91761, USA Traveling 62.0 MPH. Temp is 64.4 F. Door is closed	2026-09-23 at 05:48 CDT
A Ping: Fontana, CA 92337	BlumeIoT 
13860 SANTA ANA AVE, FONTANA, CA 92337, USA Travelling 6.0 MPH. Door is closed	2026-09-22 at 17:17 CDT
A Ping: Baker, CA 92309	BlumeIoT 
86-98 SILVER LN, BAKER, CA 92309, USA Not moving. Door is closed	2026-09-22 at 14:15 CDT

ance to make sure that the driver is where he says he is and that the reefer was set to what we asked it to be set at," Nelson said.

Freight brokers also regularly track loads as a means to protect shipments from damage and to help ensure time schedules are met. "If there is a delay, mechanical issue, weather problem or any other unexpected situation, we want to know about it as soon as possible so we can communicate with the customer and work with the carrier to address it," Bissell said.

Jim Bambach of **Independent Dispatch Inc.** (Portland, Oregon) noted that tracking loads is also a big part of intermodal shipping.

"We always know where the containers are when they're on the railroad, whether they're moving, where in the shipping process they are. We can also tell whether the doors have been opened or closed, which adds an additional layer of oversight during transit. And if there are ever any sort of delays, if we see anything that doesn't seem right, we reach out to the railroad and work within their system to try to identify what is happening and to address it with them so the container is not delayed any longer than is necessary," Bambach said.

Communication is key

Whether shipping by rail, intermodal or truck, good communication throughout the process is a key for ensuring products arrive safely at their destination, according to brokers and shippers. Bambach said he starts communicating with carriers early in the process, before the shipping season begins. "We sort of do a pre-season reset, and just reiterate to them our expectations to get off on the right foot," he said.

West Coast Logistics communicates with carriers at the start of the delivery process and throughout delivery, Bissell said. "We make sure the carrier understands the pickup and delivery requirements and any special handling requirements." The company talks to drivers at least twice a day during transit, he added.

Ultimately, Bissell said his job is getting the right carrier and the right



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equipment with the right shipment and then staying involved throughout transit until the bill of lading is signed. "From a liability standpoint, good carrier selection, proper documentation, clear instructions, shipment tracking and consistent communication are all important," he said.

Frederick echoed that, noting that attention to detail is invaluable in mitigating issues that can arise at multiple points in the shipping process and ensuring products arrive safely and undamaged at their destination.

"Those mistakes can really affect the supply chain and have the potential to damage relationships, and relationships are really important in this business," Frederick said. "So, if we can avoid that, we will." ©

Mitch Lies is a freelance writer covering agricultural issues based in Salem Oregon. He can be reached at MitchLies@Comcast.net.



Mauricio de Jesus Rosendo pulls conifers off a pallet at Bountiful Farms. For load stability, larger plant material is loaded first, followed by smaller plants. PHOTO BY VIC PANICKHUL

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Knowing opportunities and risks

Farwest keynote speaker Charlie Hall urges businesses to make decisions with their best available information

Economist Charlie Hall, Ph.D., urged green industry businesses to make their best possible strategic decisions with the information they have, rather than be paralyzed with the what-ifs. PHOTO BY MAX STEIN

BY CURT KIPP

It's an uncertain world out there, economically speaking — even with the growth the nursery industry has seen in the post-pandemic years.

But noted economist Charlie Hall, Ph.D., urged green industry businesses to make their best possible strategic decisions with the information they have, rather than be paralyzed with the what-ifs. And that goes for production levels, pricing, capital investments, or anything else.

“In the midst of uncertainty, we tend to wait on some strategic decisions,” Hall said in his Farwest Show keynote speech, which took place in August. “One of my stances here today is that there are enough opportunities in the marketplace right now that you don’t want to wait in capturing some of those strategic opportunities.”

The keys are managing working capital well, operating efficiently, operating with strong pricing discipline, and main-

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taining focus on the value proposition one's company offers, Hall said.

Hall, the Ellison Chair of International Floriculture at Texas A&M University and chief economist for AmericanHort, drew a key contrast between assessing risks and uncertainties. Risks are known, but uncertainties can't be predicted.

“We tend to use those interchangeably, but risk is basically those things that you can pretty well gauge the odds of happening,” Hall said. “[With] uncertainty, you don’t have a clue.”

Recent uncertainties, according to Hall, have included tariffs imposed by the Trump Administration, as well as the Iran

war and resulting Strait of Hormuz closure, which have driven fuel prices skyward.

Leaders who postpone decisions due to risk can forget that indecision also has its cost. Those who study, set a personal deadline, and then act are most likely to be rewarded, he said.

It's important to keep awareness of which decisions can be adjusted most easily. For example, pricing that proves to be too aggressive based on customer response can be pulled back.

But Hall said that based on the past several years, growers who increased prices saw greater income, while those who held back just ended up sharing their margins with their customers. “If you're not seeing an increase in net profit from where we were in 2019, there's some things going on,” he said with a characteristic bit of understatement.

A sustained strong market for plants

Overall, the post-COVID market for plant products from 2020–2026 has ➤

Knowing opportunities and risks



Charlie Hall's keynote address at the Farwest Show drew a packed audience. PHOTO BY MAX STEIN

remained strong, Hall said. He displayed a chart showing the trend line over time. Plant sales grew slowly from 2016–2019, then shot up from 2020–2022 with people spending more of their time, and their discretionary income, at home. Since then, there have been periods of growth and decline, and some plateaus. Overall, sales growth has continued, but at a more modest pace.

“You can see that in 2023, 38% [of growers] said that they were growing more than 10%, and only 12% [said this] in 2026,” Hall noted.

Still, 97% of growers reported in 2026 that their sales were higher than in 2019, and 59% of them reported they were up more than 25%.

Hall pointed out that growth in sales does not necessarily mean growth in units shipped. The number of growers shipping more units has consistently trailed the number of growers with greater income. This is because sales growth has been led by price increases.

“The higher plateau looks like the new normal,” Hall noted on a slide. “The question is no longer ‘Are we going back?’ — it’s ‘What do we do from here?’”



Charlie Hall pointed out that growth in sales does not necessarily mean growth in units shipped. This is because sales growth has been led by price increases. PHOTO BY MAX STEIN

The growers with greatest success have raised prices enough to cover the increased cost of their inputs.

“Since 2019, if you’ve not raised your price by as much as 23%, you have not kept up with the inflationary pressure on

inputs, and you’ve been sharing your margin with your customers,” Hall said.

He added that the need to increase prices to keep up with inflation, cover costs and protect margins has only continued in 2026.

“There’s another 3.6% of inflationary pressure on inputs because of tariffs, because of Iran, and so forth, that you’re gonna have to cover this year,” Hall said. “And some are telling me, ‘I don’t think I’ve got the runway to raise price another 3.6%.’ Well, I just told you if that’s the case, you’re gonna be sharing margin with your customer. You may have to eat some of it. But my contention is when you’re trying to weigh whether or not you have that runway to raise price, and you’re thinking, ‘I can’t raise price anymore, my customers will go somewhere else,’ my only response is, ‘How do you know?’”

A future housing boom

Hall expects demand for plants to spike up again once more people start purchasing homes, which the numbers say will happen at some point.

“We have a latent demand for 1.7 million housing units between now and 2030,” he said. “When mortgage rates get below 5.5%, that’s a tipping point. Everybody that’s been waiting in the wings to buy and sell a house, they’re gonna pull the trigger, and when they pull the trigger, they’re gonna need some flowers, shrubs and trees and landscaping services.”

Green products, he said, continue to be strong performers for big box stores like Lowe’s, Home Depot and Walmart.

“Particularly for Lowe’s and Home Depot, there are no other departments in the entire store that even come close to what indoor and outdoor garden generate,” he said. “We are driving people to their stores. We are driving most of their increases in revenue.”

However, he did caution that strong spending has persisted in spite of the lowest consumer mood in seven decades. “We don’t spend based on how we feel,” he said. “There’s a correlation, but it’s not a strong correlation. That’s the irony, is that sometimes we spend to make ourselves feel mo’ better. And we see it in the numbers.”

Factors unique to the Northwest

Hall noted that based on sales figures from retailers, the Pacific Northwest is underperforming compared to other >>

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Knowing opportunities and risks

regions of the country. Sales figures are lower and the average ticket is lower.

At the same time, shipping costs are high with the Strait of Hormuz remaining closed due to the war between the United States and Iran. The federal government forecasted that diesel would sell for \$3.50 per gallon in 2026. Instead, the U.S. national average was \$5.26 per gallon as of August 10, the West Coast average excluding California was \$5.53, and the California average was \$6.62.

"Diesel prices are only a portion of freight, but you can see the freight rates, diesel prices going up," Hall said. "And here in Oregon, right, you're in a situation where you're paying a premium above most other regions of the country. And, the only state that's paying more is California."

Closing points

Hall's major takeaways were as follows:

The new baseline. The sales levels post 2020 formed a higher plateau that serves as the new baseline. "You're not in a downturn, you're on a plateau," he stated on a slide.

Pricing vs. volume. For growers, growth has been price-led, but there's a limit to how this can boost returns. Growers should focus on building back volume.

Margins matter most. Growers that focus on margin do best. Hall noted that 61% of growers increased their profits and 41% decreased theirs, in identical conditions. Those who did well looked at price structure, SKU discipline and pricing courage.

Tariffs are here to stay, for now. The most recent tariffs under Section 301 don't have a sunset, so growers should price them in as a budget assumption. If they go away, that's a bonus.

Plan for sideways. Hall expects growth of 1.5-2% and continued uncertainty. "The fog is the weather now, not a passing front," he stated on a slide. ©

Curt Kipp is director of communications and publications at the Oregon Association of Nurseries and the editor of Digger. Contact him at 503-582-2008 or CKipp@OAN.org.