

Fresh Food, Fresh Spirits: How Berge Bulk Growing Wellness Onboard

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Berge Bulk, a leading dry bulk ship owner based in Singapore, has successfully harvested over 1.2 metric tonnes of fresh vegetables at sea in 2024 through its hydroponics program implemented across its fleet. Launched in 2019, this initiative is part of Berge Bulk's larger efforts to enhance crew well-being and reduce food and packaging waste. It aligns with both the company's YouMatter wellbeing program and its Blue Matters environmental campaign.

In an exclusive interview with NUFFOODS Spectrum, Michael Blanding, Head of Sustainability & Communications at Berge Bulk, discusses how the hydroponics program has evolved from a simple concept aimed at supporting physical and mental health into a comprehensive sustainability initiative. The project boosts morale and fosters team culture while also reducing supply chain emissions. Overall, it is transforming sustainable living at sea, one harvest at a time.

What inspired Berge Bulk to initiate the hydroponics program back in 2019, and how has the vision evolved over the years?

The idea for our hydroponics programme began in 2019 as part of our YouMatter crew wellbeing initiative. At the time, we were looking for meaningful ways to support our seafarers' physical and mental health during long periods at sea. Access to fresh, nutritious food was a clear area of opportunity. As the programme developed, it quickly became apparent that hydroponics could also help address other operational challenges, such as food waste, supply chain constraints, and reducing packaging. What started as a wellbeing effort has evolved into a cross-cutting sustainability initiative that now supports our Blue Matters environmental goals as well.

Beyond fresh produce, what tangible or intangible impacts have you observed among the crew in terms of well-being, morale, and engagement since implementing hydroponics onboard?

The response from our seafarers has been overwhelmingly positive. Crew members have described the hydroponics systems as calming, therapeutic, and a welcome source of connection and pride onboard. We've seen messmen and chief cooks take ownership of the systems and share their harvests proudly through photos and recipes. Growing vegetables at sea provides a sense of normalcy and creativity - it gives the crew something to nurture, outside of their day-to-day responsibilities. That kind of engagement has a ripple effect on morale and team culture. It has also become a bonding activity, with crew members coming together to harvest and celebrate their efforts. The shared experience strengthens teamwork and camaraderie, which in turn increases overall morale onboard.

How has the partnership with Aerospring Hydroponics influenced the program's success and scalability across your fleet?

Our partnership with Aerospring Hydroponics has been instrumental to both the success and growth of the programme. Their compact, low-maintenance systems are well-suited for the limited space onboard ships. More importantly, their ongoing support has empowered our crew to confidently manage the systems. To strengthen communication, we created a dedicated WhatsApp group for Berge Bulk's chief cooks and messmen, giving them direct access to the Aerospring team for real-time guidance. This immediate support has helped build a strong sense of community and ownership, encouraging crew members to take initiative, share best practices, and stay engaged. As a result, we have been able to scale the initiative more effectively across our fleet.

Could you elaborate on how onboard hydroponics is helping to reduce food waste and packaging, and how this aligns with your broader environmental goals under the Blue Matters campaign?

Hydroponics helps reduce food waste in several ways. First, it provides produce that is harvested on demand, which means less wastage and fewer expired ingredients. Second, by growing food onboard, we reduce our reliance on packaged, shipped vegetables - cutting down on single-use plastics. The hydroponics onboard also help reduce supply chain emissions associated with delivering vegetables to our vessels. By producing fresh vegetables at sea, we minimise the need for frequent resupply and long-distance transportation, which contributes to lowering our overall carbon footprint. These changes directly support our Blue Matters campaign, which is focused on improving our environmental footprint fleetwide, from waste management to emissions reduction. As of end-2024, we've achieved a 12 per cent reduction in food waste per vessel vs 2021 baseline. This is surpassing our original target to achieve a 10 per cent reduction by 2025 (vs 2021 baseline).

With 1.2 metric tonnes of produce grown in 2024 alone, what lessons have you learned about integrating sustainable agriculture in a maritime setting, and what challenges have emerged?

We've learned that crew ownership is key - the systems are simple to use, but it's the crew's enthusiasm that drives real impact. Hydroponics can thrive in a maritime environment when you make it part of the culture, not just the equipment. The main challenge wasn't the technology, but how to embed the programme into daily routines and mindset.

To achieve this, we took several steps:

We made hydroponics part of the Messmen's job description and included it in their KPIs, giving them clear accountability.

We track monthly data on harvested produce to measure progress and celebrate milestones.

We launched hydroponics challenges through our Well@Sea platform to encourage friendly competition and participation.

We created a dedicated WhatsApp group chat for Chief Cooks and Messmen, providing a space for them to share tips, recipes and questions - including direct access to the Aerospring team for support. These efforts have helped turn hydroponics into a shared achievement onboard, something the crew can grow, own, and be proud of.

Do you foresee expanding the program to include more vessels, different crops, or even new technologies? What's next for hydroponics at Berge Bulk?

Looking ahead, we see opportunities to deepen engagement and experiment further. In 2024, we set a harvest target of 1 metric tonne of produce and we're proud to exceed it, reaching 1.2 metric tonnes. For 2025, we've raised the bar once again, setting a new target of 1.25 metric tonnes to reflect our commitment to continuous improvement and broader adoption across the fleet. We are also expanding our fleetwide hydroponics competitions to celebrate innovation onboard - from growing the largest capsicum to crafting creative meals using homegrown ingredients. Ultimately, the next phase of hydroponics at Berge Bulk will continue to support both crew wellbeing and environmental progress, as part of our broader commitment to safe, efficient, and sustainable shipping.

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