

Turning the sod for new processor

By Greg Vandermeulen
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Nine months of hard work led to the ceremonial sod turning for Sunbelt Prairie Products Ltd. on June 28. Owned and operated by Zeb Rice, a Pakistan based company that also has a presence in Sweden, the new plant is valued at \$12 million, and will process peas, beans and lentils to the stage where they can be put directly on store shelves.

The facility was attracted in part by Sunbelt Development Corporation, made up of members from Gretna, Altona, Plum Coulee and the RM of Rhineland. At the sod-turning in the RM of Rhineland Industrial Park, Sunbelt Dev. Group CEO Jim Spencer said the project will have a "significant impact on southern Manitoba."

Ron Miller, General Manager of Thomas Builders, will take on the construction of the 25,000 square foot facility. "I think it's a great day for the RM and the surrounding districts," he said.

Sunbelt Prairie Products also wined and dined politicians, producers, community members and stakeholders at a formal gala held Saturday night.

At the event, Spencer told the crowd how nine months ago, they sent Zeb Rice CEO and Sunbelt Prairie Products President Makhdoom Abbas, a proposal for putting their plant in this area.

"We've done this so often we did not expect a response, but we did get a response," he said.

Makhdoom Abbas said coming to the Altona area was done ultimately because of the worth ethic and the type of people here.

"We have visited a lot of places," he said. "The people made the difference."

Reeve John Falk said the RM of Rhineland is pleased to welcome the new company, but added he's excited about the possibility of future expansion. "This is only the tip of the iceberg," he said.

He credited Sunbelt and the four member municipalities that made this happen. "None of these municipalities were big enough to attract this size of development alone," he said. "This gives agriculture producers an excellent opportunity."

Emerson MLA Cliff Graydon likes to see the processing being done right here at home, and said this bodes well for the area.

"It's an exciting time in Manitoba. It's an exciting time in the constituency of Emerson," he said. "We have a lot to be thankful for here."

Chris Sumner, Executive Director of the Manitoba Pulse Growers Association said the big question in agriculture has always been how to add value instead of just sell commodities to others. "Sunbelt Prairie Products is the answer," he said.

Sumner added that the plant represents a place where rural economic development and diversification meet, bringing dozens of jobs, millions of dollars in capital, and more money in the pockets of farmers, which can only benefit the communities around them.

Dori Gingera-Beauchemin of Manitoba Agriculture and Rural Initiatives (MAFRI), said they have always advocated and looked for the ability to process and package foods as close to home as possible. She said they don't just want to see large factories being built.

"It's one job at a time, one plant at a time," she said.

Bill Martin, introduced as a friend and business associate of Abbas, said western Canada has not been taking advantage of the European market, or adding value to their crops. "We have always shipped bulk commodities," he said. "We have always shipped at the lowest value."

Abbas had originally hoped to partner with an existing operation, but Miller said the opportunity was not there. Our processing industry in western Canada leaves a lot to be desired in terms of quality," he said.

When he was first introduced to Abbas, Martin said he knew this was worth pursuing. "He has a great vision, great ideas, he's someone we need to develop a relationship with," he said. "The Town of Altona, the province of Manitoba is very fortunate to have him come here."

The plant is expected to be completed this fall.