



Zeb Rice Limited Opens Processing Facility in Manitoba

The international food-processing firm Zeb Rice Limited has opened a 45,000 square-foot, \$14 million production facility in rural Manitoba. In 2009, the facility will begin processing locally produced pulse crops, such as chickpeas, lentils and beans.

"When our company decided to expand in North America, we looked for sites that met our criteria," says Makhdoom Abbas, President and CEO of Zeb Rice. "Southern Manitoba is an ideal fit for us."

The region, known as Manitoba's sunbelt, lies in the province's agricultural heartland; most of the produce for the new plant will be grown on nearby farms. Transportation links were another important consideration for the company, since the primary markets for the plant's products are far away: Europe, Central Canada and the Eastern United States. The region lies on major highway and railroad networks and is about an hour away from Winnipeg, a busy continental transportation hub. Hundreds of shipping containers travel through Winnipeg daily; ready access to empty containers helps to reduce transportation costs — a significant advantage.

"In commodities such as pulse crops, margins are very thin," explains Abbas. "This location enables us to keep our costs low without compromising the quality of our products

Sunbelt bullish on business
The sunbelt's progressive attitude was another key factor in the company's decision. In an effort to attract businesses, the towns of Gretna, Altona, Plum Coulee, and the Rural Municipality of Rhineland set up Sunbelt Development Group, an economic development organization, and partnered with the province of Manitoba to establish an industrial park devoted to the region's thriving agricultural sector. Businesses appreciate that the region offers an excellent quality of life and an experienced, skilled and stable labour force.

When Makhdoom Abbas met with representatives from Sunbelt Development Group, he was impressed with their can-do attitude. To secure the park's first foreign tenant, Sunbelt Development Group agreed to erect a building on a lease-to-own basis. The move freed up the approximately \$6 million in capital the company needed to buy and install equipment in the new plant. In honour of the development group's enthusiastic attitude, the company chose to name the new company Sunbelt Prairie Products Limited.

"We looked at a number of sites across the American and Canadian midwest, but this was our number-one choice," says Abbas. "We were impressed by the positive, cooperative attitude of people in this region; we knew we'd have a local

workforce that would be loyal and dependable. People here may live in small towns, but they certainly have big ideas."

"We are extremely pleased to welcome Sunbelt Prairie Products Ltd. to our region," says Jim Spencer, general manager of Sunbelt Development Group. "The addition of this company to our community strengthens the economy and makes excellent use of the region's vast agricultural and economic resources."

The new, state-of-the-art plant will create 45 new jobs and feature two production lines to clean, size, polish and bag a variety of pulse crops. The plant will incorporate the latest technology to facilitate the tracing of products, a critical component of food-safety regimes in Canada and around the world. It will also be one of the few processing plants in the country able to split large quantities of pulses and peas.

Family-run company evolves to meet market shifts

Sunbelt Prairie Products is part of a family-run food empire; in the 1970s, Makhdoom Abbas' father started Zeb Rice



Limited in his native Pakistan. The company has since gone international, opening Amanat Nawaz Rice AB in Sweden in 2003. The Swedish plant processes approximately 70,000 tons of rice each year for markets in across Europe. To supply retail networks in 18 countries, the company also operates warehouse facilities in Antwerp, Belgium and Belleville, Ontario.

“Rice, pulses and legumes were once staple foods mainly for cultures in Asia, the Middle East and much of Africa,” says Makhdoom Abbas. “Due to shifts in immigration patterns and regional economies, however, the supply and demand for these foods have shifted significantly in recent years. Our business has managed to respond successfully to these changes.”

Up until recently, India and Pakistan were not only the world’s largest producers of these foods, but also the largest exporters. Since then, the middle class in both countries has grown rapidly; as a result, demand far outstrips supply and both have become net importers of pulses.

Meanwhile, demand for these foods in Western countries has also skyrocketed, largely due to immigration and the trend toward healthy eating. Nutrition-conscious consumers have come to appreciate the benefits of lentils, beans and rice.

The Manitoba plant will help the company take advantage of these trends. Designed for

expansion and efficiency, the plant can accommodate two more production lines and move into processed and prepared foods, typically sold in tins and bottles. To help maintain production throughout the year, the site features 18 silos with a capacity of 215 tons each. More capacity can be readily added.

“This facility positions us for long-term success,” says Makhdoom Abbas. “Manitoba makes perfect business sense for us.”

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