



REGIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE (REDI)

L to R: Co-Owners George Teichroeb and David Friesen // Trent Schlamp Photography

VALUE-ADDED FOR FARMERS

Mackenzie Oat Millers now serving the region with new processing facility in La Crête

Thanks to long summer days and rich northern soil, Mackenzie County produces the highest concentration of organic oats in North America. Oats have taken centre stage in recent years as a trendy superfood. They are healthy, gluten-free, whole-grain, and chock-full of nutritious vitamins, minerals, fibre and antioxidants.

“Without a doubt, some of the world’s best quality oats come from this northern

region. This is our farmers’ northern advantage, and it shouldn’t be overlooked any longer,” said David Friesen, co-owner of Mackenzie Oat Millers located in La Crête. “Our northern organic oats tend to be whiter in colour and have a heavier kernel weight, which in turn produces a higher quality of oat flake that is more desirable to the large flake oat market.”

According to Mackenzie Applied Research Association (MARA), a

non-profit, producer-driven research entity, Alberta accounts for nearly 40% of North America’s organic oat production, and Mackenzie County is “...one of the most concentrated regions for organic oats in all of North America.”

Based in La Crête, Mackenzie Oat Millers is the first oat processing facility in the REDI Region. Having just opened in June of this year, it’s already bringing new value to the local oat game.

Having a primary processing source in close proximity to where the oats are produced is imperative from an economic perspective because the unprocessed oats are expensive to ship.

According to a research report prepared for the County by Keith and Associates in 2020, “... approximately a third of the volume is a low value byproduct... Freight costs can be significantly reduced by processing at the source.”

In other words, processing oats within the REDI Region will reduce the weight by 20% to 30%, which will lower the transport costs.

“I, along with members of the REDI board, have long believed our region could add value to oats grown here,” said REDI Manager, Andrew O’Rourke. “By producing, processing and creating value-added products in the REDI region, the oat processing industry can remain sustainable and agile while seizing new opportunities in domestic and export markets”.

While Friesen’s family has grown oats since 1990, the manufacturing facility just opened. It’s projected to process 172 metric tonnes of finished product per week.

“The need for this new oat manufacturing facility has been clear to me for the past couple of years,” said Friesen. “We believe our personal connection with our local farmers, and their willingness to work together with us to bring a food



manufacturing facility to the North, is strong. We hope this venture brings a great long-term advantage to all the oat producers in the area.”

So far, the response to the Mackenzie Oat Millers products has been positive, and they’ve already reached foreign markets.

“Some of our buyers are in the US. We are registered with the FDA, and we have the capability to export our products,” said Friesen. “We also work with Canadian companies as well. We’ve been hard at work to become GFSI (Global Food Safety Initiative) certified, so we can supply any wholesale or retail market and we won’t be limited in our options.”

Mackenzie Oat Millers currently employs four full-time employees and will be hiring more workers in the future.

“Once we start more consistent runs this August, we will likely be looking for another four employees,” said Friesen. “We hope this number continues to grow as our community is rapidly growing and new employment is needed.”



Friesen and the Mackenzie Oat Millers look forward to reaching their full potential and branching out as they become more established. They hope to create their own brands and lines of finished products to be on the shelves in Canada and the US.

“At Mackenzie Oat Millers, we’re excited to have the opportunity to better represent our quality northern oats to the rest of the world,” said Friesen.

According to MARA, “Canadian farmers in 2019 planted 3.6 million acres of oats (the highest in a decade), and our federal government recently allocated \$2 million to oat breeding (a testament



to their faith in the crop’s future).”

With the demand and interest in oats growing, the future looks bright for Mackenzie County producers. Now with the new processing facility, the region is positioned to secure a greater foothold in the superfood’s market.

Local producers will no longer have to pay to ship their product south.

“Farmers will now get a premium for quality oats grown in this region,” said Friesen. “Previously, it wasn’t feasible for farmers to ship the last of the oats in their bins, but now they’ll be able to unload them at our facility and prep their bins

for the upcoming harvest.” In addition, local oat producers will have access to Mackenzie Oat Millers’ by-products such as the hulls, which is about 25-30% of their raw product intake. And, farmers will have the opportunity to purchase oat screenings well.

“REDI is delighted to see an entrepreneurial family maximizing the value of locally grown oats to produce healthy food ingredients,” said O’Rourke. “Purchasing oats directly from producers in the region, and processing them here in the northwest, presents new opportunities to grow the REDI region’s thriving oat industry.”

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