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Firebaugh food processing plant purchased, adding up to 300 jobs

Written by Gabriel Dillard – Staff Writer
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A Singapore company has acquired the De Francesco & Sons processing plant near Firebaugh, reviving the dehydrating facility that has been shuttered for nearly three years and adding 250-300 jobs to the local economy.

The plant closed in 2006, laying off as many as 187 workers. De Francesco & Sons employed up to 450 people during its peak seasons.

Olam International plans to hire up to 300 workers once it reaches full capacity in a couple of years, said Carl Refuerzo, an attorney with Fresno law firm Baker Manock & Jensen who represented Olam in the deal, the terms of which were not disclosed. He said processing of onions and garlic should begin by May 2009. The company already has acreage under contract.

"It's not just the facility itself," Refuerzo said. "This is providing jobs and helping the local farming community."

Olam proposes to acquire all assets, including land, buildings, the plant and machinery in its current condition. It also intends to set up a seed-breeding program and invest in harvesting equipment and other raw material requirements.

The company plans to process garlic and onion into flakes used for spices. The facility has an established reputation as one of the best equipped vegetable dehydration plants in the U.S. and is also strategically located in the middle of the garlic and onion growing belts in California's agricultural heartland, according to a company press release.

"We are quite excited to add locally grown and processed dehydrated vegetables to our existing portfolio of food products in the U.S. which already includes cocoa, coffee, peanuts, cashews, dill and spices," said John Gibbons, president of Olam Americas Inc., in a written statement.

Olam is a global integrated supply chain manager of agricultural products and food ingredients, sourcing 20 products with a direct presence in 60 countries and serving 6,500 customers. The company had fiscal 2008 revenues of almost \$5.6 billion.

"It's great to have a large company, an international company, invest in the area," Refuerzo said.

This is not the first foray the company has made in the Central Valley. Olam also acquired cotton processor Anderson Clayton Corp. of Fresno when it purchased its parent company, Queensland

Cotton Holdings of Australia, in 2007.

Olam has expressed interest in making additional local investments, Refuerzo said.



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