

Employees visually sort potatoes as the third step in the sorting process, following an optical sorter for size and X-ray sorter for internal quality. Fresh Solution Farms potatoes can be packed in a variety of ways, including five-pound polybags with the company's logo on them.

By Scott Christie
Managing Editor

White Pigeon, Mich., is home to fewer than 2,000 people, but the town in southwest Michigan now boasts a state-of-the-art potato packing facility.

Fresh Solution Farms started packing potatoes in September, and opened its doors for a grand opening celebration in November. Hundreds of suppliers and partners that made the project possible attended the event, watching as potatoes were pulled from storage and run all the way through to end up in five-pound polybags. The plant is more than 100,000 square feet and can move as many as 1 million cwt. a year.

Finding Fresh Solutions

The idea for a grower-owned fresh packing facility in Michigan started just 14 months ago with six investors – Walther Farms, Three Rivers, Mich.; Sandyland Farms, Howard City, Mich.; Eugene Miller; Michaels Potatoes, Baroda, Mich.; Sterman Masser, Valley View, Pa.; and Basin Gold Co-op, Pasco, Wash. There wasn't a fresh packing operation nearby, but there was demand for fresh-market potatoes, and some large-scale retail and foodservice companies – namely Meijer and Gordon Food Service – made the project a worthwhile venture.

“You only get one chance to make a first impression, and they've given us that first impression,” said Greg Salisbury, general manager for Fresh Solution Farms.

The investors in Fresh Solution Farms were helped along by the state of Michigan and local economic groups. The Michigan Economic Development Corp. (MEDC) helped with the bond and tax abatements from the state – a \$10 million dollar package that was approved in 2007, said Tom Tarleton, account manager for MEDC. With the state losing its industrial – primarily automotive – manufacturing base, MEDC is looking at one of its largest but often overlooked industries, agriculture, to create job opportunities. The Fresh Solution Farms packing plant will bring 25-30 jobs to the area.

“The state of Michigan needs new, vital businesses now more

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◀ Fresh Solution Farms started shipping potatoes in September and held a grand opening in November. The state-of-the-art packing facility can run up to 1 million cwt. a year.



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than ever," Tarleton said at the grand opening of the packing plant.

The St. Joseph County Economic Development Corp. (SJEDC) also worked closely with MEDC and Fresh Solution Farms to bring the development to White Pigeon. The group helped with local tax abatements and worked with the state to redo the road leading to the property.

"This facility is phenomenal. It's more than I could have imagined," said Cathy Knapp, executive director for the SJEDC. "This is a project that complements our

industrial resources and our agricultural economy."

The economic development groups may be on board now, but they didn't know a whole lot about the potato industry or farming when the investors took the idea before them, Salisbury said.

"We had a lot of fun educating people who have an automotive background about the potato industry," he added.

The site in White Pigeon was no accident. Although the state and county were more than happy to help through bonds and tax abatements, it was the central location to a number of large markets that determined the site.

◀ Fresh Solution Farms completed a 12-month building project in about seven months. The new company started shipping fresh potatoes in September.

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Within six hours of the southwestern Michigan town are more than 71 million people accessible by truck with nearby highways and rail on the lines at the back of the building. Fresh Solution Farms will have about 40 percent exposure when the plant's up and running at 100 percent capacity.

Building a Fresh Solution

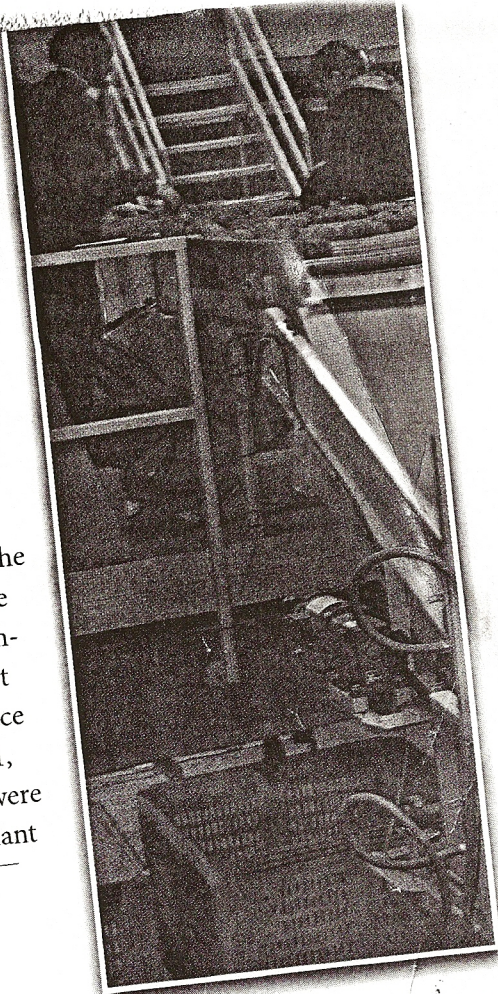
The goal was to start pouring concrete for the 110,000-square-foot packing facility in December 2007, but an early start to the Michigan winter delayed the timeline. The company then wanted to break ground in March, but a wet spring delayed the project again. Construction

didn't begin until mid-May, and the project managers had their work cut out for them – the company was going to be doing business whether the building was done or not.

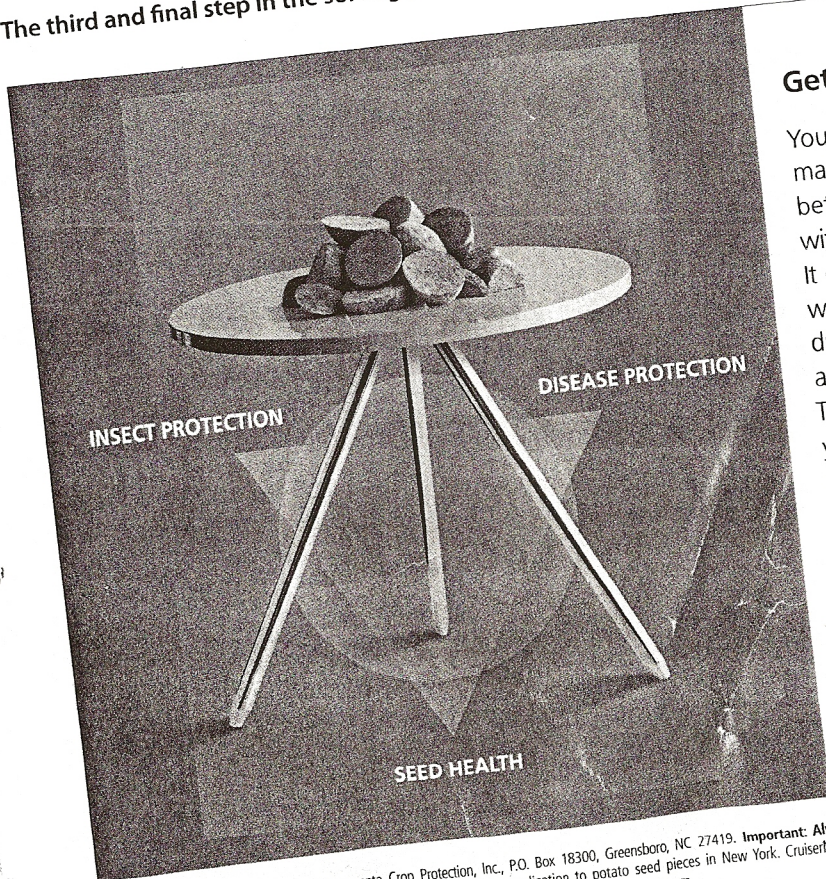
"The potatoes couldn't wait," Salisbury said. "They're coming and we have to be ready for them."

Quick Zip Steel constructed the exterior of the building, with the Canadian-based company finishing the 12-month project in just seven months. The interior space was ready to be fitted by June 1, and the equipment suppliers were lining up to start work. The plant

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The third and final step in the sorting process is a visual inspection. ►



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utilizes the best available equipment and a LEAN-based environment that emphasizes quality and cost savings.

Lansing, Mich.-based Techmark was the first equipment supplier in the new plant, installing the cooling system. The main packing room has two corner units and four Carrier cooling units hanging from the ceiling, a setup that has never been done before, said Techmark's Todd Forbush. The loading dock has four more units and the back room, where cool down happens, has six of the units. The cooling system is sanitary and food-grade, which means if there's a break in the overhead pipes, only water will be released instead of dangerous chemicals, Forbush said.

The potato storage sheds at Fresh Solution Farms have five receiving methods and use a new steel floor that allows air to move through the piles while still keeping the floor smooth to avoid damage from machinery. The flooring and ventilation systems in the two sheds were completed in time for the first load of potatoes in early September – a dry run to see if the wash, sort and packing lines were ready. By Sept. 15, 200 loads of potatoes had already gone out.

Fresh Solution Farms potatoes undergo a three-stage wash and sorting before packing. The wash has an agitation step, then a brush or tumble step followed by an ozone-infused anti-

microbial wash. Sorting is done in a three-stage process as well. The potatoes first go through an optical photographic sorter for size, then X-ray imaging for quality. The final step is a visual inspection by employees before the finished product drops into one of many bag options. There are 38 sorting tanks that dry and cool different size and grade

potatoes – each 25,000 to 50,000 pounds.

The construction and implementation of a brand-new business plan was stressful, but it's been worth it to see the rapid growth, Salisbury said.

"I don't know if I could teach anyone how to do what we did," Salisbury said. "I hope I figure that out by the time I retire." ☉

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