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EDD Supports First-Ever High-Pressure Food Processing Facility

Technology Will Open Markets for Small NM Growers

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. – The New Mexico Economic Development Department (EDD) has awarded economic assistance from its LEDA job-creators fund to a company that is opening the state's first high-pressure processing (HPP) food manufacturing facility, Cabinet Secretary Alicia J. Keyes announced today.

The Albuquerque location for New Mexico Fresh Foods will be able to offer agricultural growers and food processors in New Mexico access to HPP technology, which is now only available by transporting finished goods to Texas or Colorado. The technology can increase the shelf life of fresh and ready-to-eat foods, without the need for heat pasteurization or chemical preservatives.

Products commonly produced with HPP include fresh salsa, chile, tamales, juice, dips, sausages, deli meats, soft cheese, and prepared meals. HPP in New Mexico will help smaller companies to sell directly to grocery stores and restaurants, while providing opportunities for more established food processors to introduce new and fresher products.

“New Mexico exports the vast majority of its agricultural products and then restaurants and families pay to reimport this food back into the state. We see this as investment in local agriculture, small businesses, and agricultural producers across the state,” Secretary Keyes said.

The state awarded \$750,000 from LEDA and New Mexico Fresh Foods has pledged to hire 74 employees over five years at its 20,000 square-foot processing and manufacturing plant at 5600 Venice Ave. NE, Albuquerque. The company will invest approximately \$10 million of private funding into the facility. The money will cover electrical upgrades, concrete reinforcement, refrigeration, and two HPP machines, which run about \$2 million each.

In addition to offering HPP, New Mexico Fresh Foods will also provide commercial juicing and refrigeration to increase storage capacity for growers and food processors.

There are approximately 300 HPP processing facilities across the U.S., but only about 30 which offer HPP services to other food producers. New Mexico Fresh Foods is the first in New Mexico. It has already started hiring employees and plans to be operational by early 2021.

HPP uses a large water tank to intensify the pressure of food to 87,000 psi, which denatures bacteria and viruses that cause food borne illness like Listeria, E. coli, and Salmonella. Without the pathogens that cause food to spoil quickly, HPP-treated foods have a longer farm-to-table life.

“You can do a lot of things with these units. The possibilities are huge,” New Mexico State University’s Sergio Martinez-Monteagudo, who has a PhD in HPP food engineering, said. “These facilities are expensive and difficult to maintain, but once you have one it means you can process your food locally and local producers have access to the technology they need to compete with the big boys.”

“New Mexico growers can’t afford to send products to Denver, Los Angeles, or Dallas for processing because of transportation costs,” Martinez-Monteagudo added. “But meats, produce, dairy products, as well as chile and salsa, would benefit from HPP facility in the state. Starbucks and lots of other chains need these products, and if you can do it here, you can process it quickly and then ship it or sell it directly from New Mexico. Having it here makes a big difference for the local economy.”

Joram Robbs, Executive Director of the New Mexico Chile Association, said growers have always struggled with finding out-of-state markets where fresh chile can be sold without having to process it. Canning requires vinegar and therefore changes the flavor and texture of the product.

“Having this new technology in the state can be a huge benefit, and can help get New Mexico chile into new markets both in the United States and abroad,” Robbs said. “We covet our chile here, we value it here, we sell it here. Now it’s time to educate others.”

Chris Franzoy’s (Young Guns Hatch Chile) family has been growing in Hatch for generations and was first to market Hatch chile in 1931. “HPP will help us maintain a more natural product. The reward for our customers and consumers will be better flavor, a firmer texture, fresh look, a bright green color, and more importantly, a healthier product,” Franzoy said. “As a fourth-generation grower-processor of Hatch Valley Green Chile, I feel confident we will experience some great things, especially as markets develop in food service and retail, not only domestically but abroad as well. Hatch Valley New Mexico Green Chile is certainly on trend and with this new process [HPP] we will bring more commerce to our great state of New Mexico. I expect to see a positive sales trajectory for many years to come.”

New Mexico Fresh Foods Founder and CEO Kelly Egolf said there is a huge food security problem in New Mexico worsened by the COVID health emergency, and that New Mexico used to be a large producer for many products like carrots and apples, but small growers in the state can’t afford the sophisticated processing machines.

Egolf has talked with families that have grown apples in New Mexico for hundreds of years and have lost the ability to compete nationally due to high labor costs and lack of processing facilities in New Mexico. Yet, there is a growing industry of hard cider manufacturers who import apple juice from out-of-state and would love to get locally grown ingredients.

“How do we solve this food security problem? How do we grow our food in New Mexico? We invest in equipment so growers can process it here instead of paying to send it out of state,” Egolf explained.

Skye Devore of Tractor Brewing, with four New Mexico locations, said they order a lot of agricultural products from outside the state, so having processing and cold storage in Albuquerque will make it easier for them to work with in-state growers, who need storage to offset a shorter growing season. The company uses fresh juices to mix with its distilled spirits such as Bloody Mary and Margaritas.

Devore added that New Mexico Fresh Foods will also offer packaging, a challenge right now due to a shortage of cans because of the health emergency and increased demand for to-go products.

“We would love to use local homegrown New Mexico agriculture,” Devore said. “We’re

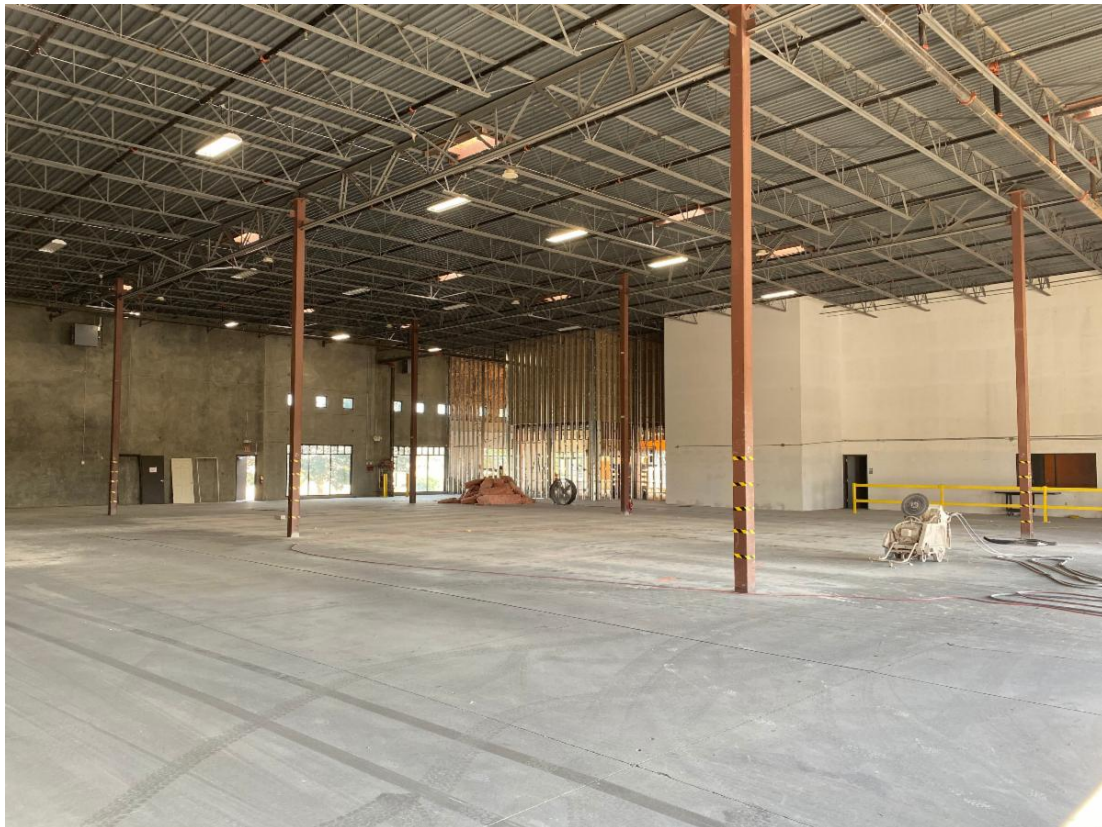
really excited to bring these products out to New Mexicans, and buying local is more important than ever.”

Anzia Bennett of Three Sisters Kitchen, a non-profit community food space that provides a training incubator for manufactured food entrepreneurs, said high-pressure processing can make it viable for many small producers to enter local markets, selling to grocery stores, restaurants, and at farmers markets.

Three Sisters has a hands-on approach to helping growers and other aspiring producers get into manufacturing of their products like salsa, samosas pies, mole, pasta, tamales, but many are deterred by the lack of accessible storage and processing facilities.

“HPP is a whole new world for the [incubator] students who come here looking for more efficient packaging and ways to extend shelf life and to be able to sell to restaurants or at farmers markets,” Bennet said. “This is exciting for those of us who are dedicated to keeping our food local, spending our money right here, and supporting jobs in New Mexico.”

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The New Mexico Fresh Foods manufacturing floor

The New Mexico Economic Development Department's mission is to improve the lives of New Mexico families by increasing economic opportunities and providing a place for businesses to thrive.

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