



Master butcher Tony Schaefer tosses bones into a container while cutting a quarter of beef at Canadian Premium Meats in Lacombe.

by RANDY FIEDLER/Advocate staff

Red Deer Advocate

Meat-packing plant marks first anniversary

By Harley Richards - Red Deer Advocate

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LACOMBE — The past year has been marked by periods of frustration and jubilation for the owners of Canadian Premium Meats.

But with the passage of the meat processing plant's first anniversary on Aug. 3, Werner Siegrist — who operates the 31,000-square-foot packing plant in Wolf Creek Industrial Park with partners Armin Mueller and Yvo Schmucki — was focused on the positives.

“We're still here.”

The agenda seemed pretty straightforward when Canadian Premium Meats opened its doors a year ago: secure United States Department of Agriculture and European Union certification, attract clients and ramp up production.

However, it took longer than expected to obtain USDA and EU approval, with the Lacombe business not winning the right to ship meat stateside or overseas to Europe until this spring. And finding staff to keep pace with demand proved to be a challenge — particularly on the cutting floor.

Until about a month ago, the business wasn't able to hire enough workers to slaughter and cut concurrently. The partners tried to fill the void with foreign labour, but were frustrated by the length of time required to work through the bureaucratic paperwork.

The federal government has introduced an expedited process to shorten the timelines from about 40 weeks to eight, but an employer must have operated for at least a year to qualify.

“That really doesn't make much sense to us,” said Siegrist. “A new business is probably out of business before the 12 months are up.”

Today, Canadian Premium Meats employs about 30 — a dozen more than it had a year ago. Operating as a custom packing plant, it slaughters and processes bison, beef, elk and horses.

“We really would like to slaughter every day and cut every day,” said Siegrist, explaining that this would enable the facility to process about 120 animals a day, or 30,000 a year.

Instead, the company has been forced to turn business away. Not only is it short of cutters, but it also needs maintenance and administrative personnel.

Foreign workers have brought some relief, said Siegrist, with about 40 per cent of staff from outside of Canada: the Philippines, Germany, Switzerland and Ukraine.

The delays in getting USDA and EU certification also cost the company business, since some clients were reluctant to forego the potential of more lucrative markets to the south and overseas.

Still, Canadian Premium Meats has built up a client base stretching as far away as Manitoba.

One of its attractions is that it doesn't process its own meat, eliminating client concerns that they could find themselves in competition.

Bison makes up about half of the animals the plant processes, said Siegrist, with elk and beef each accounting for about 20 per cent of the total and horses contributing 10 per cent.

Despite its small size — at least relative to the big packing plants — Canadian Premium Meats still requires good-sized production runs to be efficient.

Two shipments of 60 bison each are far better than 10 shipments of a dozen animals, explained Siegrist, explaining that it takes time and effort to transition between jobs.

Unfortunately, many producers are opting to send their livestock to American processors.

“If you get a better price shipping an animal live to the U.S., they're doing it,” said Siegrist, acknowledging that labour costs are lower south of the border.

An advantage that Canadian Premium Meats does have is that area producers can minimize transport costs and shrinkage by processing closer to home.

The company is doing what it can to appeal to niche marketers. In addition to specializing in alternative species, it's obtained organic certification and been approved to do halal slaughters as required by devout Muslims.

"It will always be tough," said Siegrist of the industry.

But year two should present fewer hurdles than year one.

"Definitely, it's going to be a lot easier."

Canadian Premium Meats' website is at www.cpmeats.com.

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