

Company buys Welch's plant

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By Mary Hopkin, Herald staff writer

The former Welch's processing plant in Kennewick has been sold to a Forest Grove, Ore., company that makes salad dressings, jams, salsas, sauces and bottled drinks.

J. Lieb Foods Inc. hopes to start manufacturing and bottling product in August, said Dallas Breamer, the company's business manager who also is a former Tri-City industrial development official.

The company, founded in 1992, manufactures and packs various food products and produces them under other companies' labels.

"J. Lieb Foods is really pleased to be able to take a commercial resource in the community and bring it back into service," Breamer said.

The city of Kennewick, the Tri-City Industrial Development Council and Welch's have been working together to find a buyer for the 210,000-square-foot plant that closed in February.

Carl Adrian, TRIDEC's president, said he's pleased a buyer was found so quickly for the plant, which employed 165 people and provided an annual payroll of \$7 million.

"It's not uncommon to see manufacturing plants like this sit on the market for years," Adrian said. "I think it's unusual for a win like this to happen this quickly."

Breamer said his company was considering expanding its Forest Grove plant when Welch's announced the Kennewick closure.

"This was a better value for our money," he said.

Other factors also played a role, he added.

When the company's owner, Jim Lieb, first toured the Welch's facility, he was amazed at how clean it was, Breamer said.

"It was like they had just turned out the lights and were planning on coming to work the next day," he said.

And the 12 years that Breamer spent in the Tri-Cities as president of the Tri-Cities Enterprise Association from 1987 through 1999 also had a "significant influence" on the company's decision to move to Kennewick.

"It made our decision much easier," Breamer said. "We were aware of the resources available to us, the work ethic in the community, and the support of small businesses."

Breamer said the plant will employ up to 100 people when it reaches full capacity, but that could take a couple of years.

It will likely take a month to test equipment and get it operating properly. Then the company will start slowly, making simple products and getting one line moving smoothly before moving on to the next.

The plant, which was built in 1941, will offer the company increased capacity and the ability to bottle new container sizes.

"We're excited about this opportunity," Lieb said. "The purchase will enable us to expand our operations and add important volume."

Kennewick Mayor Jim Beaver said the sale is great news for everyone involved.

"Welch's had pledged their commitment to helping us find a buyer and they were true to their word. Jim Lieb is committed to make this work and we will certainly work closely with him to make sure that happens," he said.