

ORGANICS | SASK. PROCESSOR

Organic launch years in the making

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Gene Kessler, chief executive officer for a company that recently launched a line of prairie-raised organic processed meat products, said the project was years in the making.

Clear Creek Organics officially launched its first eight products, certified by Ecocert Canada in Saskatchewan and Manitoba last month.

The company also opened its own retail location. It is the meat and deli partner in Dad's Organic Market, the recently opened Regina location of Dad's Nutrition Centre.

Clear Creek is the culmination of years of work by Saskatchewan Organic Livestock and the Manitoba Organic Marketplace Trade Association, said Kessler.

"We found out we were duplicating so we decided to join forces and divide the labour," he said.

Saskatchewan took on the marketing and value-added activities while Manitoba focused on live sales.

The name was devised to reflect the pure and natural environment in which the animals are raised.

The company operates on a share structure. Certified organic producers are each entitled to purchase a Class A voting share. About 20 shareholders in the two provinces currently supply mainly beef and lamb.

Class B shares are available to producers, consumers and investors interested in organic food.

"The investment share provides some working capital," Kessler said. "We've been very fortunate to work with some grants."

Those include assistance from the Saskatchewan Agri-Value Initiative and Beef Information Centre.

Kessler said developing the wieners, jerky, sausages and smokies took more than two years. The bureaucracy of getting a product to market presented a steep learning curve to the shareholders, he said.

One hurdle was developing consistency within a product.

For example, the spice packs used in the initial testing phase were not organic. When organic spices were added, the stronger taste sent the products back to square one.

"The garlic just about blew you away," said Kessler.

Then, some of the spices couldn't be sourced organically or in enough quantity.

Until now, livestock were slaughtered in Alberta and processed at the Saskatchewan Food Centre in Saskatoon.

Kessler said the company has outgrown the centre and is moving production to Thomson Meats in Melfort, Sask.

Thomson Meats does not offer slaughter facilities at this time but does have federal inspection status.

Paul Kowdrysh, president and CEO of Thomson Meats, said the facility is also certified through Ecocert.

He is working on obtaining status from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which would open the U.S. market to Clear Creek.

For now, Kessler is happy to have the first products available. But, he added, consumers have to be able to afford them.

"To make organic meat affordable, we had to get value out of the trim," Kessler said. "We're using more trim than middle meats and the marketplace is excited about this."

Clear Creek is looking at hotels and convention centres as potential markets for middle meat cuts. The market for high-end cuts is generally local.

Leroy, Sask., producer Lorne Schroeder, chair of the Clear Creek board, told those gathered for the product launch that the producers are "just simple farmers" with the idea of producing safe food and creating sustainable farms.

Kessler said that factors into product pricing.

A 375-gram package of four smokies, for example, is \$9.75 retail.

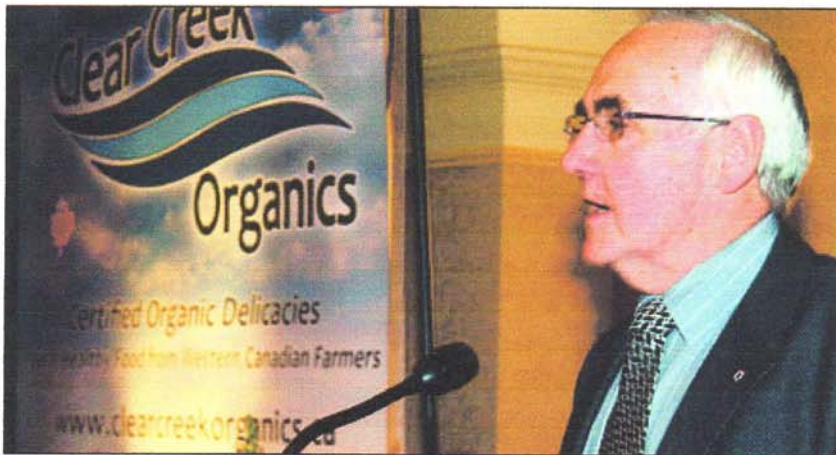
"We want to ensure economic stability within the agricultural community as well," Kessler said. "And we're paying (shareholders) a good price for their meat."

The company is using about 1,000 kilograms of meat every three weeks in its production line. The goal is to increase to 1,000 kg for each product every week.

Clear Creek has its own meat cutters at its Regina store. Kessler said the interaction with consumers will provide good feedback.

The company has also signed an agreement with a British Columbia-based national distributor.

Product sourcing | Finding enough organic spices proved to be a problem



Clear Creek Organic products, including wieners, jerky, sausages and smokies, hit store shelves recently. Chief executive officer Gene Kessler said he hopes to gain access to American markets. | Karen Briere photos



Clear Creek products are available in Saskatchewan and Manitoba.