

Salute to Industry



ADI aims for 2025 operations

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More than \$25 million in Sqwincher expansion, page 11

Quality Beverage breaks ground, page 8

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Aluminum Dynamics moves toward 2025 opening with sustainability in mind

Mill construction nears halfway mark

By Emma McRae
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Combining innovation and sustainability, Steel Dynamics' \$2.5 billion aluminum mill, Aluminum Dynamics, is pacing toward its summer 2025 opening as it nears 50% completion.

Genn Pushis, senior vice president of the strategic projects for SDI, said the mill is a way for the company to diversify its offerings while filling a market need.

There's about a 2.3 million-ton shortage of aluminum sheet in the U.S. annually, for which imports compensate. The Columbus facility will fill 650,000 tons of that need, Pushis said.

But why Columbus? One factor is familiarity.

"We already know Columbus because of our steel mill on the other side of the (Golden Triangle Regional) airport," Pushis said. "We like the work area, and we like the work ethic"

Another factor is being located on the Tennessee Valley Authority electrical grid, he said, which helps the facility maintain a lower carbon footprint.

The facility itself will incorporate several green initiatives, specifically recycling. ADI will recycle scrap aluminum, which is less electrically intensive and more environmentally friendly than making raw aluminum.

That's where the market is gravitating, Pushis said. "Aluminum is near 100% recyclable, so being able to take advantage of that with sustainability and our environment is a big deal," he said. "Customers are really driving towards that – not only being sustainable with recyclability, but they also want to know that you can do it at a lower carbon footprint."

Pushis said construction at the facility is nearly halfway complete.

"Once we get to the ground level, which we're pretty much at now, that will go a little quicker," he said. "We'll start our mechanical and piping installation this month."

The entire facility covers more than 2,000 acres, including space for companies to co-locate with ADI. Companies on the "customer campus" will agree to buy materials in return for free freight, preferential scheduling and scrap collection.

One company has already signed on, and another is in the works, Pushis said.

There will also be a biocarbon facility designed to produce 160,000 metric tons of biocarbon products from organic materials to fuel the facility's furnaces. It's another green initiative the company hopes to



Emma McRae/Dispatch Staff

A construction crew works on finishing the underground portion of the Aluminum Dynamics flat-rolled mill, which includes basements, pits and oil cellars. Mechanical installation and piping installation for the facility begins this month.

'Aluminum is near 100% recyclable, so being able to take advantage of that with sustainability and our environment is a big deal. Customers are really driving towards that – not only being sustainable with recyclability, but they also want to know that you can do it at a lower carbon footprint.'

Genn Pushis, senior vice president of strategic projects for SDI

reproduce.

"Instead of mining and refining carbon, we can (process) waste byproducts that no one around here is really using ... and then keep the carbon unit to use in our furnaces," Pushis said. "If we prove that concept here ... we can actually put one of those small biocarbon facilities at each one of our big mills."

When ADI goes online, it will have around 750 employees, 230 of whom are already hired and in training. Those jobs will pay an average annual salary

of \$93,000.

Pushis said local interest has been significant. An open application day at East Mississippi Community College's Community brought in more than 3,000 people. Tapping into the community, he said, is an intentional decision.

"We want to make the project exciting for the community too," he said. "We want them to see that we're real people, and just because we're managing the facility doesn't mean we're some 'corporate group.'"




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Abigail Sipe Rochester/Dispatch Staff

Members of the Earwood and Price families, the co-founding families of Quality Beverage, raise their glasses as company President Brad Earwood gives a toast to celebrate the company's groundbreaking of a new 50,000-square-foot facility May 15. Brad Earwood said the new facility will triple production for the beverage concentrate manufacturer.



Abigail Sipe Rochester/Dispatch Staff

The Earwood family, including Kevin, Harrison, Ashley, Banks, Anne Lowry, Eliza, Brad and Sally Earwood shovel dirt during Quality Beverage's groundbreaking May 15. Brad Earwood is the president of Quality Beverage, having inherited the company from his father, David Earwood, and the whole family, friends, employees and more took part in the groundbreaking celebrations.

Quality Beverage celebrates groundbreaking on \$10 million facility

Local business grows over three decades, two generations

By **ABIGAIL SIPE ROCHESTER**
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When David Earwood and James Price co-founded Quality Beverage in a vacant tire store in Lowndes County in 1996, they couldn't have known how it would grow over the course of the next nearly three decades.

But on Wednesday, Quality Beverage celebrated the groundbreaking of its new manufacturing facility on Charleigh D. Ford Jr. Drive in Lowndes County, with a second generation of the families at the helm.

"It's such a proud moment to see this happen," Earwood said. "We started something in a rented tire store building and have watched it progress to a

brand new facility."

Brad Earwood, who took over as president of Quality Beverage from his father in 2021, said the more than \$10 million project, a 50,000-square-foot facility, will be operational by April 2025.

Quality Beverage manufactures concentrates for "fun refreshments," like those found at amusement parks and movie theaters.

"They're for kids to have a treat in the summer," Brad said. "... That's what we'll continue to do out here, just on a greater scale."

The new plant, Brad said, will allow Quality Beverage to triple production. It will also allow the company to add 30 employees to its workforce.

"We've come a long way from operating out of a ... tire store," Brad said.

David said for the past 25 years, Quality Beverage has been based out of its current address at 82 Yorkville Park Square in Columbus.

Brad said the plan is to gradually phase out the old location and to move

'It's such a proud moment to see this happen. We started something in a rented tire store building and have watched it progress to a brand new facility.'

David Earwood, Quality Beverage co-founder

employees over to the new location, once the facility is completed.

Throughout the process of finding the new location, the Earwoods put an emphasis on keeping the plant local, Golden Triangle Development LINK Chief Operating Officer Meryl Fisakerly said. Even a spec building in Starkville seemed like a long drive to Brad for current employees, she said.

LINK CEO Joe Max Higgins said the building will be owned by Agracel, but one of the goals of the project is to use Mississippi labor to construct the new facility. Malouf Construction, a Greenwood-based company, he said, will be the general contractor during construction.

"I think you're going to see Mississippi folks out here building this thing,"

Higgins said.

But Brad said the growth was only possible due to family, including the hard work of his predecessor and the employees that have become "like family," by working together over the years.

"Buildings are great, but it's the people and the relationships of those working inside of them that are the most valuable resource we have," Brad said. "That's going to be our winning formula."

David said he is proud of his son for the direction he has led the company in, and of how the company will continue to grow in the future.

"This next generation is bold and brave, and I have the trust to follow them," David said.

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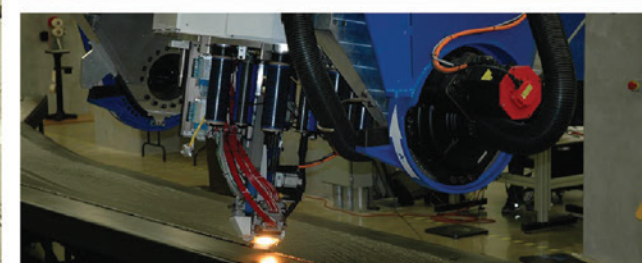
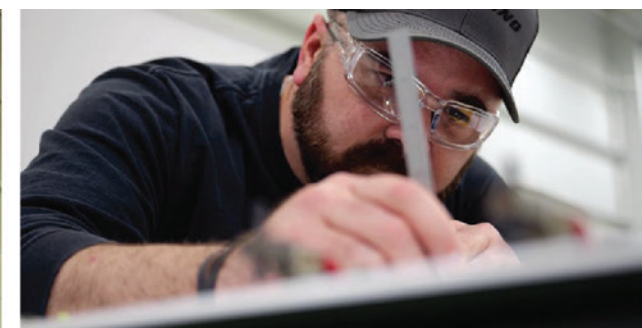
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Sqwincher takes hydration products direct to consumer

Kent Precision Foods Group invests \$25 million in facility upgrades

By **ABIGAIL SIPE ROCHESTER**
arochester@cdispach.com

The smell of sugar and fruit punch drink powder drifts through the air as Sqwincher employees move around their stations, filling, packing and counting drink mixes designed to help with just one thing: hydration.

Mike Dalton, brand manager for the industrial division of Kent Precision Foods that handles the Sqwincher brand, has worked at Sqwincher for 25 years. The goal of hydration, and helping to keep people safe in high heat environments, hasn't changed for Sqwincher since the Columbus based brand was started by Mack Howard in 1975.

For many years, Dalton said, Sqwincher's products have been focused on hydration safety, helping to keep workers safe "anywhere you can think there would be a problem with employees going down because of hydration."

"It's something that they give as a safety product, just as they would a hard hat, a pair of gloves, a pair of eyewear," Dalton said. "It's a piece of PPE – personal protective equipment."

Sqwincher's regular and sugar-free powdered and liquid hydration products are formulated with electrolytes but using more potassium and less sodium than competitors for muscle relief and water absorption. Sqwincher products include their individual Qwik Stiks, Sqwincher Squeeze freeze pops, Ready-to-Drink pouches, Bulk Liquid and Bulk Powder. Sqwincher also creates Everlyte, an electrolyte powder with no artificial sweeteners or food dyes.

Many workers in warehouses, auto manufacturers, steel mills, warehouses, construction and more may have already tried one of these Sqwincher products without realizing it, Dalton said.

But since Sqwincher was acquired by the Kent Precision Food Group in 2015, he said, the brand has grown significantly and started selling its products in a few new ways.

Laticia Wilson, vice president of finance, said Sqwincher has expanded into the back of the house in restaurants, into the health care field, and into direct to consumer avenues, including putting its Qwik Stiks on the shelves of select Walmart stores and convenience stores.

Wilson said KPFG has invested about \$25 million in the Sqwincher manufacturing facility in Lowndes County off of Highway 45 since 2021, adding new automated machines to produce more hydration products than ever before. Still, demand has been high with the new markets.



Abigail Sipe Rochester/Dispatch Staff

ABOVE: Cedric Little and Lorenzo English monitor Sqwincher Squeeze freeze pops as the plastic is sealed and filled with soon-to-be-frozen liquid at the Sqwincher manufacturing headquarters off Highway 45 on May 16. Mike Dalton, brand manager for the industrial division of Kent Precision Foods handling the Sqwincher brand, said the freeze pops are one of the brand's best-selling products.



LEFT: Gloria Hughes looks through a bin of Sqwincher Qwik Stiks, packaged in groups of 10, after they are ready to be packaged and distributed to consumers. While the brand has made hydration products for years, Laticia Wilson, Vice President of Finance, said Sqwincher is now marketing more heavily toward new markets, including putting Qwik Stiks on select Walmart shelves.

Abigail Sipe Rochester/Dispatch Staff

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Sqwincher

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Abigail Sipe Rochester/Dispatch Staff

Longtime Sqwincher employee Jacqueline Harris counts Sqwincher Ready-to-Drink pouches as they roll off of the brand's production line. Harris manually counts the drink pouches to be packaged and shipped to their final destination, where consumers can fill the pouch with water and drink the hydration solution straight from the package.

"Despite the significant capital investments made in this facility, we still are not able to keep up with the demand for our product," Wilson said. "Nice problem to have, and nice for the workforce in this area because it's continually creating jobs."

Scott Bromley, vice president for strategy of operations, said Sqwincher products are manufactured in the Highway 45 facility, but they are distributed from a 130,000-square-foot facility near Bates Tire Center. There are also six other warehouses for Sqwincher throughout the Golden Triangle, he said, all of which help to create jobs locally.

Dalton said Sqwincher's manufacturing facility has grown since he started in 1999 from 40 to 45 employees on site to almost 300 employees on site, though KPFG has many more employees nationwide.

But even with the acquisition and rapid growth, Dalton said, Sqwincher's values and mission haven't changed. Instead, they have even been "amplified" by KPFG.

Many of the full-time employees stayed with the company through the KPFG acquisition as well, Dalton said, including some employees who work in manufacturing who have been there nearly as long as he has.

"A lot of companies will acquire brands for simply that – brands, not people," Dalton said. "Kent acquired us for the knowledge and the people, and we've seen a lot of advancements that have been ideated from here that they've adopted upstream."



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