

Front Lines

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Investing for the Long Haul

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In the September 2023 issue of *Green Profit*, we told you about the brand new Espoma fertilizer plant under construction in Hegins, Pennsylvania. In late April, I had the chance to check it out while visiting Jenne's Garden Center, not too far away from the state-of-the-art facility.

And when I say state-of-the-art, I mean it's a large, 60,000-sq. ft. operation with 80-ft. ceilings at its tallest, with three stainless steel storage silos on the outside, along with one silo for loading trucks and another on the inside, as well as multiple pieces of large equipment inside, all designed to dehydrate and pelletize inputs for fertilizer production. Despite its size, once operational it should only require about five people to run it, thanks to

the automation involved.

Pictured: A wide view of the inside that was still in progress when I visited in early May. The goal was to be completed and receiving materials by the mid to late June.

While I was there, Vice President of Operations Jim Meckley walked me through the process in the close-to-finished facility (they were still finishing the final electrical installation and automation programming).

"These are unique lengths Espoma went to, to be able to control the quality of the product," Jim told me. "They think in terms of decades. They're thinking 50 years from now."

That's the goal of this operation, to bring part of the process they'd relied on other suppliers for back in house. The main component to their fertilizer is chicken litter, which had previously been provided by those suppliers dried and pasteurized to the Espoma Millville, New Jersey, location to be blended with other ingredients, screened and packaged. The supply of that product had become erratic and unreliable, prompting the company to begin construction two years ago on the Hegins facility.

Jim's walkthrough was detailed, but here I'll just say there are multiple steps in the process once the truckloads of litter arrive that this facility is specifically designed to handle. It can come in wet or dry (a new feature that helps source materials from more suppliers) and the equipment here can produce the same end product, a pelletized, uniform dehydrated prill.

"We are the only organic producer in the country to install this kind of equipment," Jim added.

The benefits of the final product are numerous for both the consumer and for Espoma. For the consumer, there's considerably less dust and a reduced aroma, and the more uniform prills are easier to use in conventional spreaders. For Espoma, the equipment allows them to make everything they've always made, plus explore new avenues like bulk fertilizer for commercial agriculture, landscape and turf.

I have to say, I walked away amazed by the size and scope of the building and the equipment in it. This is definitely an investment in the future! **GP**