

New Belview plant a welcome boost for the South East



Last week's announcement by the Dutch Royal-A-Ware Group, partnered by Glanbia, regarding the development of a €140 million continental cheese manufacturing plant at the Port of Waterford in Belview, made for welcome news. This "best in-class facility" is scheduled for commissioning in 2022 and will produce continental cheeses in various formats, with an annual production capacity of 450 million litres.

Eighty full-time jobs will be created at Belview, with another 100 temporary posts to be created during the construction phase, a welcome announcement less than three months before Brexit is officially scheduled to kick in. The Dutch are great cheese lovers and who knows what further links this new facility may lead to across the Benelux and Germany?

As Port of Waterford Chief Executive Frank Ronan recently told this newspaper: "Brexit could potentially provide just such a change to the status quo and that might serve to drive something else here too. Necessity is what will drive any such change, and that's where we're at right now." Cheddar is more the inclination of the Irish, British and North American palate, so a continentally-minded product makes perfect sense.

It will also somewhat decrease dependence on the British market and, a decade-plus on from the closure of the Glanbia plant in Kilmeaden, marks a welcome return to large scale cheese production in the region. It also makes sense from an export perspective to locate at Belview given the potential shipping spin-offs which may accrue in due course.

Meanwhile, milk used in the production process on site will be sourced from local suppliers and the cheese will be marketed and sold to global customers. Over the past decade, Royal-A-Ware has experienced accelerated growth from €700 million to €1.3 billion today. With six dairy processing facilities, multiple warehouses and over 2,000 employees, the company's commitment to Belview is a tremendous injection of confidence into the South East. Said Jan Anker, the Chief Executive of Royal A-Ware Group: "With this announcement, Royal A-Ware is taking another step towards achieving its goals of working with strategic partners to build innovative and sustainable agri-food chains and offering its customers an enhanced product portfolio. It also gives our company access to additional volumes of high-quality cheese through a local supply chain."

Welcoming the news, Agriculture Minister Michael Creed said: "Investments like this cheese manufacturing facility in Belview are a critical response to the challenges posed by Brexit, in terms of developing new products and new markets." Glanbia Ireland Chief Executive Jim Bergin said this new link-up will "create a new route to market for Glanbia Ireland suppliers' milk and diversify our portfolio of consumer dairy products and ingredients. Since 2014 we have invested €343m to facilitate a 42 per cent increase in milk production by Glanbia farmers. This proposed new investment is now required to diversify our product mix and to ensure that our suppliers have the opportunity to fulfil their growth ambitions".

A recent economic impact study of the 410-acre Belview Industrial Zone revealed that the site supports 632 full-time jobs, in addition to a further 348 posts. Last week's news means that the area will boast in excess of 700 direct posts by 2022, which will also bring direct and related employment at Belview beyond the 1000 mark. With storage facilities also being expanded by several already established businesses, it's clear that Belview's somewhat understated value and contribution to the regional economy will soon be a thing of the past.