TORTILLERIA SONORA STEPS OUT ON A PATH TO FOOD SAFETY CERTIFICATION

ABOUT TORTILLERIA SONORA, INC. Tortilleria Sonora, Inc. is a family owned and operated Des Moines, IA, food firm with 10 employees. After being displaced to Texas by the Iowa flood of 1993, Oswaldo and Esther Barcelo began supporting themselves selling tortillas to a Texas supermarket. Then their daughter, Betty Garcia, grew old enough to return to Iowa and start a family, creating a pull for the entire family to return north. Tortilleria Sonora was incorporated in Iowa in 2009.

THE CHALLENGE. Life began moving faster after Betty Garcia received a phone call from a Des Moines-area produce company in 2017. The company was planning to launch a line of ready-to-eat meals and wanted to know if Tortilleria Sonora would be interested in supplying tortillas. However, they had a few questions about the business first. As she searched for answers, Garcia realized she was behind. The Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA), a 2011 federal law that completely revamped the way food-related businesses are regulated in the United States, was in the process of placing new restrictions on the 20-year-old tortilla factory. A window for getting into compliance with the law was preparing to close. A few more calls—including one to the administrator of Iowa’s Targeted Small Business program—helped Garcia find CIRAS. CIRAS helped her begin to see the solution.

MEP CENTER’S ROLE. Today, Garcia can point to a nearly $1.5 million improvement in her business since a CIRAS project manager helped put Tortilleria Sonora on a path to food safety certification. Garcia credits a CIRAS gap assessment with showing her what she needs to do to comply with the new standards and, eventually, to go beyond what’s required for a company the size of Tortilleria Sonora. Garcia is also working with government contracting specialists in the CIRAS Procurement Technical Assistance Center (PTAC) to help promote Tortilleria Sonora’s high standards to food-buying federal agencies. Garcia intends over the next year or so to completely revamp the company, adding warehouse space and upgrading machines. Tortilleria Sonora already has several brands for sale in major Iowa supermarkets, but new government contracts would help fuel the necessary upgrades.

"More and more food companies are requiring compliance with the new regulations before they’ll do business with you," said Kim Anderson, a food safety project manager who works jointly for CIRAS and the Iowa Grain Quality Initiative in Iowa State University’s Agriculture and Natural Resources Extension and Outreach. “She’s a lot farther along than a lot of places are, so being compliant and being able to talk about that fact will put her at a tremendous competitive advantage.”

"CIRAS is what launched it. Even though some of it has been very painful, they’ve been willing to jump up and say, ‘How can we help?’ That has been very awesome. It’s a challenge, but I’m excited to see where we will be in two years…I see it growing for sure."

-Betty Garcia, Chief Financial Officer