

TAKING A BIGGER BITE OUT OF THE SNACK FOOD MARKET: MONTANA MANUFACTURER AND MMEC COLLABORATE ON SUSTAINABLE GROWTH INITIATIVES

ABOUT HI-COUNTRY SNACK FOODS. For more than 40 years, Hi-Country Snack Foods has been a mainstay of the Montana food manufacturing community. Since 1976, Hi-Country has produced high quality meat snacks using traditional recipes and seasonings in the small town of Lincoln. Along the way, the company has developed a loyal following for its beef, bison and elk jerky, as well as its wild game seasonings. Hi-Country now employs 38 people and its expanding product line is available in stores across the state, at its popular "Trading Post" and through a growing online presence. The Trading Post has transitioned to highlighting "Made in Montana" products as a store feature to support other Montana manufacturers.

THE CHALLENGE. In 2019, Hi Country welcomed new management. Owner Travis Byerly and COO Steve Fehrs saw potential for significant market growth, but also shared a commitment to keeping the business in Lincoln. The primary challenge facing them was attracting and retaining a limited workforce. The initiative to become the employer of choice within 65 miles was born.

MEP CENTER'S ROLE. Steve Fehrs shared this vision with MMEC Business Advisor Doug Roberts and they worked cooperatively to develop a plan to accomplish the vision. The desired result was to increase employee compensation, benefits, and job skills while continuing to improve company profitability. Roberts identified several opportunities to help Hi-Country reach its goals. Leveraging an EPA Waste Reduction grant, he guided Hi-Country through a value stream mapping effort that highlighted specific improvements for improving efficiency. Energy savings opportunities included LED lighting, cooler insulation, and the use of EC motors for coolers and freezers. In addition, Roberts trained staff in the lean principles of waste reduction, and standard work to dramatically improve overall packaging efficiency. These changes provided the necessary gains to support the first step in wage increases.

Through parallel projects, Roberts and Hi-Country collaborated to identify focused automation opportunities for spice filling, bag labeling, and bottle labeling. The automation investments resulted in not only increased production but higher paying jobs due to the skills and knowledge needed to operate the equipment. The next step was to develop and implement the MEP "Smart Talent" program customized to the company's needs. Smart Talent combines well-defined career paths with corresponding skills training, structured assessment, and skills-based rewards. These are three key components to attracting, developing and retaining the limited workforce.

"MMEC is a great resource for manufacturing in Montana; whether it's operational improvements, automation, waste reduction, or employee development, we know they will help us find solutions that set us up for long-term growth and improvement."

-Steve Fehrs, COO, Hi-Country Snack Foods

RESULTS



\$650,000 in increased or retained sales



\$383,787 in new investment



\$103,000 in cost savings



3 created or retained jobs

CONTACT US



PO Box 174255, Montana
State University
2310 University Way Bldg 2,
Ste 1
Bozeman, MT 59717-4255



(406)994-3812



www.montana.edu/mmec

