Seafood safety finds champion in Valley

By Bill McEwen/The Fresno Bee
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Old-fashioned entrepreneurship, global markets and cutting-edge technology intersect inside the original Kings County Courthouse, which is more than a century old but was spared the wrecking ball in the late 1970s and is one of the San Joaquin Valley's most beautiful buildings.

Here, in a wing of upstairs offices in the Hanford building, is the corporate headquarters of Global Food Technologies Inc., a private venture that investors hope becomes a leader in food safety.

The company gives us a glimpse of the Valley's future: While agriculture will remain important, diversification into high-tech industries is vital.

Global Food Technologies has worked for seven years on a patented process that kills disease-causing bacteria in seafood without altering the food's taste, texture, color or nutrition.

Today, after spending more than $22.5 million, according to corporate filings, the company will unveil its self-described "organic clean step" system -- which it touts as "the greatest advancement in seafood safety since ice."

In addition, Global Food Technologies has a trademark brand -- "iPura" -- and a business plan that calls for the company to install, service and operate systems in food-processing plants.

Much is riding on international acceptance of the technology, which combines pressure, temperature, vacuum and an organic antimicrobial solution to attack pathogens and extend seafood shelf life.

Many investors are from the Valley, and success could produce hundreds of high-paying jobs for local residents, says Keith D. Meeks, president and chief executive officer of Global Food Technologies.

"Friends, family, fools and other risk-takers" is how Meeks describes investors who have kept the company afloat during the trials of technological development and securing contracts in fish-exporting countries.

Global Food Technologies expects to begin running the system this spring at a salmon processor in Chile. It has contracts to operate in China and is negotiating to place the system in Vietnam. The countries are among the top 10 world seafood exporters.

After that?

The goal, Meeks says, is to adapt the technology to poultry, meat and produce, making the company's blue iPura logo synonymous with safe food.

Meeks envisions a scenario in which the iPura brand "is ubiquitous throughout the world."

The company has 25 employees and a management team that includes James Bouskos, whose family owned and operated Continental Markets in Fresno for 30 years, and Stan Bien, a former Fresnan who once owned the Elbow Room restaurant. Among the directors is former San Francisco mayor and state lawmaker Art Agnos.

"We have another 50 people who are working for stock [in the company]," Meeks says.

It hasn't been easy for Global Food Technologies, which makes the system in Pocatello, Idaho, and teamed with Idaho State University to test the system's efficacy.

The first version of the system weighed 270,000 pounds and didn't appeal to fish processors.

A second version also was too big. Today's model weighs 35,000 pounds and is attracting interest, Meeks says.

Necessity being the mother of invention, company leaders came up with the iPura name instead of parting with $1 million sought by a marketing firm for coining a brand.

Meeks says the company bought four books on branding and that during a brainstorming session Agnos suggested "Pura."

Ron Calonica, the director of business development, said, "What about iPura?"

Research indicated that iPura would be understood throughout the world and didn't have negative connotations, Meeks says. For a song, the company had a catchy brand to replace the system's previous name -- SEABAC, which stood for seafood bacteria elimination system.

That was a good day for the entrepreneurs. Meeks anticipates more.

"I didn't think this would get so big," he says. "And take so much to get here."

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