

South Bend Tribune

Serving north central Indiana and southwestern Michigan since 1872

All's well at area WellPet

■ Mishawaka company in midst of expansion, job creation.

By JIM MEENAN
South Bend Tribune

MISHAWAKA — Three years ago, WellPet invited retailers, a major distributor and area dog and cat breeders to its Mishawaka factory.

The purpose was to drive home the point that little was changing, except for the good after Berwind, a family-owned investment management company out of Philadelphia, merged Eagle Pack Pet Foods with Wellness under the name WellPet.

On Wednesday, WellPet had many of the same people back under the tent just outside its plant on West 11th Street in Mishawaka, but this time it was to show off how much *has* changed.

Not the company's long-standing efforts with premium pet food, but rather its expansion of production and warehousing after a yearlong \$20 million project.

The company's plant will now consist of about 150,000 square feet, of which 50,000 is for manufacturing and about 100,000 square feet is for warehousing. The end result for the area is 45 new jobs, half of which have already been filled, and the rest of which should be filled by the end September.

At that time, the company will employ 100. Interested parties should contact the company's human resource office.

The fact that these jobs allow a person to support a family with both health insurance and a 401(k) is not lost on Tim Callahan, chief executive of WellPet.

"We all have a vested interest in a strong middle class," said Callahan. "So for us to put good quality jobs, good health care benefits, all those things (into the jobs WellPet is offering), it's great.

"It feels like we are bringing something back to our community," Callahan said. "I think it matters to our customers. I think they respect and see the benefit that such an expansion brings."

The company is able to expand, despite slow economic times, because it produces a product for a growing market in America — pets.

According to the American Pet Products Association, the number of U.S. households that own a pet has hit an all time high of 72.9 million and is steadily increasing.

And the number of pets has been increasing for 20 years, with at least three-fourths of those pets being dogs and cats, which WellPet serves with its brands of Holistic Select, Well-

ness, Old Mother Hubbard and Eagle Pack.

"It helps that we are in a business that has seen a lot of growth," Callahan said. And pet food products have expanded with it.

"We're expanding the distribution of our products, so we're seeing good growth of that," Callahan said. "And the growth in turn

See WELLPET/C2

has enabled us to invest and expand our business as well."

The company's products are sold locally at PetSmart, Petco and local independent pet specialty stores.

The several hundred people who arrived in shifts to tour the factory saw an incredibly larger warehouse area than they were shown three years ago, but also much more automated and computer-run machines, all of which allow the company to expand its processing capabilities, Callahan said.

Callahan also said the company now has tighter controls in terms of safety and quality control management.

Callahan also cited his current work force.

"I start with the folks who are working for us today," Callahan said. "They have just a tremendous amount of enthusiasm and energy for our brands, and commitment."



South Bend Tribune/JAMES BROSHER

A worker watches as a conveyor carries packages of pet food to a robot before it's packaged on Wednesday. New equipment was part of the \$20 million expansion the Mishawaka company unveiled Wednesday.