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International taste of success

Proprietary technology has helped a Durban company export unrestricted by licence or royalty agreements, writes Nicola Jenvey

DURBAN-based food acidulant manufacturer Isegen SA has spread its wings to include Russia on its 42-country export list. Acidulents are food additives used to impart a sharp flavour. The Russian order, worth R265000, is for malic acid manufactured at the Isipingo plant.

Isegen executive director Angela Fowlds says the food division currently generates 60%-70% of its turnover from exports.

The group also produces raw materials for resins, paint, adhesive and the PVC industries.

Malic acid is used in the food industry in the production of beverages, confectionery, sauces, cider and wines, providing the sharp, acidic tastes required in these goods.

Using in-house technology unrestricted by licence or royalty agreements, the acidulants are produced from wholly South African content. Fowlds says this is in line with government's policy of adding value to local raw materials that can be exported to the benefit of the economy.

She says the company is the only one worldwide to have successfully commercialised the granulation of its food acids. Granulation technology has significant advantages that result in a free-flowing, dust-free product with an even particle size, making it is easier to handle.

The Russian coup has given Isegen a toehold in a potentially large market and Fowlds is confident of growing the business. The company has already achieved principal supplier status to more than 40 multinational food groups.

MD Robert Fowlds says the company has embarked on an extensive expansion programme from its Durban-based facilities, citing both the proximity to Africa's busiest harbour and the attitude of eThekweni city management and officials as key elements in the board's decision.

"City manager Michael Sutcliffe, deputy mayor Logie Naidoo and the council

departments should be complimented on the professional manner in which they make Durban an efficient and effective place in which to do business," he says.

Internationally, Phoenix Park Gas Processors in Trinidad announced last month that it would partner with Isegen in building a \$64m maleic anhydride plant for the Caribbean island nation. Construction is scheduled to begin by the end of 2008.

The company is expected to spend R45m on expanding its Durban plant food production by 37% to 13500 tons in order to meet the growth in global demand.

Fowlds says the plant is among the world's most integrated food acid facilities. Isegen receives butane from the adjoining Sapref refinery, converts this into maleic anhydride via oxidation and uses the energy that is liberated to produce steam.

The steam and maleic anhydride are used by the food acids plant on the same site to manufacture the wide range of food acidulants that end up in the products of multinational corporations and thus on menus around the world.

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