

Local water company making splash overseas: Natural Glacial earns Japan Airlines contract, plans expansion into China market this year

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Illustration: Photo: Natural Glacial Waters CEO Alan Lai and logistics and sales manager Jack Liang anticipate a large increase in business over the next year and a half as they begin exports from Fanny Bay to China.

After a tough recovery following a strike that started in 2000 and shut the plant down for an entire year, Natural Glacial Waters bottling plant in Fanny Bay is back on track and looking to expand their business.

"Ten years ago, when talking about bottled water, not many people were talking about it," said logistics and sales manager Jack Liang. "But now when you go out everybody grabs a bottled water."

Natural Glacial chose the Comox Valley for their business due to the quality of water available. The company extracts the water they bottle from both Rosewall Creek and the Schoen Glacier. Their contract allows them to extract up to one million gallons of water a day from the glacier but they currently extract about five per cent of that amount.

Liang said that because the water is extracted from the end of the aquifer it would be wasted if not used.

"If we don't pump it out, this water will go out to the sea," said Liang.

The company restarted in 2002 without any customers, having lost them all due to the strike. By 2003 they had won back one of their largest contracts and by 2004 they had tripled their exports.

The company recently won a contract to supply Japan Airlines with bottled water for all flights between Japan and Taiwan and if the trial is successful, hopes to be awarded the contract to supply all of Japan Airlines' flights with water. They will also begin an expansion into the Chinese market later this year.

"We still have a lot of spare capacity," said CEO Alan Lai. "The Chinese market is going to be very important."

The Comox Valley Economic Development Society has noticed the company's resurgence and recently nominated Natural Glacial for a 2006 B.C. Export Award.

"It's a great little company that not a lot of people know is there. We're very supportive of the work they've been doing," said economic development officer John Watson. "They've been a great supporter of the community ... and they deserve to be

recognized."

The company currently exports almost all of their product to Japan and Taiwan although they do sell locally at Quality Foods and hope to expand their local sales. Lai said that large manufacturers had saturated the local market but as the company increases their production their cost per unit should go down.

"We do value the local market, it's very important," said Lai. "Once the volume is up, I believe we can compete with the larger companies in the local market, the Canadian market and the U.S. market."

The company exported about 200 40-foot shipping containers of bottled water in 2005 and have already surpassed that target this year, with a goal of 700 containers shipped by year end. They will begin their expansion into China at the end of this year and hope to ship between 450 to 600 containers to China in 2007.

If their plans pan out, they will be using about 50 per cent of the plant's total capacity of 2700 shipping containers, a significant increase from the 200 containers shipped last year.

"By stabilizing our production we will give our employees a more stable work environment," said Lai. "That's a goal for our company. To be successful and also give our employees and ourselves more stability."

Natural Glacial currently has 52 employees.

More information about the company can be found at their website, www.naturalglacialwaters.com.

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