

Vegetable Soybean Company To Make Mulberry 'Edamame Capital' Of U.S.

MULBERRY, ARK.

This Crawford County town was christened the future "edamame capital of the United States" at a Jan. 31 press conference to announce construction of the nation's first plant dedicated to the receiving, processing, packaging and shipping of edamame, or vegetable soybeans, to be grown by Arkansas farmers starting this year.

Kelly Cartwright, who will be chief operating officer of American Vegetable Soybean and Edamame, Inc., (AVS), said "we don't see a ceiling on the market" for edamame that will be shipped from Mulberry. Frozen edamame products are currently imported from Asia for the fast-growing U.S. market.

AVS is a subsidiary of JYC International based in Houston. JYC president J.Y. "Gene" Chung said, "We are excited to be part of the larger Arkansas community and the city of Mulberry as we work together to make this new vegetable soybean industry successful and sustainable."

Gov. Mike Beebe said during the press conference at the county fairgrounds that the new venture is a reflection of private and public sector collaboration for economic development.

Mulberry Mayor Gary Baxter said local leaders have been impressed with the AVS

Speakers at a press conference to announce construction of the nation's first edamame processing plant in Mulberry were, from left, Kelly Cartwright, future chief operating officer of American Vegetable Soybean and Edamame, Inc.; Gov. Mike Beebe; Kay Baxter and Mayor Gary Baxter; J.Y. "Gene" Chung, president of JYC Foods; and Mark Cochran, U of A System vice president for agriculture.



and JYC leadership. "Dr. Chung said he didn't want any tax breaks because he supports education and doesn't want to take tax money away from our schools," Baxter said. "This company will be a great asset to our city and our state."

The 32,000-square-foot plant, being built at a cost of \$5.8 million, will have about 40 full-time employees by this summer and as many as 60 within three years, Cartwright said.

AVS is contracting with farmers to grow 900 acres of edamame in 2012. "We anticipate doubling the acreage in 2013, and adding a second (processing) line in 2014," Cartwright said. The first year's crop will include organic edamame to be grown in White County. The rest of the acreage is in the Arkansas River Valley from Faulkner to Crawford counties.

Demand for edamame in the United States is growing at a rate of 12 to 15 percent per year, Cartwright said. It is eaten as a vegetable dish, in soups and salads and as a snack. JYC is a leading importer of edamame and other frozen food products from China, which are marketed through major national retail and restaurant chains.

Chung said rising costs in China have made it economically feasible to pursue his vision of producing edamame in the United States. He holds patents on equipment he invented for efficient processing and packaging with less labor cost compared to operations in China.

Chung has a Ph.D. degree in engineering from Purdue University and had a successful career as an acoustical engineer in the automotive industry before launching a gourmet foods company in 1985, which he sold. He founded JYC International in the mid-1990s.

"We look forward to many years of success

here as we become the edamame capital of the United States," Chung said. He said help with financing through the Arkansas Economic Development Commission and the Arkansas Development Finance Authority and technical assistance from the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture have been critical to launching the new venture.

Chung's interest in U.S. production of edamame coincided with a two-year effort to lay groundwork for edamame production in Arkansas by Cartwright, who is also president of Agricultural Research Initiatives, a research and consulting firm, along with Hank Chaney, Faulkner County Cooperative Extension Service agent; Lanny Ashlock, Arkansas Soybean Promotion Board; and Division of Agriculture soybean breeder Pengyin Chen. Winrock International, Arkansas Farm Bureau, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and state government agencies also provided support.

Mark Cochran, U of A System vice president for agriculture, said, "The Division of Agriculture in the University of Arkansas System is extremely pleased to have the opportunity to support the development of an edamame soybean industry in Arkansas."

"We are very excited about this great opportunity to diversify into a new crop and to enhance the tremendous impact that agriculture has on the state's economy by pursuing another value-add enterprise to supplement farm production," Cochran said.

Division of Agriculture soybean breeder Pengyin Chen has developed a new vegetable soybean variety that is well adapted for edamame production under Arkansas growing conditions. The Arkansas edamame variety will be planted along with a JYC variety from China.

Lanny Ashlock, Arkansas Soybean Promotion Board director of research, said soybean farmers have helped support the Division of Agriculture plant breeding program and field tests to develop edamame crop management recommendations.

Robert Stobaugh of Blackwell in Conway County has contracted to grow 60 acres of edamame for AVS. He has already grown the new Arkansas variety as part of a seed increase project.

"I don't see any big obstacles for farmers," said Stobaugh, a member of the national United Soybean Board and former ASPB president.

Arkansas produces about 3.2 million acres yearly of commodity soybeans, which are harvested as dry beans and crushed to extract oil and meal. Edamame soybeans are harvested as green pods and are larger and sweeter tasting than commodity beans. Δ

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