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Subject: SCNOW: Essex investing \$54 million, creating 215 jobs in Marion County (Photo Gallery included)

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Staff Report

A Miami-based global resources company Wednesday announced the largest initial investment in Marion County -- a \$54 million rice repackaging plant that will ultimately employ at least 215 people after five years.

Marion Mayor Rodney Berry announced the deal with Essex Holdings Inc. at a press conference Wednesday afternoon.

"We've got a quality company that's going to be committed to Marion County in the long run, that believes in their workforce, believes in our workforce and we'll treat them right," Berry said. "So this company is of the upmost ethical means and we're so grateful to invite them in."

Dr. Navin Xavier, president and CEO of Essex, said Wednesday it's a humble company with big dreams.

"We are excited about the opportunity to establish our new manufacturing facility in Marion County," Xavier said. "This new facility will increase our operational capacity and hence represents an important step for our company's growth. South Carolina has a great business environment, and we strongly believe that this integration will be a bona fide step to further give added value to our food division's operations. We look forward to starting our operations there and appreciate all the support we've received from state and local officials."

Founded in 2008, Essex Holdings Inc. is a producer and integrated producer with specialties in the trade of global resources. The company has both domestic and international offices with several manufacturing facilities.

Marion County Administrator Tim Haper said the company will locate its new facility in the former Blumenthal Mill facility off of U.S. 76 in Marion. The new facility will allow the company to bring jobs to the U.S. that were formally located outside of the country and into Marion County.

"It's another great opportunity, because we are taking an existing building and bringing new industry back to it," Harper said. "We have had a great partnership with the state for some incentives and to do some renovations onto the building. That's going to help them get into the building quicker."

The company will work to hire as many employees as possible from Marion County, and to purchase as many services and products as possible in the area.

Marion County had the state's highest jobless rate at 19.2 percent in January 2013, down from 19.9 in January 2012. Berry said the media will now have to refer to the county with a different "tagline" now that Essex has declared its intentions to come to the county public.

"So often the media, and rightfully so, has taglined us (Marion County) every time our county is mentioned as the highest unemployment," Berry said. "It's been our job to remove that tagline, so today I think is a step in the right direction."

Salaries at the plant will be market rate "plus a little," Commercial Director for Essex Baker Anthony said. Anthony, who will manage Marion operations, also said "We certainly hope to bring more" than the 215 jobs called for in the company's incentive agreement with the state.

"It's part of a desire to be an important force for good in the communities where we have facilities," Anthony said.

As an example, Anthony cited a Chilean mine where a \$50 million water filtration plant purchased from the U.S. military to supply clean water to the mine is now also supplying nearby schools and other town facilities.

Essex Holdings will establish a facility that will support the expansion of the company's food division. The new facility is expected to be completed and operational by the middle of this year.

"Essex is here to stay for a long time and do all we can to lift up this county," Xavier said.

S.C. Gov. Nikki Haley was also in attendance for the big announcement on Wednesday. She said she wants to make it "very clear" that we are celebrating a \$54 million investment and 215 jobs here in Marion.

"More and more companies are seeing South Carolina as the 'it' state for doing business, and today's announcement by Essex Holdings is another sign of that," Gov. Nikki Haley said. "The company's decision to set up operations in Marion is also a big win for one of our state's rural areas."

Others in attendance of the announcement Wednesday were Congressman Tom Rice, Senator Kent Williams, Rep. J. Wayne George, Rep. Lester Branham, Delores Dacosta representing Senator Tim Scott and Jeff McKay with the North Eastern Strategic Alliance. The entire Marion County Council was also in attendance.

McKay said Essex Holdings is a global company that could have gone anywhere -- and chose Marion County.

Rice said this is a great day for Marion County and that jobs are the number one priority in his district -- which includes most of the Pee Dee including Marion County.

Essex Holdings will start with two items -- packaging rice from Cambodia to distribute throughout the United States, Essex said.

Jasmine rice will grow and be milled in Cambodia and then shipped to Marion via Charleston.

Anthony explained that the company was moving its jasmine rice packaging operations to the U.S., because it would save a considerable amount of money on freight if it shipped bulk rice to the U.S. instead of packaged rice. He continued that the company is currently paying a third party to do the packaging and paying a mark up there. The difference in amounts that can be shipped makes the difference in freight price -- It would take 1000 containers, the current method for shipping, to equal what one, 12,500-ton bulk ship full of rice could bring in.

The company has also recently signed a deal with a Chilean company to lease its own pacific port, an \$18 billion deal.

"Grown only twice a year and in relatively low volumes Cambodian Jasmine rice is renowned globally as the best Jasmine rice available on the market. In 2012 Cambodia was awarded the prestigious status of producing the world's No. 1 rice, as voted for by consumers worldwide," according to the company's Web site.

Cambodian Jasmine rice has a fragrant Jasmine aroma, is silky, smooth, tender and shiny in appearance and after cooking has a soft and fluffy texture.

"Jasmine rice is exclusively grown and milled in Cambodia by Essex Holdings Inc.; we have taken every precaution to ensure that we grow only the very best grain using no chemicals, pesticides or non-organic fertilizers in the process. Once the rice is ready for harvesting and milling stringent quality controls put in place ensure that only the highest quality grains are packaged under the brand name Max Star Choice," according to the company's Web site.

Essex Holdings is a prominent and seasoned supplier in the export of rice, the company's diversity with rice covers, import, export, quality control, packaging, logistics and much more, according to its website.

For more information about the company, please visit www.essexholdings.com.

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