

Fellsmere sees new, innovative businesses as way to stay relevant in changing economy

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A scientifically advanced organic aquaculture plant growing colossal-sized prawns, oysters and saltwater vegetation. A hybrid biofuel refinery using elephant grass and other agricultural stock to produce jet fuel.

These are just two of the cutting-edge industries being nurtured in the fields of Fellsmere, which 100 years ago during its incorporation was strictly focused on farming.

Much like the early pioneers of this northwestern corner of Indian River County, the entrepreneurial spirit is alive and beginning to take hold in this rural community. While mostly still made up of traditional farms, cattle, and mom-and-pop shops, Fellsmere has taken very aggressive steps to diversify the town's tax base and create higher income jobs.

"We are very interested in diversifying what we do in agriculture through the use of different technologies," said Jason Nunemaker, Fellsmere's city manager. "The City Council has been very supportive in reaching out and collaborating to move these efforts forward."

The business-friendly and progressive environment is what drew Florida Organic Aquaculture and Green Flight International to locate operations in Fellsmere.

Founded by Douglas Rodante, Green Flight International is best known for its groundbreaking use of renewable fuels in aviation. The company chose Fellsmere to grow test crops to continue their exploratory efforts.

"Fellsmere has helped us tremendously by allowing us to test crops, and it also has the land imperative to us as we expand and scale up operations," said Rodante.

Florida Organic Aquaculture is three to six months away from breaking ground on a plant using a proprietary recirculating water aquaculture system of growing giant shrimp and oysters. The plant, with its enclosed scientific water quality monitoring systems, pumps, filters, a water treatment plant and emergency back-up devices, will be designed to maintain growing conditions year-round.

John Billian, vice president of marketing, said Fellsmere was the right spot for the company.

"We hope to create 50-60 jobs during phase one of the program. Fellsmere has been very supportive and helped us make a lot of things happen," he said.

Florida Organic has been taking advantage of EB-5, a government initiative to encourage foreigners to invest in new commercial enterprises and create jobs in the U.S. by enticing them with green cards. The company just recently received the final approval to become a certified EB-5 regional center, making it even more attractive to green card investors.

"The president of our company, Cliff Morris, is a successful businessman from South Africa who himself has had difficulty migrating with his family to the U.S." said Billian. "Through his personal process, he became interested in the EB-5 initiative, making this process possible. We should have the first module of the aquaculture plant completed within six months and fully operational between 18-24 months."

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