



Spring Meadows Natural Pet Food production and operations manager Jason Stovra proudly holds up a flexible flow-pack containing a nutritious, all-natural three-ounce serving of high-quality raw rabbit meat retailing across Canada under the company's new Raw Whole Animal brand of premium cat food products manufactured in Saskatoon, Sask.

COOL FOR CATS

Canadian premium pet food manufacturer brings its innovative new raw meat cat food to market with high-impact flow-wrap packaging solution

By George Guidoni, Editor
Photos by Dave Stobbe

At people come in all shapes, sizes and personality traits all over the world. But whatever their differences, they all share incredible love and affection for their enchanting feline companions.

And while this enduring love affair may sometimes border on being obsessive to a fault, the emerging trend towards so-called pet 'humanization' and pet parenting has become a major growth driver of the booming Canadian retail pet food market worth an estimated \$4.2 billion in 2020, according to **Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada**, and projected to grow to \$5.6 billion by 2025.

Notably, this brisk growth has gone hand-in-hand with robust product innovation in the pet food industry, with 1,025

new pet food products lunched in Canada between 2016 and 2020.

With so many brands and product categories locked in fierce competition for market share and consumer loyalty, achieving strong product differentiation in a crowded marketplace is a formidable challenge often requiring significant capital resources to invest in new production equipment and capabilities.

For Saskatoon, Sask.-based **Spring Meadows Natural Pet Food**, the company's 2018 acquisition by the Mississauga, Ont.-based **Dane Creek Capital Corp. (DCCC)** provided a perfect financial partner for helping the innovative pet food producer bring its technical capabilities up to par to the high levels of nutritional excellence of its premium-quality, hand-crafted cat and dog food patties eagerly snapped up by grateful Canadian

pet owners for whom price is no object when it comes to their beloved four-legged family members.

Founded in 2004, Spring Meadows excels at manufacturing frozen raw ground animal pet food in a variety of product sizes to make it easy to feed small to large domestic animals, using a propriety double-grind process to achieve uniform find-ground texture and to remove any large bone pieces from the product.

Sourcing a broad variety of raw meat from reputable suppliers across Saskatchewan—including beef, bison, chicken, turkey, fish, lamb and rabbit—the 6,200-square-foot facility company currently produces 28 different SKUs (stock-keeping units) of cat and dog meat patties under its own flagship **Spring Meadows** brand label, along with doing some private-label work for a select group of like-minded customers placing high value on the benefits of raw meat diets for domestic dogs and cats.

According to Spring Meadows, these significant benefits include cleaner teeth, more pleasant breath, higher energy and vitality levels, a shiny coat, clear eyes, healthy skin, and fewer arthritic symptoms in older pets.

As the company's website proclaims,

“Choosing a raw food diet with a variety of different meats gives your pet a natural, healthy diet—the way nature intended.

“Frozen raw food is the freshest and is the easiest to digest, while finely ground bones in whole animal raw food provides a great source of calcium and phosphorous.

“Whole animal food includes meat, bones, vital organs, heart, liver, lungs, kidneys and tripe—all the ingredients for full nutrition,” the company says, also citing the benefits of healthier muscles; lean strong bodies; better resistance to

Spring Meadows staff transfer a batch of freshly ground raw meat into the Reiser Vemag Robot 500 vacuum stuffer and portioner.

disease, allergies, ticks, fleas and worms; and fewer veterinary bills for the pet owners.

Nowadays operating as part of the **United Raw Pet Foods Inc.** division of DCCC, the company has recently taken a bold step of automating its pet food packaging process to improve with the start-up of a high-performance horizontal flow-wrapping machine supplied by the renowned Montreal-based packaging machinery manufacturer **Paxiom Group.**

As Spring Meadows production and



Perfectly-shaped three-ounce medallions of raw meat emerge from the Reiser Vemag Robot 500 portioner on a food-grade conveyor transfer belt feeding them inside the Paxiom SleekWrapper i65 horizontal flow-wrapping machines to be packed into individual single-serve, easy-open flow-packs.

PET FOOD PACKAGING



A close-up view of the high-quality rollstock film loaded inside the SleekWrapper i65, printed on the HP Inidgo digital press technology by ePac Flexible Packaging Canada in Vancouver, provides superior barrier protection to keep the product inside fresh and flavorful, while the high-end printing and finishing of laminated pouches provide the premium look befitting the innovative upscale cat food brand.

operations manager Jason Stovra relates, the company had to upgrade its packaging capabilities last year in order to execute a successful market launch of a brand new line of three-ounce raw ground meat medallions for cats.

Produced in three innovative flavor varieties—including rabbit, chicken-and-duck and turkey-and—the *Raw Whole Animal Diet for Cats* line medallions are packaged in flow-packs, which are then packed in groups of seven inside recyclable multi-pack freezer pouches containing a full delicious serving of raw meat for each day of the week.

Unfortunately for Stovra and his dedicated five-person production crew, the plant simply did not have enough hands on-deck to try to pack all the individual portion-packs manually in sufficient quantities, and with the required quality, that this important product launch entailed.

To overcome this drawback, Stovra commenced a thorough search of the available automatic packaging equipment that would suit the plant's current and future production requirements—ultimately contacting the food packaging machinery experts at Paxiom.

After several discussions, demonstrations and test runs conducted alongside Paxiom's sales manager Luis Pilonieta, Stovra eventually decided to go with high-performance *SleekWrapper i65* model inverted horizontal flow-wrapping machine.

Manufactured in Italy by Paxiom's **ValTara srl** sister company—the high-performance *SleekWrapper i65* inverted servo-driven horizontal flow-wrapping machine is designed to deliver optimal reliability, simplicity and serviceability, according to the company.

Using five servo motors to facilitate quick and easy changeovers and adjust-

Production and operations manager Jason Stovra (right) keeping a watchful eye over the Spring Meadows production line process inside the company's HACCP-certified facility just outside of Saskatoon.



The single-serving portioned medallions are deposited on top of the clear plastic film at the entry into the SleekWrapper i65 machine, to be overwrapped and placed inside individual flow-packs at a speed of 50 products per minute.





Jason Stovra selecting a program recipe for the next packaging run on the SleekWrapper i65 machine using the system's built-in HMI (human-machine interface) touchscreen terminal.



Manufactured in Italy by Paxiom's sister company ValTara, the SleekWrapper i65 flow-wrapper boasts stainless-steel construction and fully-enclosed electrical and electronic components to ensure clean and reliable operation, with easy access for the required maintenance and cleaning.

ments, the machine's servo drive help ensure assures precise product positioning and smooth acceleration/deceleration.

Well-suited for handling soft or sticky products, multipacks and other products that are difficult to push with the lug chain design found on conventional bottom-seal flow-wrappers, the *SleekWrapper i65* feeds the rollstock film from below the product—securely carrying the hard-to-handle products on top of the packaging film from the former through the cutting head.

Boasting a sleek and compact design, the *SleekWrapper i65* machine comes standard with stainless-steel frame construction, large user-friendly color touchscreen, automatic open/close rotary fin wheel assembly, rotary seal jaws with jam detecting logic, and the ability to pre-program and store product settings.

As Stovra happily acknowledges, he

"I'm convinced that we'll be able to meet future demands from the retail trade with our new technology."

could not be more please about his equipment selection, along with the extensive customer service and support offered by Paxiom throughout the project—from testing and troubleshooting the machine at the company's Montreal facility to the actual commissioning of the *SleekWrapper i65* at the Spring Meadows plant in June of 2021.

Running virtually problem-free since start-up, the *SleekWrapper i65* has enable the plant's packaging line to process an average of 50 packs of the premium cat food per minute, representing a quantum

leap in throughput and productivity for the HACCP (*Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points*)-certified plant.

"This was really the biggest single investment in automation we ever had at this plant," Stovra confides, "so getting the right type or equipment for packaging our premium product inside our premium-quality packaging was essential for us.

"So far, the machine has run like clockwork," Stovra says, "running 50 packs per minute, or roughly 10 pounds of product, producing perfect hermetically-sealed packages to keep the product nice and fresh, as well as easy for consumers to open and defrost."

Moreover, by connecting and synchronizing the *SleekWrapper i65* flow-wrapper with the **Reiser Vemag Robot 500** vacuum stuffer and portioner forming the medallions, the installation has eliminated the need for the labor-intensive manual placing of finished patties onto the conveyor by hand.

"We typically fill the Vemag stuffer with about 300 pounds or so of the raw product, which comes out of after passing through built-in guillotine that splits the round meat mass into three-ounce medallions that are placed onto conveyor belt, one after another," Stovra explains.

"The medallions rest on top of the film as they are pulled through the *SleekWrapper*," Stovra continues, "where they are hermetically sealed for optimal freshness and come out at the other end of the machine, to be placed into bags of seven packs each.

"When everything is running perfectly, we can run the whole production run for the cat food medallions with just three people," Stovra says.

"Once you have it all set up to go, you just press 'start' and it pretty much runs itself."

To achieve the premium-quality look, the medallions are packaged in high-barrier, laminated rollstock film supplied by flexible packaging converter **ePac Flexible Packaging Canada** in Vancouver, which uses the advanced **HP Indigo** digital printing press technology to apply the classy brand graphics onto the film surface.

"Everything really came together well with this project: a high-quality product in high-quality packaging produced on a high-quality machine," says Stovra, citing the consumer-friendly design of the flow-wrap multipack packaging for the new raw meat brand.

"For the consumer, it's as simple as remove the bag from the freezer, tear the pack open, put the meat on a plate to defrost, and dinner is ready," Stovra says.

"It has all the convenience of a can with all the quality of raw meat ingredients," he says, "which makes it an important product differentiator that can make raw pet food a more appealing option for new



Jason Stovra and Paxiom's sales manager Luis Pilonieta share a light moment alongside the packaging line equipped with the SleekWrapper i65 horizontal flow-wrapper.



Jason Stovra shows off the tiny pieces of debris and other contaminants detected in a finished master bag of product by the powerful, high-sensitivity Phantom metal detection system manufactured by Fortress Technology Inc.



consumers to give it a try.”

For Rasmus Hvid, director of operations for the United Raw Pet Food, the success of new SleekWrapper installation at Spring Meadows is a validation of the company’s commitment to the raw meat category of the pet food market.

“This investment is as much about improving process efficiencies as it is about what kind of new business opportunities it will help us unlock,” says Hvid.

“Spring Meadows has always been a trailblazer in this industry with its unique raw meat products,” he says, “and the new packaging capabilities will enable us to offer consumers the level of convenience and user experience that none of our competitors can match.”

Says Hvid: “During the COVID pandemic, the entire pet food industry has seen fantastic overall growth at around six per cent a year.

“But within that market, the raw meat segment has been growing at a tremendous rate of about 25 per cent annually.

“It is a very promising market niche that is far outpacing the growth for conventional pet food products,” he asserts.

“We are seeing a lot of these alternative pet foods, including gently-cooked or dehydrated products, starting to become a more common sight at many mainstream grocery stores,” Hvid says, “and being able to provide innovative consumer-friendly packaging for these types of products is only going to make them more visible and appealing to mainstream consumers.

“Making a correct decision on how you

choose to design and display your product is a big challenge in the frozen pet food category, where you also have to make sure you have superior sealing and other technical issues to address,” Hvid says.

“It is something that we put a lot of time and effort into,” he says, “and we feel that we have found a real breakthrough packaging solution for Spring Meadows with the Paxiom equipment.”

For Paxiom’s Luis Pilonieta, working on the Spring Meadows installation was a satisfying and fulfilling professional experience that accurately reflects Paxiom’s deep commitment to outstanding customer service and formidable technological prowess.

“We had the machine set up and running within two weeks of delivery,” he recalls, “and we had our field technician on-site there for several days to help with the commissioning and to provide staff training.

“Spring Meadows had an absolutely amazing new product to offer to the market, and we are very pleased to have provided them with the perfect automated packaging solution to bring it to market efficiently and cost-effectively,” Pilonieta states.

“For companies just starting out with automation, it can be a daunting experience,” he says, “which is why it is important for us to provide them with all the on-site and remote support that we can to make comfortable with the new technology and to implement a process that will help them succeed in the marketplace.

“Being able to work with the customer on-site and explain the whole process in the way that their staff could understand and absorb made a big difference to Jason and his team,” Pilonieta concludes, “who were all a great pleasure is to work with.

“Knowing that you have made a real impact in helping your customer move forward and succeed by empowering them with technical knowledge and automation expertise to make them a more efficient business is the best compliment anyone could ask for.”

SUPPLIERS

- Paxiom Group Inc.
- ValTara srl
- ePAC Flexible Packaging Canada
- Fortress Technology Inc.



Please see a video of the *SleekWrapper i65* horizontal flow-wrapping machine in action at the Spring Meadows Natural Pet Food plant in Saskatoon on Canadian Packaging TV at: www.canadianpackaging.com