

CASE STUDY

POTASH LEADER MAINTAINS ITS LEAD WITH UNION ALLIANCE TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS



Saskatchewan is home to the two biggest potash plants on the planet: the Belle Plaine mine, near Regina, is the world's largest potash solution mine and refining complex; the Esterhazy mine, in eastern Saskatchewan, is the largest producer of granular potash in the world. The two mines, and a third in Colonsay, Saskatchewan, are owned and operated by the Mosaic Company, the world's leading producer of concentrated phosphate and potash crop nutrients.

The Belle Plaine mine was developed by Kalium Chemicals Ltd. and began production in 1964. Since its opening, maintenance at the plant has been performed by skilled tradespeople working under the General Presidents' Maintenance Agreement (GPMA), which allows contractors to sign a single union agreement covering 13 trades.

Jacobs Industrial Services Ltd. has been the primary maintenance contractor at Belle Plaine since the 1960s. When Mosaic bought the mine in 2004, Jacobs was engaged to provide maintenance at all three of Mosaic's Saskatchewan mines and the GPMA was extended to cover tradespeople at the sites. Jacobs employs permanent full-time people at Belle Plaine and Colonsay, and hires tradespeople on a part-time basis at Esterhazy, primarily to work on short-term capital projects.

The mines, especially Belle Plaine, have provided steady, long-term employment for building tradespeople in Saskatchewan for many years. "We've been working at Belle Plaine for almost 50 years," says Don Kettle, who recently retired as General Manager for Jacobs' maintenance and construction group in Western Canada. "There are about 400 permanent, full-time tradespeople at the plant, and many of them have been employed for 25 years or more."

Mosaic has its own staff to handle regular maintenance. Jacobs and several smaller companies provide supplemental maintenance services and work on capital projects such as replacing large equipment. During turnarounds and emergency outages, the number of maintenance workers onsite can increase to 500 or more.

Finding skilled tradespeople quickly in a tight labour market can be a challenge. Tony Mah, General Manager of Maintenance for Jacobs in Western Canada, credits the General Presidents' Maintenance Committee (GPMC) with helping to ensure that skilled people are always available when they're needed.

"The GPMC [an alliance of international unions] has the advantage of being able to bring in skilled labour from the U.S. or overseas," he says. "The client can also do that, but the process is longer and slower. When we face emergency shutdowns or last-minute closures where we may need to find 500 people overnight, the GPMC works with us to manage those crises."

Whether the need is urgent or routine, Mosaic relies on the professionalism of the unionized maintenance workers Jacobs provides. "The beauty of having these tradespeople on site is that they can step in and work almost seamlessly," according to Rob Bonneau, Maintenance Superintendent at Belle Plaine. "We can bring in experienced people from the union halls that need very little guidance. They're already well trained and, after they go through our safety orientation and plant tours, they're ready to work. That's a real benefit for us."

At Belle Plaine, Mosaic's non-union staff members are also well integrated with Jacobs' unionized tradespeople. The two groups work side by side with no problems, Bonneau says. He also credits Jacobs and its unionized workers with maintaining safe work sites. "Jacobs has a good safety program and they're adamant about having

their foremen involved. Mosaic managers sometimes supervise crews, but Jacobs foremen are there 100 percent of the time. They oversee the work, and mentor and coach new workers.”

Mosaic views Jacobs as its embedded contractor. Don Kettle attributes that, in part, to the GPMC. “They have provided trouble-free and dependable service to Mosaic and other clients for many years,” he says. “They deliver excellent labour relations services, including annual meetings with representatives from contractors and local unions. The meetings provide an opportunity for people to talk honestly about concerns relating to projects in the province.”

“The contractors and the GPMC have a very good relationship,” Kettle continues, “because the GPMC and the local representatives deal with issues as they arise—they don’t let things fester. They want to take care of business and they want to do the right things.”

One of the “right things” that the GPMC helped to develop is a unique bereavement provision for maintenance workers at the Mosaic mines. Contract workers who take time off because of a death in the family are not paid during their absence; thanks to the bereavement provision, however, they can now be compensated for some missed time and travel expenses. “That’s a godsend,” Kettle says.

The GPMC has also been instrumental in developing an initiative to employ more First Nations people at the Mosaic mines. The organization has struck an agreement with the Saskatchewan Provincial Building and Construction Trades Council (SPBCTC), Jacobs and the File Hills Qu’Appelle Tribal Council to jointly participate in training and employing tradespeople from the 11 First Nations represented by the Council.

First Nations and Aboriginal people constitute the youngest and fastest-growing population in Canada, and Saskatchewan’s First Nations communities are the youngest and fastest-growing in the country. The province is experiencing a building boom and facing a tight supply of skilled construction workers. At the same time, many of Saskatchewan’s 7,000 unionized construction tradespeople are approaching retirement age.

“There’s a real need to bring First Nations and Aboriginal people into the construction trades,” says Lyle Daniels, Labour Development Strategist with the SPBCTC. It’s his job to help achieve that goal. “We have some First Nations journeypersons, but we send them everywhere. I’m trying to engage young people by speaking at schools and trade fairs, and counseling youth who are interested in the trades. The GPMC understands that there’s a real benefit for everyone and they make sure that there’s top-level support for the initiative.”

Don Kettle says that the GPMC’s support for the First Nation initiative is characteristic of the organization. “The most important thing about the GPMC,” he contends, “is that they understand the big picture, the business climate across Canada and the U.S. They’re not interested in the one-off. They see this as a monstrous project forever and that’s what they want to build.”



The GPMC/NMC

The General Presidents’ Maintenance Committee/ National Maintenance Council for Canada (GPMC/ NMC) is an alliance of 13 international unions that negotiates and administers labour agreements designed to facilitate maintenance at industrial plants. Through the GPMC/NMC, employers can negotiate single contracts covering up to 13 building trade unions.

Now celebrating its 60th anniversary, the GPMC/ NMC administers agreements in eight out of 10 Canadian provinces. These agreements account for over 28 million work hours, or 14,000 full time jobs, each year.



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