

Vegan 'meat' craze just one opportunity for plant protein's potential

Tim Boyd

A local business is set to capitalise on the vegan "meat" boom by opening the first commercial extraction facility in Australia, in the country town of Horsham in Victoria by March.

Australian Plant Proteins will announce on Monday it has secured the \$20 million needed to begin the fit-out of its plant protein manufacturing facility.

Plant protein is the main raw material used in making some fake meat alternatives, the protein is extracted from pulses and legumes such as yellow peas, chick peas and lentils.

While vegan "meat" might be an on-trend topic, co-founder and director of EAT Group – the investment firm that founded APP – Brendan McKeegan said the opportunities for plant protein were much larger than just a fad.

"I think veganism and vegetarianism is a component but the overwhelming

drive for this [demand of plant proteins] is consumers being very aware from an environmental impact and sustainability perspective," he said.

Mr McKeegan said consumers were increasingly aware of the amount of resources required to produce meat. As an example, he said it took more than 3000 litres of water to produce a kilogram of beef, but only 70 litres for a kilogram of pulses.

It takes 4.5 kilograms of a pulse, such as faba beans, to extract one kilogram of plant protein powder.

Mr McKeegan said his team began looking into and developing a protein extraction process over the past three years at a small research and development production facility in Werribee, a south-west Melbourne suburb.

The main investor in the new facility and also the business that will handle distribution of the end product is Scalzo Foods, which has put up \$9.2 million for the fit-out.



Australian Plant Proteins' research and development facility in Werribee, Victoria; EAT Group's Brendan McKeegan, top right; Michael Scalzo of Scalzo Foods.

Managing director Michael Scalzo said the use of plant protein extended far beyond just meat alternatives.

"There seems to be a lot of focus with

the alternative meat space," he said. "But that's only one segment of what I think will be a global reach for plant protein raw materials over the next 40 years."

Other plant protein applications include as a substitute for dietary protein supplements, in drinks, confectionary and protein bars.

The facility, in the western Victorian town of Horsham, will be capable of producing 5000 tonnes of plant protein extract every year once it hits full capacity.

Mr McKeegan expected to reach that capacity within 18 months of opening but thought the plant would start with a lower output.

"The initial phase will be 2500 tonnes per annum," said Mr McKeegan.

The finished product would be powdered plant protein in 20kg bags, mainly made from faba beans. The powder would have an 85 per cent protein content.

"This business will be selling it as a food ingredient.

"We'll sell to major food manufacturers and beverage companies," Mr McKeegan said.

Mr McKeegan said the benefits went beyond consumers eating more sustainably. Farms that grow pulses such as faba beans actually improve soil quality.

"Pulses and legumes are a significant contributor to putting nitrogen back in the soil in a grain farming operation," Mr McKeegan said.

Nitrogen is one of the key nutrients for plant growth.