



MCCAIN

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Maxime Debrye
McCain's Harnes plant
Director



x



Founded in 1957 in Canada by the two McCain brothers, this family business has become a world leader in the processing and distribution of frozen potato products (mainly French fries). It has kept its family roots despite its global expansion, with a presence in over 160 countries. The Canadian group has been present in France for over 40 years, with its first production site established in Harnes in 1981. It employs 22,000 people worldwide, including around 1,000 in France between its European office and R&D center in Villeneuve d'Ascq (59) and its three production sites: Harnes (62), Béthune (62) and Matougues (51). Based in the Hauts-de-France region for over 40 years, McCain produces over one frozen French fry out of four consumed in France and draws on local momentum. The company works with

a network of 800 French farmers and has developed long-term relationships with them based on a short supply chain approach. The group is constantly seeking synergies with local players with a view to continuously improving its processes. McCain is therefore planning to invest over €300 million to strengthen its sites' competitiveness and improve their environmental footprint while continuing its transition to regenerative agriculture. These are just some of the topics discussed with Maxime Debrye, director of the McCain plant in Harnes.



x



MCCAIN

A GLOBAL COMPANY WITH LOCAL ROOTS





MAXIME DEBRYE

Harnes plant Director
McCain



Why did McCain move to northern France in 1981?

The McCain brothers logically chose to set up shop in France, which is our main market in Europe. They selected a region known for its potato production. This is why two of our three sites are located in the Hauts-de-France region. We have always prioritized short supply chains with the farmers we work with. Our farmers are located on average within a 150 km radius of our factories. The Hauts-de-France region's industrial heritage was also an important factor, with the founders rightly belie-

ving that it was conducive to successful development thanks to its high-quality workforce.

***There is a Relationship
to work and industry
among employees in
the Hauts-de-France region
that cannot be found
elsewhere
and which is due to
the region's history.***



X



How would you describe the management style of a Canadian family-owned group such as yours?

This strong sense of family is reflected in how we operate and how we interact within the group. The fact that our exchanges are direct and straightforward—regardless of the teams’ hierarchical levels—reinforces this dimension. This dimension also contributes to each individual’s ownership of the collective project. This internal proximity goes hand in hand with external proximity. Unlike other groups, we have chosen to have around fifty production sites around the world, which has a significant impact on the local ecosystem and the communities around us.

We are preparing for the future by working hand in hand in the field with our agronomists and farmers. In particular, we are studying potato varieties that will produce good yields in the future and will be adapted to climate change.

How does this strategy impact the farmers you work with?

This local approach is essential for our 800 partner farmers in France, 70% of whom are located in the Hauts-de-France region. We have established a long-term partnership with them. We help them make their soil more resilient through regenerative farming practices. Already, more than half of them are following us in this approach, with the goal of ensuring that all land used for McCain’s production is involved in this transition by 2030. These practices provide soil that is more resistant to water stress, thereby producing high-quality potatoes. The goal is also to ensure the long-term viability of our farmers. This is why our agronomists are working with them on future potato varieties that will be able to adapt to climate change in 10-15 years’ time. My father was a farmer, so I am particularly sensitive to this issue.

How has your landmark site in Harnes evolved over its 40+ years of existence?

The Harnes site is the largest of our production sites in the Hauts-de-France region. It produces around 260,000 tons per year for both the French market and exports. Originally, it housed only one production line, before a second one was added a few years later. In 2017, we increased our production line capacity. We are now rolling out a major new investment plan called “Zenith,” in two phases, which will total more than approximately €300 million over three to five years. This should enable us to increase our production capacity as well as modernize our infrastructure. This concerns both our equipment (new sorting station, storage, packaging) and our employees’ working conditions (new offices, changing rooms, canteens, etc.).

Do these investments include an environmental component?

We are now working towards achieving 100% recovery of our food waste. The modernization of our sites also involves the complete digitization of our work organization, with paper having almost entirely disappeared. We are also considering new measures to minimize our heat production and use electricity rather than natural gas in order to further reduce our impact. The second phase of our investment plan should enable us to reduce our water consumption per ton produced on site by 30% thanks to a treated wastewater reuse system (REUT)¹ at our wastewater treatment plant outlet. We have also optimized our supply and distribution logistics chains, based on a short-chain approach, thanks to the proximity of our farmers. Overall, our goal is to make investments that have a positive impact on the environment.

1 REUT refers to the “secondary use” of treated wastewater, with the water quality level required for this new use, as defined by regulations.



Are you receiving support for your ambitious investment project?

A local project support committee (CLAP) has been set up with the various administrative authorities concerned: sub-prefecture, DREAL, ADEME, etc. This body makes it possible to regularly review the project's progress, facilitate interactions, and resolve certain issues more quickly. All stakeholders are working together to support the completion of this investment, from the local town hall to Business France at the national level. We have always forged close and sincere relationships with our partners. Whenever possible, we prioritize synergies with local stakeholders, from schools for our recruitment to local and regional startups and businesses. And this starts with projects carried out with neighboring companies that are located next to us in our industrial park.

We have always forged close and sincere relationships with our partners.



So a local approach is perfectly compatible with international processes?

We do indeed have food safety standards and quality objectives that apply internationally, as we must ensure the consistency of our products worldwide. A consumer or customer should not be able to taste the difference between a McCain product from Harnes and the same product made in Florenceville, our original site in Canada. On the other hand, our French employees are proud that the McCain products they sell are made from French potatoes that are processed in France. In addition, we are home to the McCain Europe R&D center here in Hauts-de-France. Innovations are created here and benefit the entire group. This global approach is based on strong roots in a region whose values we share, in terms of trust, authenticity, and family spirit. Our company is appreciated by its employees and various stakeholders because we act locally.

POTATO FARMING

Among the criteria that determine whether a national or international company will set up in Hauts-de-France, the importance of its ecosystem is not sufficiently emphasized. “All the key players that are essential to the smooth running of our business are close to us: farmers, equipment manufacturers, suppliers, and employees,” explained Maxime Debrye. The director of the McCain plant in Harnes also mentioned a geographical area and local potato production that are essential to the business’s development. This is an asset for the company, which has been particularly successful in retaining its employees, many of whom are long-serving and have spent their entire careers at McCain. In order to ensure that its employees develop their skills, adapt to increasingly high-tech equipment, and ensure the transfer of know-how between generations, this most French of Canadian companies in our region devoted 7,800 hours in 2024 to continuing education for its staff in Harnes.

A DEVELOPMENT PROJECT IN HAUTS-DE-FRANCE?

CONTACT US!



NORD FRANCE INVEST
ECONOMIC PROMOTION AGENCY
FOR HAUTS-DE-FRANCE

Espace International,
299 boulevard de Leeds
59777 LILLE - France



FINANCED BY

