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# VIEWS & VISIONS

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**Jeffrey Sokal**  
Mountaintop Beverage  
Company

Jeffrey Sokal is the Chief Executive Officer of Mountain Top Beverage, a best-in-class, aseptic beverage manufacturing facility located in Morgantown, West Virginia that provides safe, innovative, and sustainable products to end consumers. Sokal has spent the last two decades creating and executing aseptic strategy and leading business development for one of the largest aseptic processors in the country. He has more than 25 years of experience in the food, beverage, and manufacturing industry as well as operations, finance, and business development.

# Welcome to Mountaintop

There's a new business in the Morgantown Industrial Park called Mountaintop Beverage. The 330,000-square-foot factory, visible from Interstate 79, was dreamed up by partners Jeff Sokal and Doug Jantzi. The native Western New Yorkers were looking for their next business venture when they sat down with Scott Higgins and Bill McCabe, of the American Dairy Association Mideast, and Kent Leonhardt and Joe Hatton, from the West Virginia Department of Agriculture.

The Mountaintop team saw an opportunity in West Virginia and decided to build a manufacturing facility that would benefit the state's workforce, re-grow the dairy industry, and provide shelf-stable dairy products to rural schools, food pantries, and food banks.

We started looking at the geographic reach of Morgantown, being right in the middle of the Eastern U.S. population. For us, transportation was a big deal. It's also an area where people



## MOUNTAIN TOP BEVERAGE

Sokal, Jantzi, and their partners, Toby Horon, Colin Goodrich, and Craig Jantzi, raised over \$200 million to start construction on Phase One of the project. The site development process started in August 2021 and entailed

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have pride in their community and aren't afraid of putting in a hard day's work. That was critical for us as well. Additionally, locating the project here, we felt we could make a big difference in the state. That was important for my business partners, our customers, and me as we contemplated doing business for the right reasons - making an impact with our project.

moving over 1.7mm cubic yards of earth in just over four months. It took 250 construction workers on-site daily to get the job done. The facility is now complete, and it opened for commercial production in April 2023.

Mountaintop uses an ultra-high heating process to commercially sterilize dairy and dairy alternatives, protein shakes, coffee, and coffee



creamers. The typical pasteurization process is heating milk to 160 degrees for 15 seconds. That's part of our process, but we take it a step further to ultra-high temperature processing. We heat the milk to 280-290 degrees for a few seconds and then flash cool it back down. So, in terms of the final product, it's a gentle process. It renders the product commercially sterile, but it doesn't alter the flavor. The second step is what happens on the packaging side. An extended shelf-life packaging option would extend the shelf life of milk to roughly 60 to 70 days compared to a pasteurized product that will last 21 days. But, if you combine the thermal process with aseptic packaging that is sterilized, the shelf life of milk is now up to a year.

This process enables expanded dairy usage and applications. For instance, dairy products can be sent to locations where refrigeration isn't available. One example includes food banks, such as Mountaineer or Huntington Food Banks, whose purpose is to collect and distribute food to smaller organizations for reallocation to those in need. Transporting product without refrigeration is more economical and less complicated. In addition, many outlets, including some rural schools, don't have the capacity to refrigerate enough milk to last a week. Delivering pasteurized milk via a refrigerated truck is cost prohibitive and sometimes impossible. Aseptic products can sit on a shelf until needed, with refrigeration recommended shortly before consumption. These are perfect applications for aseptic products.

Mountaintop has pre-sold the 330,000 square feet of factory space to manufacture a wide range of products, including

several big name brands. That means they will be at full capacity on their first day of business. The goal is to source as much milk as possible from West Virginia. More than a hundred million pounds of milk will go through the factory over the next year. That's almost twice as much as West Virginia dairy farmers currently produce.

Plans are already in the works for Phase Two of the project starting summer/fall 2023. The plant has the potential to grow to about 750,000 square feet when it is fully finished. The need for dairy will be there for decades. This is an investable proposition for folks who want to get into dairy farming or expand their existing dairy farms.

Mountaintop has already hired more than 100 team members and will be closer to 200 by the end of 2023. On top of that, there will be literally hundreds of downstream jobs in farming, transportation, services, and supplies. The state is working on a proposed exit off I-79 that would direct traffic to the upper part of the Morgantown Industrial Park and Mountaintop Beverage. It will also provide access to additional shovel-ready sites for further economic development.

A lot of folks tell us thank you for coming to West Virginia, and we're lucky to have Mountaintop here. The reality for us is we're the lucky ones. My partners and I couldn't be more grateful to the Mountain State and the community for welcoming us. We are committed to making sure Mountaintop is a company West Virginia can be proud of. 