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 (/printsto**A First For U.S.? Startup Manufacturer Places Bet On MgO Panels**

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Ryan Miller, general manager of US MgO Co., stands in the company's leased facility at 13 Wright St. in Wilmington. (Photo by Cece Nunn)

Ryan Miller and his team are working on turning vacant facilities off South Front Street in Wilmington into what he expects to be a national first.

Miller, general manager of US MgO Company, said his firm has chosen the site off of South Front, at 13 Wright St., to create what could be the first commercial-scale manufacturing plant in the U.S. for magnesium oxide sheathing panels. General contractors use the panels in

place of traditional gypsum or wood materials for walls, floors and subflooring. The material is used mainly in larger structures, such as apartment buildings.

"We'll be producing boards in July," Miller predicted while walking the leased property Thursday morning.

The company will hire about 20 people in the beginning to add to the 10 employees US MgO already has in the area, eventually scaling up to 150, he said.

Currently, US MgO imports the panels from China and sells them to contractors, but the materials are subject to a 25% tariff that could increase by another 10% or more in the near future, Miller said.

The Wilmington plant is a precursor for his company, he said, to a much larger manufacturing operation off U.S. 74, on land that US MgO is looking to purchase from Brunswick County. That future campus is expected to hold five buildings, including a 150,000-square-foot manufacturing facility.

A US MgO team has been quietly working on developing the company's product at a separate site in Leland.

"This has been very top secret up until right now," Miller said. "What we're focused on right now is setting up this building (a 30,000-square-foot steel structure at 13 Wright St.) over here to be our first manufacturing facility."

The new Brunswick County campus wouldn't come online until about 2027, he estimated. US MgO will be using American-made parts and equipment to create its boards with raw materials sourced in North America.

Miller said magnesium oxide panels have been around for at least 20 years in the U.S.

"Just in the past few years, it's really gotten the attention of the construction industry," said Miller, who is also chairperson of the Magnesium Oxide Building Products Association.

MgO paneling isn't always cheaper, he said, but "from a performance standpoint, it is better. When we look at fire resistance and the mold and moisture resistance and structural strength, it is a better product. And that does come with a higher price tag, but the way that the product works is that you can save other materials and labor because it does more."

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