CHARGED WITH POTENTIAL

Why Saft Chose Florida for its Most Advanced Plant Yet

Thomas J. Alcide
CEO, SAFT America
The world’s most advanced lithium-ion manufacturing facility isn’t in China, or Hong Kong, or Singapore. It’s in Florida. The company behind it all? Saft—a French powerhouse that’s kept our world running for nearly 100 years. With operations in 18 countries across five continents, Saft has become the global leader in the design and manufacturing of high-tech industrial batteries. From military hybrid vehicles to smart energy grids, the applications for Saft’s next-generation lithium-ion technology are as diverse as they are endless. They are, however, unified by one common thread: Florida. Following the opening of Saft’s state-of-the-art Jacksonville facility, the state has become the point of origin for almost all of Saft’s Li-ion technology. Ultimately, Saft found the state’s pro-business culture to be so conducive to growth that it relocated its North American headquarters to Florida just one year later.

Building the Factory of the Future
Led by a team of Saft executives, including Saft America CEO Thomas J. Alcide, Saft began its search for the best place in the United States to host a new cutting-edge manufacturing plant. After considering 16 potential locations, the company ultimately chose Jacksonville as the future site of its $200 million project, referencing its ability to provide Saft with a ready-made foundation of advanced talent, transportation networks and production technology. “Saft designed and built the Jacksonville site to be one of the most state-of-the-art Li-ion manufacturing sites in the world,” said Alcide. At 235,000-square-feet, the facility is Saft’s largest and a triumph in both its high-volume capacity and advanced design. The plant is fully automated (outside of inspection) and features flexible production lines that can be easily modified as Li-ion technology continues to evolve. The innovative facility also boasts one of Florida’s largest rooftop photovoltaic systems, capable of producing one megawatt of solar power.

Assembling a Supercharged Workforce
Despite being fully automated, Saft’s new factory will eventually require up to 300 high-skill workers to keep operations running smoothly. Fortunately, Saft found the talent to meet its needs in Northeast Florida’s substantial population of veterans.
who make up more than 50 percent of the site’s workforce. “They have strong work ethics, good leadership skills and are self-driven,” Alcide explained. “This was one of the key reasons we chose the area.” Home to multiple military facilities, Jacksonville boasts the third-largest military presence in the country. But Florida’s military prowess isn’t restricted to its Northeast corridor; in fact, companies can access the same talent pipeline from anywhere in the state. With 20 active military installations and the second-largest defense systems manufacturing industry in the nation, Florida’s large talent pool of former military personnel is an invaluable resource for companies that need to quickly assemble a reliable, disciplined and tech-savvy workforce.

Saft also benefits from its proximity to the University of North Florida (UNF) and the strategic partnerships it has formed with the institution. Saft is already playing a role in the cultivation of its future workforce, helping to shape UNF’s program offerings to better reflect the needs of the surrounding business community and its growing industries. Through its relationship with UNF, Saft has also been able to offer continuing education and leadership opportunities in PLC and SQL programming with the help of state-sponsored Incumbent Worker Training and Quick Response Training grants.

ENERGIZING THE CORPORATE LANDSCAPE
Florida’s dedication to maintaining a cost-competitive business landscape was another driving force behind Saft’s decision. “Florida offers good logistical flow, an abundant workforce and strong governmental support for business,” Alcide said. Saft benefits from Florida’s streamlined regulatory environment, affordable land and low operating costs. Furthermore, the state’s favorable tax climate, which includes a 5.5 percent corporate tax rate and no personal income tax, frees up capital and helps growing companies like Saft plan for future investments. Florida has also recently eliminated its sales tax on manufacturing machinery and equipment and has no sales and use tax on goods manufactured for export—an undeniable edge for any international company.

FUELING INDUSTRY GROWTH
It’s obvious that Saft isn’t the only company to recognize Florida’s attractive advantages for the advanced manufacturing industry. Currently ranked first in the nation for manufacturing export intensity, Florida is home to more than 18,600 manufacturing companies. Thanks to this high concentration of industry leaders, companies like Saft can take advantage of pre-existing resources and efficiencies. For example, the First Coast Manufacturing Association helped Saft optimize its supply chain by connecting the company with local suppliers upon its arrival in Northeast Florida. “Through these and other programs, Saft has developed good relationships with other manufacturers for sharing of best practices and helping grow the area,” said Alcide.

DELIVERING POWER TO THE WORLD
For an international company like Saft, positioning its largest manufacturing facility overseas would have been an impossible feat without the aid of a strategic global location and top-ranked multimodal infrastructure. “Northern Florida offers good transportation options including air, land, rail and sea,” said Alcide. From coast to coast, Florida furnishes exporters with 15 deepwater seaports, 19 commercial airports and thousands of miles of road and rail. Saft’s location in Jacksonville’s Cecil Commerce Park is a perfect distillation of the connectivity that Florida offers. The 4,700-acre industrial park sits at the nexus
of three major rail lines and several of Florida’s arterial highways, contains its own major airport, and is only half an hour from the Jacksonville Port Authority. “The infrastructure is excellent and meets the need of high-tech companies like us.”

Leveraging Florida’s comprehensive transportation networks, Saft can easily move its products anywhere—even beyond the Arctic Circle. This February, Saft delivered an innovative extreme temperature Battery Energy Storage System (BESS) for use as part of a hybrid micro-grid that will deliver cheaper, cleaner, more reliable power to a community located deep in Canada’s Northwest Territory. On the other side of the globe, Saft is sending Li-ion battery systems to power 1,300 Hawkei military tactical vehicles in Australia. Even for the farthest destinations, Florida is providing Saft with the resources necessary to design, manufacture and deliver cutting-edge energy solutions worldwide.

CHARGING AHEAD
From the helm of its Western Hemisphere hub, Saft continues to push the boundaries of Li-ion technology. With each innovative development, Saft reaffirms what international companies newly invested in the state discover every day: Florida is the total package. From advanced workforce talent to unrivaled infrastructure and government support, you’ll find the integral components of long-term success for any industry.

To learn more about how Florida can help your business thrive, contact Enterprise Florida, the state’s lead economic development organization, at 877-YES-FLORIDA or visit PerfectBusinessClimate.com.