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Two new building materials factories – including the UAE's first gypsum plaster board facility – are on track to be commissioned next year.

The two facilities – Gypsemna Company, and Porcellan Company – are being built in Abu Dhabi's Mussafah Industrial City (ICAD 2) over an area of 1 million sq m, Promoted by Jamal Al Ghurair Group, the operator of Al Khaleej Sugar, the Gulf's biggest sugar refinery in Jebel Ali, the plants are part of the group's foray into the region's booming building materials sector.

Gypsemna, which is to be commissioned by the last quarter of 2008, will have an annual capacity of 50 million sq m or 150,000 sq m gypsum boards per day, making it one of the largest of its kind in the Middle East. "By global standards too, it is one of the largest-capacity plants," says Dilip Kumar Borah, technical manager with Jamal Al Ghurair Group.

Gypsemna will start with plaster boards and later add gypsum blocks. The idea is to have a diverse range within the same product family, according to Borah.

Work on the project started last January and a contract for the machinery was signed in May with Germany's Grenzabach.

"The project is progressing as per schedule and the equipment

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will start coming in from the first quarter of next year and we hope to commission the plant by the last quarter of 2008," says Borah.

The aim behind setting up the two plants was to meet the growing demand for building materials in the region. So far, gypsum plaster boards are being imported by companies in the UAE and the volumes are increasing by around 25 per cent every year as a result of increasing construction activities.

Borah continues: "Having a facility locally will help companies save costs as the freight charges are very high and also one cannot transport too much board in a container because of weight and volume ratios. It will also help save time. For example, now if someone requires a particular type of board, suppliers have to either store it or have to order and wait for weeks for the delivery. With our facility next door, we will be able to meet the requirements in a day or so.

"Gypsemna will manufacture high-quality products using the latest technology. We decided to set up a large-capacity plant in order to be globally competitive. Moreover, since the plant is highly automated, it does not require much manpower.

"From a 100 per cent importing country, we want the UAE to become an exporting country. Depending on the market requirements, we aim to export around 50 to 60 per cent of our production."

The world market is estimated around 8 billion sq m and is mostly concentrated around the US which is about half the market at around 3.75 billion sq m, followed by Europe, Japan, Far East and India. The company will be appointing dealers in other countries to market its products.

For raw materials it will depend on natural gypsum and will source it from Iran.

Besides regular boards, the company will manufacture fire-resistant boards and moisture-resistant boards. Although gypsum doesn't catch fire, Gypsemna will add some chemicals to make it more fire resistant. All the products will meet ASTM C 1396 and DIN 18180 standards.

The boards will be available in dimensions ranging from 8 to 25-mm thicknesses, 600 to 1,350 mm width and 1,800 to 4,500 mm length.

"We have an edge here as we can make it locally-any type and any size. We are flexible enough to make different types of products. Being based in the UAE we should be able to meet additional requirements of customers through our research and development (R&D) department," Borah says.

Meanwhile, Porcellan, which is expected to start production by the second quarter of next year, will have the capacity to manufacture 18 million sq m of tiles per year or 50,000 sq m per day and will eventually be expanded by similar capacity.

For the start-up of Porcellan production, the company has tied up with Sacmi of Italy as its guaranteed supplier of full production lines, including modular mills of 180,000 litres capacity, ATM spray dryer with 200,000 litres capacity, PH3800 and PH6200 presses and kilns with a maximum length of 218.4m (one of the largest kilns in the region), complete with ground-breaking integrated energy recirculation system between combustion and spray dryer.

The order is completed with an automatic TGV shuttle fleet for handling green and fired tile storage plus pallets, nine sorting lines and seven palletizers, all produced by Sacmi Automation and designed specially for large sizes.

A large part of the production will be glazed and polished tiles, large-sized porcelain stoneware tiles – 400 mm by 400 mm up

to 1,200 mm by 1,200 mm – as well as tiles decorated with soluble salts, hi-tech porcelain stoneware and top-of-the-range products. Sacmi is also supplying material for the preparation of glazes, plus an innovative, high-efficiency and low-consumption system for the preparation of coloured slips.

Porcellan will be looking beyond the GCC market although the local market is very important, says Nagi Beshara, deputy general manager (sales and marketing), Jamal Al Ghurair Group.

Beshara says that demand for porcelain tiles has also been growing nearly 10 per cent annually in the last five years. Quoting a 2005 analysis of the world market, he says consumptionwise, Saudi Arabia is ranked number 19 as its requirement ranges around 90 to 95 million sq m tiles per year. The UAE is 22nd in the list with more than 65 million sq m annual consumption.

Among the importing countries, the US ranks number one as it imports around 250 million sq m of tiles per year. Saudi ranks fourth importing around 80 million sq m and the UAE is eighth importing around 30-32 million sq m.

“Our strategy is to be global. We are looking at exporting 40 per cent of our production to markets beyond the GCC,” says Beshara.

The company says it has done a market research and will be offering a variety of models, designs and colours aimed at different market preferences and requirements.

“In two to three years time, we are looking at doubling our capacity. The building has been constructed in such a way that it can accommodate two plants. So all that needs to be done is install more machinery,” he says.

“Normally people use steel structures but we have gone for space frames, which are more expensive but offer benefits like more space. It gives more area to the factory as there are no columns in between making movement of goods easy.

“For the future, we will continue to invest in the latest technology to get modern products, more variety and designs. Making our presence felt globally is very important for us,” he concludes.

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