

# Factory in the Forest

## Planning to scale up with development section

About 20 minutes' drive from Sundsvall, the Swedish town of Matfors hosts the oldest production facility belonging to contract manufacturer Cobra Biologics.

**CURRENTLY THERE** are around 60 employees at the site, producing biological products, and filling syringes and vials.

Production is mainly focused on supplying materials for clinical trials. The factory has no development section, although discussions are underway with a view to establishing one.

"A development section would enable us to develop and scale up processes. Hopefully, a decision will be made sooner rather than later, so that we can start development work this autumn," says Lars Fahlander, site manager at the Matfors facility.

**PRODUCTION-READY** biological products are brought to the facility by its clients. The company then produces cell lines for the production of that particular molecule or cell, and sets up a manufacturing process.

"Many of our clients are small companies linked to academia, wanting to take their projects from the toxicology study stage to beyond phase II clinical trials. However, large pharmaceutical companies that require drugs pro-

duction for clinical trials represent our main client group. We also produce smaller volumes of commercial products," says Peter Boman, Project Management & Customer Services manager.

**AN INCREASING** number of clients request the adoption of single use equipment for the production of biological drugs molecules.

"Single use equipment is often requested for the storing of, for instance, buffers and products during the purification process. Then, there is less need to validate the cleaning processes, and the risk of cross contamination is eliminated," says Peter Boman.

**HE POINTS TO** other trends including an increased demand for rapid production and for the production of drugs based on live bacteria. One example is Oxalobacter formigenes, which degrades oxalate in the large intestine and is sold as a treatment for hyperoxaluria, where oxalate accumulates in the urine, potentially leading to kidney damage.

Another area that attracts clients is the production of monoclonal

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biosimilars and gene therapy products (viruses that infect a host cell and correct a dysfunctional or defective strand of DNA).

"We are also experiencing an increased interest in the production of DNA. This was a hot topic until early 2000, but then cooled off. Now, the DNA production technology has improved, and there seems to be more money available for such work. We can produce DNA, and we have a client who will soon require greater volumes from us, so this is something we will focus on."

**IN DECEMBER 2012**, Lars Fahlander was appointed site manager of Cobra in Matfors. With a degree in industrial economics, he has many years' experience of management and business development.

"However, before I came here, I had never worked in the pharmaceutical sector," he says.

When Lars Fahlander joined



Foto: Erika Lindbom Sierakowiak

Matfors, he was warned that it would be difficult to recruit staff to the facility, but since 2012, the number of employees has increased from around 25 to 60.

"We are a bit isolated here, and as a result there is no one around to poach our staff. The Mid Sweden University offers a chemistry programme, and some of our employees have been recruited from there, but it is important to be prepared to train the new recruits."

In his opinion, staff recruitment is not a major problem.

"Finding the right person for a position is the main objective, not how many applicants there are," says Lars Fahlander.

**HE POINTS** to another advantage of being located in the Norrland forest; the company's foreign clients consider it an exotic location to visit.

In the last few years, Cobra Bio-

logics has attracted more projects and clients, and the company will now focus on obtaining pharmaceutical production approval for the Matfors facility from the US Food & Drug Administration (FDA). Also, the company plans to largely automate the purification process which is currently relatively manual.

**COBRA IS OWNED** by a Swedish holding company. Around 100 employees work at the company's site in Södertälje, representing the lion's share of its staff. Its Kelle facility in the UK is staffed by around 90 people, including the company's Managing Director. The potential impact of Brexit is a current issue within Cobra.

**"WE KNOW THAT** Brexit will affect the company, but we don't know how. When the negotiations eventually start, we will spend more efforts on preparing for the UK exit.

We don't have many UK clients, so it will probably have implications mainly for interactions within the company," says Lars Fahlander.

**ERIKA LINDBOM SIERAKOWIAK**

#### Factory background:

»The Matfors factory is located in a forest near the river Ljungan. It was built in 1965 to supply drugs to pharmacies in the region. ACO gained control of the factory in the 1970s, and Kabi/Pharmacia owned it until the early 1990s.

»In 1998, SBL Vaccin bought it for the production of an ingredient in the cholera vaccine Dukoral. This carried on until 2004.

»In 2004, Unitech Biopharma started contract manufacturing of recombinant proteins. In 2009, the aseptic filling facility was approved by the Swedish Medical Products Agency.

»In 2011, Cobra Biologics acquired the company, which at the time had 25 employees.



Foto: Cobra Biologics