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Seattle Company Embraces New Minimum Wage Early and Speaks of Challenges

This Thursday a new era will begin at The Field Roast Grain Meat Company. It's the day the company's 105 employees will be receiving their first paycheck reflecting Seattle's new \$15/hr minimum wage. While the law was enacted a few years ago, most Seattle employers have until January of 2019 to gradually comply with the \$15/hr mandate. Field Roast has decided to start early.

"Since the law was first enacted, the environment has changed very quickly," says Field Roast CEO, David Lee. "It certainly impacted the expectations of our employees and implied that we were lacking in generosity. This stung many long time, established family businesses who have been in Seattle for generations and have had a deep and abiding relationship with their employees. Some of them have decided to stay, while some have packed up and left town."

"Local restaurants compete with their neighbors down the street, and manufacturers compete on a national level with companies that pay their employees much less, so it's a challenge to price our products competitively," Lee says. "Manufacturers have already been leaving Seattle for decades due to the high cost of real estate, now they are leaving because of the wage issue. Sadly, it's a matter of survival."

The company estimates a cost increase of more than \$300,000 per year. Lee says that due to the increased efficiencies of its new facility in the SODO area of Seattle, the company can absorb the expense of increasing its basic wage for workers.

"It's clear that wage inequality is hurting our community. Many in Seattle are making too much money and even more people are making too little," Lee says. "Many of our employees have had to move out of Seattle due to the overall high cost of living."

This new change brings new challenges that Field Roast is currently navigating. Some longer-term employees have been frustrated that newer arrivals are making a comparable wage, without the sacrifice and years of service.

"The spread between the highest paid worker and the lowest paid worker has been a concern from the start," Lee says. "Employees gauge their value not only on the amount of money they earn, but also comparative to their co-workers. Before implementing the new policy, the difference was \$8.00 between the lowest and highest paid workers. After implementation, the spread will be reduced to \$4.00. This change may have an impact on morale for the higher paid employees."

This year, Field Roast is celebrating its 20th year of making a line of gourmet vegan sausages, roasts and non-dairy cheeses. In recognition of its broader commitment to its employees, community and environment, the company was recently awarded "Company of the Year" by *VegNews Magazine*. The Company is also a founding member the "Fair Pay Today" campaign, a national effort to lift the federal minimum wage.

Lee says, "Being an independent, family run company has allowed us to focus not only on making great products and creating shareholder value, but also on the wellbeing of our employees. This next payday will be a big step in that direction."