

Coca-Cola to buy Great Plains bottler

by Brian Brus

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Production is expected to continue uninterrupted at the Oklahoma City bottling plant. (Courtesy photo)

OKLAHOMA CITY – Soft drink giant Coca-Cola Co. will purchase franchisee Great Plains Coca-Cola Bottling Co. in Oklahoma City for \$360 million by the end of the year, company officials announced Thursday.

Great Plains, the fifth-largest independent Coca-Cola bottler in the country, will become an operating unit within Coca-Cola Refreshments, a wholly owned subsidiary of Coca-Cola Co. Great Plains Chairman and CEO Robert F. Browne said he will assume a support role with CCR as the company improves its product supply and customer service operations.

The local company will continue operations without interruption through the transition, spokesman Rickey Truelove said, and major staff changes are not

expected. Great Plains employs more than 1,200 people at two production and seven distribution facilities across Oklahoma and Arkansas. The company's headquarters is near the State Fair Park.

Great Plains has been owned and operated by the Browne family since 1922, when Virgil Browne and two other investors acquired the franchise rights for the territory. Today that market is comprised of more than 3 million people. The company produces 600 beverages including carbonated drinks, water, fruit and vegetable juices, sports and energy drinks, milk and soy beverages, teas and coffees.

"As I look to the future, I believe this is the right action to ensure the continued success of this business that I love," Robert F. Browne said in a prepared statement.

Coca-Cola Co. spokesman Scott Williamson said the company remains committed to the franchise system and independent bottlers. He said he was not aware of the purchase of any other bottling franchisees being planned. Last year, the Coca-Cola Co. spent \$3.4 billion to buy the North American bottling operations of Europe-based Coca-Cola Enterprises Inc.

"We also are working with our independent bottlers to build capability and to ensure our system is well-positioned. In ongoing conversations with folks at Great Plains it became clear to them and to us that a transaction was the right decision at this time," Williamson said.

Truelove would not comment on which party approached the other with the idea of the sale.

As an independent operator, Great Plains provides product to other bottlers, and such business relations are common throughout the bottling industry, Truelove said. Those third-party relationships are not expected to be interrupted, he said.

The Great Plains transaction requires regulatory approval but officials said they expect to close by year-end. Coca-Cola Co. shares rose \$1.10, or about 1.63 percent, to \$68.57 by the end of regular trading Thursday on the New York Stock Exchange.

