

BioComposites develops earth-friendly fencing

By: **Matt Griswold**

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In the late 1980s, Heath Van Eaton was helping to tend his family's grain crops in Kansas.

That's when he heard about a company that was using wheat straw and formaldehyde to manufacture particle board. Cool idea, he thought.

Some years later, Van Eaton caught wind of an East Coast outfit using recycled polyethylene and wood fiber to make composite deck boards. Another cool idea, he thought.

>From those two events - the employment of wheat straw to manufacture lumber, and the start of Winchester, Va.-based Trex Co. Inc. - the idea for Van Eaton's company was born.

Using a proprietary mix of wheat straw and recycled PE, Torrington, Wyo.-based Heartland BioComposites LLC extrudes composite fence boards, posts and rail out of its newly built plant in Torrington.

Heartland displayed its Prairie-Picket fence for the first time at Fencetech, held Jan. 30-Feb. 2 in Orlando, Fla.

The product has been nearly a decade in the making. Van Eaton wanted to come to market with a fence board long before many of the wood-plastic composite deck makers started introducing fence to supplement their decking sales.

``In 2000, nobody was doing fence," he said.

Young, affable and sporting a ponytail, Van Eaton's love for agriculture, the environment and his budding firm are apparent.

``Wheat straw is an underutilized fiber," he said. ``It upsets me that we have this source of material, and it's not being used. I believe we're helping to pioneer it."

Using wheat straw isn't easy, he said. But it is abundant and has an annual re-plant cycle, unlike trees, which take years to grow.

``People are sensitive about cutting down trees," he said.

Van Eaton believes the green aspect of Heartland's fiber source will be warmly accepted by the market.

Like many players in composite lumber, Van Eaton is interested in growing the entire category.

``We're part of an industry. We recognize that, and embrace that," he said.

Heartland has no immediate plans to enter the deck market, but Van Eaton said the company will continue to explore new opportunities.

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