

# WYOMING BUSINESS REPORT

10/31/2008 - 2:15:06 PM

## Research an ongoing process for Torrington businesses

By Brodie Farquhar

TORRINGTON - What's a fencing company doing on the high plains of eastern Wyoming, six miles from the Nebraska border, with harvestable trees few and far away?

Heartland BioComposites doesn't use trees, but instead taps the region's vast quantities of wheat and barley straw, combining them with recycled plastic (milk jugs) to make a remarkably durable and sustainable line of composite fencing products.

The startup company produces composite pallets, drilling mats for the oil and gas industry, roofing shingles, privacy fencing, decking, snow fencing, posts, poles, and railroad ties.

Stronger than wood products, the composite materials have a higher flash point, better nail and screw retention properties and will last longer than wood products.

Company founder Heath Van Eaton (CEO, president, sales director, etc.) grew up on a wheat farm near Colby, Kans. Much of the straw left behind the harvest is simply tilled back into the soil, said Van Eaton, but much simply blows away. In a family of entrepreneurs, young Van Eaton was convinced there had to be a way to put waste straw to work, and at the age of 17, he found one. In nearby Atwood, the Gold Board company opened up, making particleboard from straw.

"I got real excited," said the pony-tailed Van Eaton. A few years later, he heard of a New Jersey company that was creating composite building materials out of plastic film and throw-way pallets - the beginning of the Trex composite decking company.

One intuitive leap later, Van Eaton realized he could create his own composite material, using waste straw as a major component. After years of research and development (while he held down a restaurant chain management job and/or attended the University of Wyoming), Van Eaton found wheat straw cellulose is similar to that in wood and adds strength -- which can be missing from a straight plastic product. The straw also gives it a natural, grainy look.

Unable to hire staff, Van Eaton hired consultants, tapped the expertise of his UW faculty and leased laboratories for crucial experiments.

He said he owes a great deal to the business and ag economics faculty, and especially to Dr. David Walrath of the College of Engineering, for help and advice in advanced materials testing.

"UW is unique, I think, for faculty who are very generous with their time and knowledge," said Van Eaton.

Not many UW students are writing research grants and lobbying in Washington, so UW profs gave Van Eaton plenty of slack when he missed classes.

Eaton even won the university's \$10K Competition, which is designed to encourage students in the UW community to act on their talent, ideas and energy to produce tomorrow's businesses. The annual competition awards \$10,000 in cash to an outstanding team of student entrepreneurs who submit a business plan for a new venture showing significant business potential.

"I knew I wanted an eco-friendly product," said Van Eaton. He selected Torrington as a base of operations because it gave easy access to wheat straw supply sources in eastern Wyoming, western Nebraska and northern Colorado.

Plastic is part of a straw composite, but he didn't want to use virgin plastic and finally settled on high density No. 2 polyethylene plastic found in milk jugs. Van Eaton found recycling centers around the country that collect milk jugs, crush them into bales and ship them to Torrington.

Forming the company Heartland BioComposites in 1994, Van Eaton has continued his research program, most recently developing a flexible mat that drilling companies can use instead of the traditional oak mat.

"We've also been working on fine-tuning equipment and training staff to save as much energy in our plant operations as we can," said Van Eaton, noting that little savings can add up over a year.

Heartland had a surge of business orders late in the first quarter and early in the second this year, but demand has been softening as winter approaches. That's why he's excited about establishing national distribution across Canada, strengthening his distribution in Mexico and working to establish distribution in European markets and Australia.

"We had a western United States focus in 2006 and 2007 and have successfully grown markets in the northeastern United States this year," said Van Eaton

For more information, see [www.heartlandbio.com](http://www.heartlandbio.com) or [www.PrairieFence.com](http://www.PrairieFence.com).

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