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From: Mark Piepkorn, BuildingGreen, More from this Affiliate  
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## New Product: Fencing Made From Ag Fiber And Recycled Plastic

**Torrington, Wyoming - Heartland BioComposites, of Torrington, Wyoming, has commercialized a new breed of composite wood using annually renewable wheat straw rather than wood flour, and has introduced its first product, a privacy fence. The company purchases regional wheat straw and compounds it with post-consumer high-density polyethylene (HDPE). The raw materials, which include 50% straw, 35% plastic, and less than 5% proprietary additives (described by the company as "non-hazardous and organic"), are mixed, heated, extruded, and cut to length.**

The usual attributes of composite wood apply: durability; low maintenance; lack of splinters; little appeal to insects; and good fastener retention. The composite mimics the appearance and use of natural wood, is available in four low-fading integral colors, and carries a 20-year residential warranty (five years commercial). Heartland BioComposites touts the line as more cost-effective than wood, vinyl, and the leading wood-plastic composites.

The material, in development since the mid-1990s, has been the work of Heath Van Eaton—himself a product of a Kansas wheat-farming background. Growing up, he saw "a high level of underutilization of wheat straw. Then, in the early '90s, I learned about Trex [wood-plastic composite lumber], and that intrigued me beyond belief." Van Eaton began research on straw-plastic composites while studying at the University of Wyoming, and in 1999 founded Heartland BioComposites to further develop and market the material. The company has blossomed into a \$10 million manufacturing startup.

Mike Fauth is the PrairieFence product manager for Empire Building Materials in Billings, Montana, a wholesaler that has been carrying the line since early 2007. "We looked for many years for a composite fencing product, but the composite decking people just weren't going there," he said. According to Fauth, the retail lumber yards Empire supplies have so far been selling it mainly to homeowners.

Houlihan Fence by Design, in St. Louis, began installing the PrairieFence system during summer 2007. Houlihan's Morvie Boyd said that customers find it an attractive option. "We're pricing it between wood and vinyl," she told EBN, "and not filling up the landfills with plastic."

Jares Fence Company, also in Billings, installed 350 feet (107 m) of PrairieFence in 12 hours when the television show "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" came to town. Justin Jares, vice president, noted that the product's density provides impressive strength but also makes it

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fairly heavy: "We went to six-foot centers and used brackets," he said. "With cedar, we can just toenail." Each 72" (183 cm) PrairiePicket weighs 5.4 pounds (2.4 kg). With the recommended 1/16" (0.16 cm) spacing, an eight-foot (2.4 m) run of pickets weighs about 100 pounds (45 kg).

Other components of the system include PrairiePost, a hollow 4x4 extrusion with 5/8"-thick (1.6 cm) walls in 8' (1.2 m) lengths; PrairieRail, a solid 2x4 used for the support rails, compatible with most fence brackets, in 12' (3.7 m) lengths (16' and 20' [4.9 m and 6.1 m] available by special order); and PrairieDeck, a 5/4" x 6" (1.3 cm x 15 cm) board used as a finishing element at the fence top, in the same lengths as PrairieRail. So far most distribution of PrairieFence has been in the western U.S.

Additional products are under development, says Van Eaton. "We've got properties that exceed most of the composite products out there, but we haven't completed all of the ASTM testing yet." Tweaks in process and formulation could yield an array of building materials, including decking, dimensional lumber, sheet materials, and roofing shingles.



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