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Combining straw and plastic

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Heath Van Eaton, founder and president of Heartland BioComposites in Torrington. Photo by Denise Heilbrun, Star-Tribune correspondent.

October 05, 2006 12:00 am • DENISE HEILBRUN Star-Tribune correspondent (0) Comments

TORRINGTON - After years of effort, the president and founder of Heartland BioComposites LLC has now seen the first products of his research come to life.

Heath Van Eaton came up with the idea of using wheat straw and recycled plastics to produce a natural fiber composite as a wood substitute. He and his wife, Amy, decided more than a decade ago to pursue his ideas, "and to do it right."

"It took a lot of dedication and commitment on both our parts," Van Eaton said.

Last week, Heartland started the first production line at its new plant in Torrington. He said he and his management team are making great progress in getting it running properly.

"I am super charged right now," he said. "It's exhilarating, relieving and energizing to know it's finally happening."

Heartland now has 16 people on its payroll and plans to add 12 more in mid-October, then will add more staff as production grows.

"Right now we have customers all over the country calling and e-mailing me for products practically daily now, and it is going to get busier and busier," Van Eaton said. "We have a great opportunity in the marketplace and have several standing orders."

Van Eaton said the product he developed is stronger, retains color better, is more sustainable and looks better than available wood composites or vinyl products on the market.

"We have testing data to prove that our product fades less and is stronger," Van Eaton said. "And as

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far as appearance, you can eyeball the product and see that it mirrors the wood-like appearance, but it doesn't fall apart like wood does through the aging and environmental exposure process. And in most cases our product sells for less than our competitors."

Important to Van Eaton and his wife is that the product is sustainable and doesn't rely on deforestation for wood fiber. The company uses recycled plastic and diverts it from landfills and shipment to China markets.

"Amy and I are strong environmentalists, and I'm proud of it," Van Eaton said.

The company has contracted for wheat straw from regional farmers to fulfill its needs.

"We have an abundant supply of straw in the region, and next year we have people listed to supply us as we grow," he added. "It's all regional from western Nebraska to southeast Wyoming."

The products

The first product off the line and going into the marketplace is called PrairiePicket, which is a privacy fencing system that includes railing and posts. Next will be composite shipping pallets called PrairiePallet, which will enter the market the first part of November.

"We also have composite decking which will be trademarked as PrairieDeck that will be coming soon," Van Eaton said. "These will have complete systems from the rails, corner posts, balusters and boards."

A number of specialty products are also available, but according to Van Eaton, due to the sensitive nature of the customers, they won't be promoted or shown to the public.

Asked what he sees for the company in a year, Van Eaton said, "We will be on the map in a year and in the market we will have notable market share in composite fencing, and we will be rushing to expand."

In five years he said, "We will be the leader in natural fiber/polymer composites. The interest level for us is not only in North America, but globally. We have had interest from European markets, Mexico, Chile and Australia."

Van Eaton said he feels fortunate that Heartland BioComposites is located in Wyoming. He said the company has brought a dynamic, sustainable manufacturing enterprise to the state.

"Torrington has welcomed us, and we want to be a business that Goshen County can be proud of," Van Eaton said. "We will do everything that we can to do that for southeast Wyoming."

U.S. Sens. Mike Enzi and Craig Thomas, R-Wyo., are scheduled to be on hand for a ribbon-cutting at Heartland BioComposites at 10:30 a.m. Oct. 18. Enzi is the one who originally talked to Van Eaton about building his facility in Wyoming.

"Enzi, as cool as he is, told me that Wyoming would support us in everything," Heath said. "He requested if we could do a feasibility analysis to operate in Wyoming... One of the most important elements for Heartland's success was being near a supply channel of wheat straw, and it is southeast Wyoming where the wheat straw is."

Heartland BioComposites has received support from the Wyoming Business Council, the Goshen County Economic Development Corp., the city of Torrington, the Wyoming Women's Business Center and the University of Wyoming, among other entities.

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