

Soil-ution Provider

Evansville Company Controls Erosion, Leads Industry

By Matt L. Ottinger

North American Green President Tim Lancaster discusses his company's products and the national accolades the organization has received.



Vmax3. HydraCX2. DS150. Contrary to what some gearheads might hope, these combos do not signify the latest lines of Honda coupes. They do, however, represent just a few of the soil erosion control products North American Green has used to plant the seeds of success it's been sprouting since 1985.

The Evansville company initially operated out of a pole barn, providing erosion control blankets for local coal companies that needed to repair damaged ground following excavation. Now, the company is still producing these products, but out of a 160,000-square-foot factory with seven production lines and staff working three shifts, 24 hours each day throughout the week. Between its Evansville office and nearby production facility, the company includes over 100 Indiana employees.

North American Green still strives to slow water run-off and preserve landscapes as it did in 1985, but now on a much larger scale for a wide array of customers. Among them: various departments of transportation, commercial stores such as Wal-Mart and Home Depot, and many housing developments nationwide.

Additionally, the company has grown to serve much more than just southwestern Indiana, germinating the globe with distributors in various markets including the Americas, Europe, Japan, Australia and New Zealand.

Top dog of topsoil protection

According to North American Green President Tim Lancaster, his company is currently at the top of its field in terms of innovation and impact.

"It's safe to say we're number one in this industry on a global basis," he surmises. "In the United States, there are 20 to 25 manufacturers with similar products. Out of those, probably four or five are major players nationally, and the others are regional."

Although the company must constantly compete with regional manufacturers, Lancaster claims he offers an element of service that competitors struggle to match.

"We have local distributors who will go out to the site and assist with installation," he notes. "Also, some competitors don't have a product line as full as ours."

Additionally, Lancaster asserts that North American Green's products meet the highest specifications for the industry. Chief among its top products, the company has recently gained recognition for HydraCX2. This erosion control product was named by *Better Roads* magazine as one of the Top 50 Rollouts for 2007. The magazine's editors touted the cotton fiber base of the product as eco-friendly and that it not only prohibits erosion, but also establishes vegetation along roadsides.

Innovation meets greening

According to Lancaster, HydraCX2 is a "cotton ginning" product, primarily using the stems and "trash material." He believes that by using residuals of natural resources, the earth benefits as less waste is created.

"A majority of our materials are byproducts of agriculture," he says.

Another popular North American Green product, BioNet, is nationally acclaimed. This biodegradable erosion control blanket has been on the market since 1993 and was selected as one of the top 10 Green Building Products by BuildingGreen, Inc. in 2005. Just last year, the American Society of Agricultural & Biological Engineers also named BioNet as one of the top 10 products created since the awards began in 1986.

The honor was based upon innovation as well as market acceptance of the product. BioNet, along with many of the company's creations, has also benefitted by eco-friendly legislation. Lancaster claims that in some states outside of Indiana (California, New Hampshire, Montana and Delaware to name a few) landscapers are required to use fully biodegradable products in erosion control.

By touring North American Green's facility, one also sees the massive materials needed for a company of this magnitude to use nature as a means to facilitate nature. The stacks upon stacks of straw wattles and rolls could leave horticulturists in awe, if not in sniffles.

"I hope you don't have any straw allergies," Lancaster quips during a walkthrough of the warehouse.

And while the company's primary raw material is wheat straw from local farms, coconut fiber is also used in some cases.

Serving the people

According to North American Green marketing manager Lynne Finney, the Clean Water Act, which was amended in the 1980s to include storm water provisions, has been a driving force in the industry.

"Ninety-nine percent of pollution is from storm water run-off," she offers. "We need to keep the earth in place, and that's been the impetus for the (Environmental Protection Agency) putting this into effect."

Because anyone in the United States who disturbs an acre or more of soil for whatever reason is required to file an erosion control plan, the company's services have become integral for many project engineers.

Local and state governments are also in need of erosion control products for the millions of miles of roadways and ditches throughout the country, and North American Green's bottom line has benefited. As Indiana's Major Moves plan develops, Lancaster hopes his company can be a benefactor from that initiative as well.

"We haven't received any contracts from that yet, but we hope to," he notes. "Major Moves has had some controversy, mainly with environmental concerns. That could definitely mean business for us. In highway work in general, erosion and re-vegetation are big issues."

Eroding challenges, growing forward

Although the company churns out erosion prevention blankets at a prosperous clip, Lancaster concedes the recent downturn in the housing market has been a bit of a wet blanket on sales as his products are often used in housing development retention ponds and drainage systems.



A North American Green employee assembles erosion control blanket samples to send to prospective customers.



To create erosion control blankets, raw fibers (straw, straw/coconut, coconut or polypropylene) are fed into a distribution cell located on the matting machine. The fiber is then pulled out of the bottom of the cell by needles affixed to a rotating cylinder that randomly disperses the fibers on top of high performance netting. Once stitched (bottom), the finished erosion control blanket is pulled to the end of the production line, rolled up and packaged in color-coded, perforated plastic bags or stretch wrap.

"In 2004-05, we saw our business starting to go up," he says. "But the residential development decline has hurt growth more than we thought it would. We hope that will pick up."

Lancaster adds that the company maintains its allure by focusing on solutions and best practices, appealing to a range of consumers.

"We're very aggressive in terms of research and development," he says. "We want to be a total solutions provider."

He stresses the importance of appealing to both contractors and engineers, so North American Green strives to make products that can be easily and properly installed, all the while speeding up the process so projects can stay on timetables.

The company also remains on top by being involved in industry associations. For example, it's a charter sponsor of the SOIL (Save Our International Land) Fund, which is administered by the International Erosion Control Association.

"We do whatever we can to not just market ourselves, but promote education and awareness," states Finney in discussing the company's exposure.

It seems that attitude permeates the company's production process as well.

"We're all passionate about this; these aren't just products to us," Finney beams. "These products are about saving the earth."

INFORMATION LINK

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