

Hi-point industries | bill butler

Bill Butler grows cranberries for peat's sake!

Cranberry production is just one of the operations to be found at Hi-Point Industries Inc. in Bishops Falls. Hi-Point Industries is owned and operated by Bill Butler. Its principal and original product is a natural oil absorbent product called Oclansorb used to clean up oil spills. This product is made from peat. The peat is harvested from bogs. After these bogs have been exhausted of peat, they need to be rejuvenated.

That is where the cranberries come in. Hi-Point Industries is an environmentally conscious company that is engaged in assisting nature in its process of reclaiming the bogs. So Bill plants cranberries to restore the natural cycle of life to the bog and at the same time he adds another product line to an already diverse business.

Bill is a person with imagination who sees possibilities and seizes opportunities. Prior to 1991, he was the production manager at the Oclansorb plant which was owned by a large company. When it decided to sell off its Newfoundland peat-based operations, Bill, who had never before considered owning his own business, realized he was in a unique position to make the leap into the business world. He knew the business of peat production; he had a network of contacts in the international market; he had the advantage of the good name and solid research of a product developed by a major corporation. As well, the provincial government did not want the province to lose the business. It was willing to guarantee some of his bank loans. The time was right; Bill became a businessman and Hi-Point Industries was born. Bill began with Oclansorb but has expanded his product lines. For the most part they are all based on peat. Bill is animated but patient as he explains the process of harvesting and processing peat.

Peat bogs look like any bog and are covered in low growth. This growth has to be removed. Bogs are also punctuated with small holes. These must be filled. The low growth becomes fill and is thrown in the holes. The surface must be smooth so any other material such as roots or knots is loosened and is also thrown in the holes. Then the surface is leveled and the holes are covered in.

Approximately every 70 feet a ditch is dug for the purpose of lowering the water table to enable the peat to dry out. Once dry, farm tractors loosen the surface of the bog. The loose bog is like powder and a harrow flips it. When it is 50% dry, it is vacuumed and stockpiled. It is then hauled to the plant where it is screened. At this point it can be packaged for the horticultural market or it can be further processed until it becomes Oclansorb. This involves being put through a drier until only 10% of the original moisture remains.

The resulting peat powder is sold as Oclansorb and is used for cleaning up surface oil spills. Bill began producing Oclansorb and Sorbsox. These sock-like tubes of different lengths are filled with the absorbent peat dust. Later, he created Spillows, a pillow shaped product with two synthetic products sewn together on the outside holding Oclansorb in the middle. In addition, Hi-Point Industries manufactures a related product called Oclansorb Plus. This is designed for situations where the oil absorbent product is not able to be removed from the spill, such as along seashores and marshes. It is designed to be left in place.

Bill also makes and sells spill kits. These kits contain Spillows, Sorbsox, shovels, gloves and hazardous waste bags among other items. They vary in size from a small \$25 kit to throw in a pick-up truck or to keep handy for a small spill, to \$800 kits in 90 gallon drums for larger operations. The largest kits he has sold are contained in huge aluminum boxes. These large kits are expensive. The box alone is \$7,500.

Bill's operations have branched into other products needed in the oil clean-up industry. He has another plant which makes containment booms, berms, flex tanks and turbidity curtains. Containment booms are used around the perimeter of a spill to contain the oil. Berms are like miniature swimming pools. Engines can be put in berms to be worked on. Flex tanks can hold 1000 gallons and are eight feet square but are flexible and can fold to 9 inches for shipping. Finally, turbidity curtains are made from a geo textile material that allows liquid to pass through but not solids.

It is not surprising that there is quite a demand for Hi-Point's products. They are purchased by oil companies, heavy industries such as pulp and paper, mining and refineries, as well as shipping and transportation companies. Any enterprise that uses petroleum products could potentially have a spill. Many companies do not wait until the spill happens to buy remedial products such as those manufactured by Hi-Point. Responsible companies ensure that they have adequate quantities of oil remediation products on hand as part of their risk management strategies.

Ninety percent of Hi-Point's products are exported. They can be found world-wide throughout North and South America, parts of Africa, Europe and Asia. Bill's market is global and it is accessed through a network of distributors.

In building his markets Bill has found industry trade shows to be invaluable. He has had booths in trade shows around the globe. At these shows the competitors are there, the industry players are there, the distributors are there and they have a chance to see and touch the product. They can ask questions and compare Hi-Point's products to other products. It is a time to build relationships, trust and loyalty, especially among the distributors.

On-line advertising and web pages have lessened the impact of trade shows, but Bill feels they do not replace the personal interaction and product education provided by a trade show. Bill has extensive knowledge about the oil clean up industry. He says that it is particularly important "to know the competitors and to know their products inside and out." Bill's largest competitor is the large multi-national 3M and there are approximately one dozen smaller competitors. These sell synthetic products. Bill says his product is better because it is natural, environmentally friendly, 100% organic and does not release oil. It has the International Standard Organization (ISO) certification. It is a high quality product with quality sales and service behind it.

Bill has maintained sole ownership of his business through all periods of growth and expansion. Owning a business is rewarding and challenging but it is a lot of responsibility. He says that a business owner has to be prepared to do any job necessary and to work long hours. In the summer when the weather is good and it is time to harvest the peat, he works 16 to 18 hour days for weeks on end.

Hi-Point has 10 employees in the winter and approximately 30 in the summer. There are

office staff, sales personnel and people who can operate and maintain heavy equipment. Millwright skills are an asset in this field. A millwright is a tradesperson who installs, maintains and repairs industrial machinery and mechanical equipment. Whatever the position, Bill looks for people who are personable, willing to learn and able to accept criticism. Bill said that recently he has not had difficulty filling positions, but this was not the case a couple of years ago when Alberta's economy was booming.

Bill has built a great team at Hi-Point Industries and he is very much a team player and leader himself. This is evident in his participation in the Canadian Manufacturing Association (CMA), the Newfoundland and Labrador Environmental Network (NET) Association and, the Newfoundland and Labrador Ocean Industries Association (NOIA). He has found participation in such groups invaluable for networking; for sharing ideas with people who experience similar situations; for lobbying governments or other bodies on mutual concerns; and for their ability to bring in experts to share their knowledge with industry players. He was named Newfoundland and Labrador Manufacturer of the Year and has received awards from NET and others.

Bill is optimistic about the future of Hi-Point, the future of the environmental business in general and the future of Newfoundland and Labrador. Bill has found his home province an excellent place from which to do business. The government has many agencies and programs in place that are supportive of new and growing businesses and the overall economy in Newfoundland and Labrador is healthy.

The environmental business is a global priority and will only continue to grow. The horticultural business, which also uses peat, is experiencing similar growth as the population in the western world ages and people invest more in their gardens. Products such as cranberries that contain natural anti-oxidants are also experiencing an increased demand.

The future looks bright for Hi-Point. It is an environmentally responsible company which makes ecologically friendly products in a manner that is sensitive to renewing the earth. There is no doubt that Hi-Point Industries will continue to be a global player relied on by enterprises far removed from the peat bogs and berries of central Newfoundland.