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RPN photo by Chris Sweeney

Chris Tolliver (left), Great Lakes lab coordinator/chemist; Great Lakes President Don DeMallie; and Tom Leonardo, Great Lakes Rubber process engineer.

Great Lakes Rubber thrives on tackling extreme environments

By Chris Sweeney

Rubber & Plastics News Staff

WIXOM, Mich.—Great Lakes Rubber Co. Inc. has probably encountered every demanding application imaginable.

The Wixom-based rubber products manufacturer often is challenged with producing a part that can survive the extreme: Hot or cold temperatures, tons of dust, garbage and a whole gamut of other wild cards.

It's prepared for all of those, and is investing to take on the ones it hasn't encountered yet.

"We're not afraid to look at the next best technology that's out there, regardless of price," said Chris Tolliver, Great Lakes lab coordinator/chemist. "We're looking to have it on the shelf, ready to go, when it's needed. Being a smaller company, to look at those things that are not just the norm is something that we pride ourselves in."

New business

In 1979, Great Lakes Rubber was founded by Harvey McCloud—a former buyer with Mac Valves Inc., the country's largest manufacturer of pneumatic valves.

Dynamic rubber seals are critical to Mac's products. Frustrated with the difficulty it took to purchase seals at the level

of quality Mac wanted, McCloud approached his boss with an idea—he'd make the seals himself if Mac would source them.

Mac agreed, and the rest is history. By 1989 Great Lakes had grown to the point where Mac decided to bring it under its umbrella as a wholly owned subsidiary. Four years later, the firm relocated from its original site in Walled Lake, Mich., to its current 25,000-sq.-ft. home in Wixom, housed within Mac's global headquarters.

Don DeMallie came on board as the company's president in 1994. At the time, Mac accounted for 98 percent of Great Lakes' business. One of his first goals was to grow the company's business beyond Mac Valves. Today, the Mac business accounts for about 75 percent of the firm's overall sales, though at times the breakdown has been even.

"Even though Mac Valves is growing very, very fast, we've made a lot of investments in a lot of different ways," DeMallie said. "Not just in our facility with our equipment, but through partnerships with other companies that have allowed us

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Philpott pulls out of China, plans for growth

RPN photo by Kyle Brown

Philpott's Aurora, Ohio, facility includes about 40,000 square feet of manufacturing space, with room for new equipment.

By Kyle Brown

Rubber & Plastics News Staff

AURORA, Ohio—A new Philpott Solutions Group is on the way, starting by shutting down operations in China and bringing them back to its new Aurora facility.

"We're getting out of China," President and CEO Mike Baach said. "We're bringing those jobs back."

Philpott, which has another facility in Brunswick, Ohio, also had a footprint near Shanghai, partnering with local companies making small parts for its rubber line, he said.

But the company will be shifting those operations back to the U.S. with a goal of mid-year to September, said James Vaughn, Philpott's chief operating officer.

Though the total number of jobs was not disclosed, Baach said the amount is, for Philpott, "significant."

"We have plans of bringing everything we have from China here," he said.

Making the shift back to the U.S. is not a project taken on lightly. Baach said the strategy started with Greg Stafford, vice president of technology and business development for Philpott. Though Philpott has worked with Chinese partner companies in the past to reach particular price requirements for jobs, it came down to an issue of quality.

"What you find out is that the absolute dollar isn't the true cost of (working with) the company," Baach said. "When problems occur, we don't disappoint our customers."

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Parker to combine hose businesses

By Bruce Meyer

Rubber & Plastics News Staff

MARCO ISLAND, Fla.—Parker Hannifin Corp. is combining its industrial and hydraulic hose businesses into one division, though officials said customers shouldn't see any difference in their dealings with the company.

The combination of the new Hose Products Division will be effective July 1, the beginning of Cleveland-based Parker's fiscal year, top officials of the hose business said during NAHAD's annual convention, held April 28 through May 1 in Marco Island.

Parker said the consolidated division enables it to:

- Simplify products, services and

customer experience;

- Support and grow OEM and distribution channels;

- Leverage resources to quickly design, develop and introduce new products;

- Merge technical expertise across hose platforms; and

- Refine and capitalize upon manufacturing efficiencies.

"The advantages we will have as one large division within Parker Hannifin obviously is the scale of the business," said Dan Barrett, currently general manager of the Industrial Hose Products Division within Parker's Fluid Connector's Group. "With the scale is

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SPECIAL REPORT

Molded Goods

Coi Rubber building momentum, growth

By Mike McNulty

Rubber & Plastics News Correspondent

LOS ANGELES—Coi Rubber Products Inc. seemed to spring up out of nowhere in 2013 with a young, experienced industry veteran at the helm.

It also had a small plant in China to handle manufacturing. That was the good news. The bad news was that the custom rubber goods maker's factory was older as was some of the machinery at the site.

Some would have called the company a long shot to make it in the rubber products arena. They would have been wrong.

Coi Rubber's co-founder, David C. Chao, apparently knew what he was doing. When he launched the company, he already had a small but solid customer base, a number of experienced leaders to help guide the business and an aggressive growth plan in place as a foundation from which it could grow.

In addition, the firm's owners had the foresight and a plan that allowed the company to produce products and continue growing while it built a new production facility from the ground up in Anhui Wuhu, China, two blocks down from Lear Corp.

Coi Rubber broke ground on the Anhui Wuhu factory, which is located about 30 minutes away from the firm's old site and a six hour drive inland from Shanghai, in 2013 and completed construction in 2015. In August 2016 it received ISO-TS 16949 certification. The company, which started out with 150 employees in China, has been adding machinery and personnel since then. It now has a workforce of about 450.

"We put together a factory in China built and run with Asian-American leadership, expectations, values and framework," Chao said.

He also had a financial interest in some partner manufacturing companies in China and they have helped shoulder some of the production workload during the construction stage of the plant.

A steady flow of the company's products are shipped to the U.S. in 40-foot containers on a regular basis, insuring the most competitive shipping costs possible, Chao said. It primarily, but not exclusively, serves the automotive, HVAC, agriculture, heavy trucking and commercial rubber markets.

Regular expansion

Today the 250,000-sq.-ft. factory in Anhui Wuhu not only is running efficiently, it's also in a continuous expansion mode. "We specialize in custom molded, extruded, rubber-to-metal-bonded products and also plastic injection," he said.

Coi Rubber is currently finishing up phase one of its extensive growth project at the new plant, according to Chao, who is a co-owner and president of the Los Angeles-headquartered business. The company expects to complete stage one in the fourth quarter.

That expansion project involves adding personnel and a variety of new equipment at the Anhui Wuhu facility. The firm also has experienced growth at its headquarters facility in the City of Industry, a 10-by-5 mile stretch in Los Angeles County that houses numerous companies.

Chao said that while the company's plant spans 250,000 square feet, when partnering plants in which he has made investments are included, the company has over 1.4 million square feet which gives it "great depth and manufacturing power."

Machinery added at the Anhui Wuhu site includes a variety of transfer, injection and compression molding presses for both rubber and plastic along with those used for extrusion and rubber to metal



Coi Rubber Products Inc. was formed by David C. Chao (left) in 2013. Since then the firm has been expanding rapidly and is getting ready to expand its capabilities in China.

products business was needed.

During his 15 plus years in the industry, "I realized that the market had gotten more competitive with customers demanding simply the best—lower costs and higher quality products," according to Chao, who moved to the U.S. from China with his family in 1982 at the age of three.

"With labor rates increasing in coastal areas within the Far East," he said, "we needed something with an edge: new technology, lower labor costs, better logistics and more importantly an infrastructure that brought extreme value to the supply chain."

Armed with that knowledge, Chao said, "we needed to build it from the ground up and incorporate the latest in technology, automation and competitive value for many years to come. New rules were needed along with a fresh start. From new facilities to management from the top down, it was time for the old saying, 'in with the new and out with the old.' Anything antiquated was systematically flushed out phase by phase.

"Our team members, such as Bryan Erdmann (director of business development) and Craig Law (Mexico automotive accounts), have been with me for over 15 years. Building a solid team of experienced individuals takes much more time than just building a factory." Between 2011 and 2013, a good portion of his team was in place.

Chao presently holds two positions at Coi Rubber, president and vice president, because he's still looking for the ideal person to fill the latter post. His primary job in the U.S. is to create jobs to support the business and several departments at the Los Angeles site.

"My responsibilities in China are to insure that our building and manufacturing are state of the art and up to U.S. standards," he said.

Future growth plans

The next step for the company will be phase two of its expansion plan, which at this point will be determined by some key projects that are pending, he said. "How-

ever, the land is in place and we will be formalizing this in the next few years."

If the firm moves forward with phase two, it is tentatively expected to start in 2020. While Chao did not discuss all the details, he indicated it may involve construction of another production plant.

He views molded rubber goods made at the company's plant in China as the most cost-effective for customers "due to labor rates, overhead and other advantages we have over domestic manufacturing." And the fact that it's located inland, rather than on the coast in China, helps reduce labor costs.

"We also mix and compound our own materials in house through a fully automated process from ingredients, to batching, to perform and every other step. It starts on the third floor and works down." Full automation takes the labor out and makes production as efficient as possible, he maintained.

State-of-the-art bar code scanning and step by step data automatically tracks each batch of material and then enters into the company's systems for further integration with IMDS, lab testing and other reports generated for repeatability and traceability, Chao said.

Coi Rubber has a research and development laboratory on the second floor of the Anhui Wuhu factory. In the U.S., the firm generally works with customers on CAD files, designs, front end work for new programs that require research, direct support on engineering for ASTM specifications and other projects, he said.

"There's no way anyone could build a plant like this in California or New York," the executive added. "It's simply too cost-prohibitive."

In addition to its own facilities, "we work very closely with Akron Rubber Development Laboratory in Akron on other testing, recommendations, compound development and other work that cannot be done in China," Chao said.

"Finding how to leverage and maximize our success on each project is the key while doing it at the most competitive price possible is what we strive for so that our customers can achieve the value they are looking for."