

Asbestos handling is made easier by Nitro company

By Tom Buell
BUSINESS/LABOR EDITOR

A growing industry has developed in West Virginia around the control and removal of deadly asbestos from homes, buildings and factories. Several companies around the state provide services and know-how to help alleviate the health risks of the once-popular fireproof fiber.

In Nitro, tucked in among some chemical and steel fabrication plants, sits a small company that has developed a breakthrough material to make the job of handling asbestos easier and safer.

Researchers at Vimasco Corp., which for years has produced latex-based coatings and adhesives for industrial insulation applications, took a simple idea and turned it into a substantial new line of products.

With the help of Chicago-based American Coatings Corp., which now sells the products under its label, the company developed EPA 55, the brand name given to a chemical treatment compound. It allows workers on asbestos abatement projects to more easily capture and contain airborne asbestos particles.

"We, in conjunction with American Coatings, developed this product for better penetration of the asbestos fiber," said William Pugh

Jr., president of Vimasco. "We produce it exclusively for them. It's as though they're the sales office and we're the production department [for EPA 55]."

Pugh, who took over the company from his father, said Vimasco has contracted with American Coatings for several years, although there is no corporate connection between the two companies. Vimasco still sells its own lines of industrial coatings and adhesives, he said.

Many asbestos removal companies still use the most common method of capturing asbestos particles when removing the material, which is to wet the asbestos with plain tap water. They also use water mixed with a small amount of soap or surfactant mixed in to make the water cling more easily to the particles.

However, there are certain types of asbestos fiber which resist collection by plain water or "amended water," as the surfactant mix is called, Pugh said. These fibers repel the water, which often evaporates too quickly.

John Tidquist, Vimasco's technical director, was instrumental in the development of EPA 55, which went on the market last spring. In the company's small lab, he perfected the product us-



Gazette photo by KENNY KEMP

Nitro's Vimasco Corp. President William Tidquist stand by their asbestos treatment Pugh Jr. (right) and technical director John compound and other products.

ing what he described as "little bits of other technology" and a thought he had been mulling over for a while.

"I had heard from contractors that they needed something better for asbestos abatement, so I had some ideas that I had been saving up," Tidquist said. "It was a little like paint technology and a little like cooking. We came up with a blend to achieve a certain effect."

Since competition is pretty stiff in the small but increasingly lucrative market, Pugh and Tidquist won't say much about what makes

EPA 55 work, what it contains, or even exactly how much they produce. "It would be accurate to say that we make several thousand gallons a month," Pugh said.

They will say that the product, on which they have a patent pending, uses a simple agent to prevent evaporation and a slightly mysterious chemical bonding process to encapsulate, or grab onto, the asbestos particles.

Armed with a biology degree from Alderson-Broaddus College and some graduate courses, Tidquist and his lab staff took about

six months to develop EPA 55, an average development period. As with other asbestos-related products, the most important phase was the field testing process since the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency doesn't allow lab testing on actual asbestos.

"That meant that in the lab we have to test the products on a mineral composite that was similar to asbestos, which really isn't the same," Tidquist said. "That makes the field testing essential

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You get a few surprises, but the contractors can tell you a lot about how a product works on the real thing."

Most of the raw materials for Vimasco's product line, and all of the ingredients for EPA 55, come from plants in the Kanawha Valley, Pugh said, explaining that this "backyard" purchasing approach saves on transportation and other costs. The company employs 25 people and has annual sales of several million dollars, he said.

The 42-year-old Pugh, a Charleston native who received an MBA degree from the University of North Carolina, joined the company in 1975. He has been president of Vimasco since 1983. He said EPA 55 now represents a substantial amount of Vimasco's business, and expects improvements in the asbestos control market in the future.

When the industry first sprang up around the need for asbestos control, analysts predicted the market would last about five years. Tidquist said that initial five years has passed and the analysts are now predicting the market will last 10 to 15 years.

"This is definitely a growth area for us," Pugh said. "We also hope to show growth in other areas so as not to become too dependent on one particular product or industry."