

MID-IOWA NEWS

09/23/2008

Colorbiotics completes 140,000-square-foot facility

By: Linda Voit , Special to The Tribune

Becker Underwood, a privately held company with 120 employees in Ames and more than 315 globally, has become a world leader in developing and producing bio-ergonomic and colorant products.

It all started in 1982 with Jeff Becker and Roger Underwood, two entrepreneurs with a 640-square-foot building on the east side of Ames who developed a colorant for farmers to add to herbicide so they could see where they had sprayed. The product, Spray Tracer, is still marketed by Becker Underwood today.

In 1986, the product line expanded. The early 1990s brought a building expansion, additional staff and more expansions in the product line. Today, the Becker Underwood Company encompasses 12 sites on four continents and is made up of four major business units. The company's products are used to enhance the appearance of renowned sports venues in the United States as well as countless decorative flower beds across the country. Other Becker Underwood products are used to enhance the appearance or performance of seeds planted around the world.

In the past couple of years, with all business units growing, Becker Underwood has been bursting at the seams of its 801 Dayton Ave. corporate headquarters. Todd Schnathorst, new product development manager, says Becker Underwood has focused strongly on growing the landscape colorant and equipment business globally in the last decade. Success in that endeavor meant the development of Colorbiotics as a specialized business unit, in 2006.

"Becker Underwood was founded on developing niche products for specialty markets," Colorbiotics Chief Operations Officer Brent Lester said.

That allowed them to be ready when environmental law helped to create an expanded market for color-enhanced wood source.

"As federal policy emerged to prohibit dumping of pallets and scrap wood into landfills, we saw an opportunity to divert that scrap wood into decorative mulch. We went about developing equipment to apply environmentally safe coatings to that wood source, and that's how color-enhanced wood was born." Lester said.

At the same time, consumer demand for color-enhanced mulch, for both individual and commercial applications, began to grow.

"Color-enhanced mulch became mainstream in large home-improvement and landscaping stores, and, as a result of that market growth, we began to specialize," said Lester.

"Our processes are different than those of the other Becker Underwood business units," Schnathorst said.

He describes Colorbiotics as a high volume manufacturer.

"In the early days, people thought colored mulch was going to be a fad, but consumers continue to demand it. The growth in the past five to eight years has been much stronger," Schnathorst said.

As the world's leading producer of landscape colorants and coatings, Colorbiotics needed not only more

space, but specialized lab and manufacturing areas. They completed construction on a \$13 million, 140,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art research and manufacturing facility just north of Becker Underwood headquarters this August.

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