

OregonBusiness

Jobs Watch: Hemp for the masses

Ben Jacklet

Wednesday, September 23, 2009

Anyone who believes that the hemp industry is best left to the half-baked stoners of the world should spend a few hours talking textiles with Ken Barker. Five minutes into the conversation it becomes clear that this guy is onto something big, and he knows exactly what he is doing.

Barker recently served as head of apparel at Adidas North America in Portland. Before that he held executive positions with Adidas and Levi Strauss in Canada. He knows how hard it is for apparel companies to meet the rising demand for clothing from earth-friendly sources. When he was with Adidas he entertained proposals to make fabric from soy, bamboo, even seaweed. None of them made as much sense as hemp, the plant that once served as the backbone of U.S. industry before it was banned in the 1930s.

Barker and another former Adidas executive, David Howitt (a brain behind the success of Oregon Chai), run an investment firm in Northwest Portland called the Meriwether Group. They have two hemp companies in their portfolio. Living Harvest, which makes hemp milk, is one of the fastest growing companies in Oregon. Naturally Advanced Technologies, the company Barker has run since 2006, recently raised more than \$900,000 and plans to get its product to market within six months.

You know you're talking to an entrepreneur when you ask how close they got to running out of money and you get a grin and a nod. "We took it down to under \$200,000 just 30 days ago," says Barker. "But once we were able to announce that we had some global players signed on as partners, we went out and raised a quick million dollars. That's enough to take it to commercial production."

NAT's partnerships with the decidedly non-hippy powerhouses Hanes and Georgia Pacific offer hints about the company's plans. The goal is the no-nonsense, low-cost, mass

production of industrial hemp, initially for the apparel and pulp industries and eventually for natural plastics and biofuels. The company has trademarked a fiber technology called Crailar that Barker hopes to build into the next big apparel ingredient in the tradition of Lycra and Gore-Tex, but plant-based and organic.

The idea isn't to replace the mountains of petroleum-based polyester used by Nike and Adidas, or the fields of pesticide-covered cotton gobbled up by Hanes and Levi Strauss, but rather to introduce Crailar into the existing system of textile manufacturing, as an option for manufacturers interested in going green. Thus the partnership with Hanes and textile researchers at North Carolina State.

The same general principle applies to the pulp industry, which is in deep trouble these days and could use some fresh ideas. Think paper towels and napkins without the stumps. The fact that Georgia Pacific has signed on suggests that the potential is there.

Barker calls hemp a "super-crop." There is no disputing that hemp is a proven performer that grows like a weed without pesticides. It is also illegal, at the federal level, although Oregon recently became the seventh state to vote to legalize it at the statewide level. Barker argues that harvesting hemp locally would make sense, but in the meantime he says it is easy to import from Canada.

The potential for hemp has been there for decades — make that centuries. What has been missing in modern times (in addition to intelligent federal policy) is a team with the experience and expertise to take hemp production to the next competitive level. Barker and his partners could end up doing just that. If his plans come to fruition, they could breathe new life into the nation's suffering pulp and textiles industries and offer a new option in the search for viable biofuels. All of which would build nicely on Oregon's strengths in the apparel industry and in the business of going green.