

## Company wants a piece of the 'green' flooring business

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Hamilton Spectator | Mar 06, 2015

BURLINGTON — A local company is in the final stages of testing a new way of taking a dangerous cancer-causing chemical out of laminated flooring products.

EcoSynthetix has a lot riding on its new bio-based binder for particle board products — grabbing a piece of a \$16-billion market the company badly needs to reignite its once shining star.

Jeff MacDonald, EcoSynthetix's interim CEO, explained products such as plywood and medium-density fiberboard — the core of what's in laminated flooring — is made of wood chips held together by formaldehyde, a chemical linked to leukemia, nasal cancers and irritated asthma.

"Formaldehyde is the glue that holds all those particles together," MacDonald said. "Chemical solutions are used to keep the emissions low, but there are still emissions."

Demand to replace formaldehyde with a "green" product creates a potentially lucrative market for a company with a product that works, but doesn't carry a heavy green premium on its price tag.

Many of the replacement products hitting the market today are based on petroleum and carry a price premium of up to 15 per cent, something MacDonald says is not sustainable.

"We realize that we just can't keep selling 'green' at a premium," MacDonald said. "There are lots of great solutions out there where the cost-effective part still hasn't been solved. We're bringing something to the table that's cost neutral."

Replacement products only command about five per cent of the available market right now, so MacDonald sees lots of opportunity.

EcoSynthetix' product, called DuraBind, is a bio-based glue undergoing full production line tests in wood mills now and MacDonald said he hopes to have it on the market later this year.

DuraBind has been in development at EcoSynthetix's Burlington lab for the past three years. For competitive reasons, MacDonald won't say much about what's in it other than it's a "natural product grown around the world every day."

Bill Dearing, president of the North American Laminated Flooring Association, said the industry has been working for years to better control formaldehyde emissions and is open to adopting anything that furthers that effort.

The only defined standard for formaldehyde emissions today is that set by the California Air Resources Board. In the industry the standard is called CARB 2.

"Formaldehyde exists in everything that lives or has lived, the question is how to you control it and keep it to acceptable limits," he said. "I'll be curious to see what this new product achieves."

"Anything that meets or beats CARB 2 is welcome," he said. "Deploying green technology has always been at the forefront of the laminated flooring industry."

Public interest in the issue of formaldehyde in flooring was heightened earlier this week when the TV news magazine show "60 Minutes" aired a segment alleging Lumber Liquidators, a major retailer of laminated flooring with an outlet in Stoney Creek, sells Chinese-made flooring with illegally high levels of the chemical.

In a news release posted on its website after the broadcast, the company alleged "60 Minutes" used improper testing techniques to supports it claims.

"We comply with applicable regulations set by the California Air Resources Board ("CARB"), which is currently the only regulator of composite core emissions. Although the CARB regulations only apply in California, we adhere to these standards everywhere we do business," the company said.



EcoSynthetix is testing a new bio-based particle board product that doesn't include formaldehyde. From left, Somaieh Salehpour, research and development manager, Doug Ireland, director of new market and chief operating officer Jeff MacDonald.

Getting a piece of the "green" flooring business is important to EcoSynthetix. The company has been battered in recent months by heavy losses, sharp drops in its stock price, the collapse of a major customer and the sudden leave-of-absence of its founding CEO, John van Leeuwen.

To turn that situation around MacDonald has promised a focus on getting the company into new markets such as building materials.

EcoSynthetix makes a biolatex binder that allows colourful graphics to "stick" to the glossy paper used in magazines, books and packaging, replacing petroleum.

The enterprise was born in 1996 when van Leeuwen and friend Steven Bloembergen (now the company's executive vice president for technology) put their heads together to find an eco-friendly replacement for petroleum-based products.

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