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SPECIAL REPORT | Chemicals and Additives

Bolder breaks ground on plant expansion

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MARYVILLE, Mo.—When Bolder Industries L.L.C. founder and CEO Tony Wibbeler set out to significantly boost the company's manufacturing and technical capabilities in the last year, he did so with an eye on both the present and future.


Wibbeler

The manufacturer of BolderBlack—a key ingredient used for sustainable rubber and plastic products—recently broke ground on a 17,000-sq.-ft. addition at its Maryville production facility and hopes to complete the expansion in February 2021. The plant currently spans about 27,000 square feet and sits on five acres.

It also is adding machinery at the site to significantly increase the firm's capacity and allow it to handle increased demand for its products. "This expansion will increase our capacity nearly three times our current capability in each of our product lines," Wibbeler said.

Part of his plan began to take shape in mid-March when the company started building the equipment Bolder would need in order to grow. In May, the company said it had increased its investment in the firm's technical expertise, physical laboratory space and leadership team at its rubber development and compounding center in Punta Gorda, Fla.

Wibbeler estimated the cost of both the addition and new machinery at about $14 million.

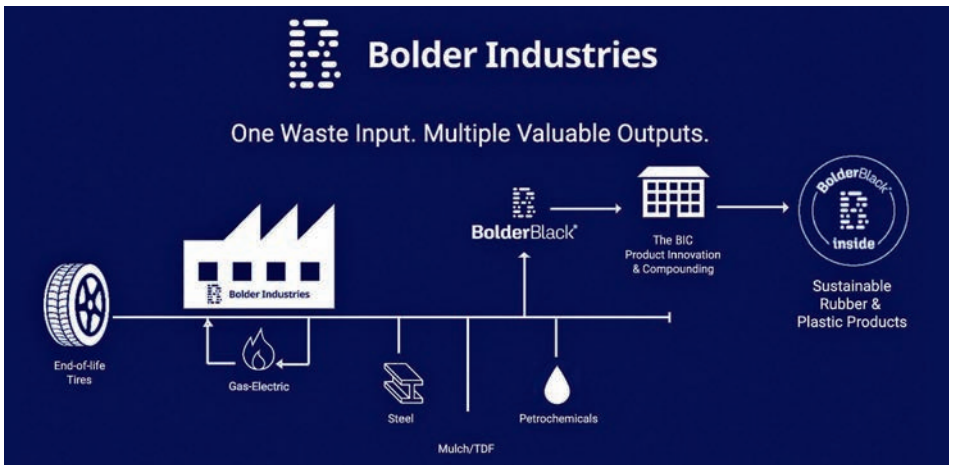
He noted the project could create about 10 advanced manufacturing jobs at the plant in the near future. The firm currently has a work force of approximately 30, although that figure is down some because of COVID-19.

Headquartered in Boulder, Colo., the company is a pioneer in converting end-of-life tires into carbon black alternatives and petrochemicals with minimal waste, Wibbeler said, adding that its flagship product, BolderBlack, is a less expensive, more sustainable alternative to virgin carbon black.

He said the net effect of the BolderBlack process is a 90 percent reduction of environmental impact across the board when taking into consideration greenhouse gas emissions, electricity and water usage. It's used in more than 250 products ranging from tires to construction materials to waste containers.

Bolder's expansion "demonstrates our ability to expand our facility and capacity on time and on budget, and shows we can manufacture products at a predictable price," he said. "We are currently on time and on budget with the project, with more than 85 percent of the costs contracted or purchased for what is essentially a second facility."

Demand for custom formulas has been on the rise, according to Wibbeler. "We expected that things would level off during COVID-19. Instead, the casualness and quick connectivity of video chat meetings have accelerated conversations with brands looking to innovate and tell a new story … that focuses on responsible resources. The new dialog isn't about 'eco' and 'sustainable' as much as it is about thoughtful use of what we've rediscovered as the resourceful use of the materials we already have."



A schematic on how Bolder Industries said its process works.

Virtually anything that is black plastic or rubber can use BolderBlack, he said.

Bolder is expanding at this time because, after dedicating the last several years to perfecting its manufacturing process and the quality of its outputs, "our pilot programs have reached a sustained level of commercial success where we can scale with confidence," Wibbeler said. "Our sales are increasing as our applications prove out over time, and we simply need this capacity to keep up with our current demand."

In addition, he noted, "we are now in the planning stages for adding more capacity in North America and abroad," and other projects that call for the additions of new plants in the U.S. and in other countries are being considered by the company.

While BolderBlack is the firm's primary product, petrochemicals extracted from tires ranks a close second, followed by steel and mulch. In addition, the company makes its power on site. About half of its market is rubber-related, and the other 50 percent is in the plastics industry.

Formed in 2011 with the intention of serving numerous waste markets, "it became quickly apparent that there is not a one-size-fits-all solution to every problem, particularly in product innovation," he said. "The tire issue became our focus mainly due to the potential social and environmental impact."

In December 2014, Bolder acquired the distressed assets of a plant in Maryville, Mo., that had attempted to extract materials from tires and resell them in the market. "They actually made a tremendous amount of progress toward that end, but ultimately could not keep their business afloat," Wibbeler said.

Bolder focused on rebuilding and refining the finishing process in 2015 and, in 2016, the company tackled the pyrolysis portion of the process but learned that the available technology was not ready for commercial application.

In 2017, after trial and error with pyrolysis and feedstock, the company built its own whole tire shredding operation. It spent 2018 working with its partner, Kleenair—which had built a pyrolysis system in the 1980s—and "we built our first commercial complete solution," Wibbeler said.


Bolder Industries' CEO Tony Wibbeler (left) and Chief Technology Officer Nate Murphy break ground for the company's expansion at its site in Maryville, Mo.

By 2019, Bolder consistently met its production target "and made 100 percent in-spec product and have sold it all," he said. In 2020, the company has concentrated on growth and continuing to manufacture the same products day in and day out, Wibbeler noted.

"Our operations run 24 hours a day, 330 days per year," he said.

"Sales are our key focus right now and it's all about bringing customers a meaningful sustainability story, cost reduction and supply chain confidence. We are prepared to meet all the demands of the market and can finally prove that all of those wonderful chemicals in a tire can have another life … maybe more, resulting in massive decreases in greenhouse gas emissions, power and water usage while creating local jobs."