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Straw is golden for Fort Worth company

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BY SANDRA BAKER
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FORT WORTH -- Nearly 70 years ago, a Swedish company invented a way to take the lowly wheat straw -- what's left in the field after the harvest -- heat it and compress it into a rigid board that's used to build houses and other structures.



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Last year, Stramit USA in Fort Worth sourced that technology from Stramit UK and has begun manufacturing the board in an 88,000-square-foot facility off Lubbock Avenue on the south side. The new company has 25 employees, but its goal is to have 100 workers within 18 months as demand picks up.

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It also wants to operate perhaps a half-dozen regional mills near selected major metropolitan areas in coming years, said Tim Evans, executive vice president of sales and marketing at Stramit USA and a partner in the firm.

"Wheat straw, unlike corn, will never be food again and it will never be fuel," Evans said. "It's a great use of a raw material."

In 1945, a businessman acquired the manufacturing rights for the so-called Stramit board in the United Kingdom. Thousands of houses and other buildings have since been built using Stramit board in the U.K. The company developed the machinery that Stramit USA is using. Evans said only eight such machines are in use worldwide, including the one in Fort Worth.

Six shipping containers arrived in Fort Worth in January from the United Kingdom with the parts for the machine, which is about 300 feet long, nearly as long as a football field, Evans said.

'Green' alternative

Stramit in Fort Worth is calling the product CAFboard, or compressed agricultural fiber, and hopes to brand that name, Evans said.

Building houses with this sustainable product means less lumber is needed. It also gives door makers a "green" alternative to particle board or foam filler. It's good insulation, can be used to make flooring and has other applications in residential and commercial structures. It's also nontoxic and resists mold and pests.

Don Ferrier, president of Ferrier Custom Homes, a Fort Worth-based home builder who has won many national awards as a builder of so-called green homes, said he is familiar with the product, thinks it's a good concept and is willing to use it. But when he has priced similar products in the past, he said, they cost more than a home builder was willing to spend.

"I have not looked at the new one," Ferrier said of CAFboard. "The concept is very appealing to me. There's a lot of things going for it. People are willing to pay more to get green, but there is a limit to what they will pay."

The U.S. Postal Service used wheat-straw board more than a decade ago to build a 25,500-square-foot post office on Eighth Avenue in Fort Worth.

Stramit USA said it will donate some of its product to the nonprofit Trinity Habitat for Humanity to build a local pilot project.

Evans says the process is simple. The company is buying bales of red winter wheat straw from farmers about 90 miles north of Fort Worth, he said.

The wheat straw goes into a hopper that separates the short and long strands. The short strands and dust are given to mushroom growers who use it for mulch. The long strands are compacted into a rectangle form and heated to 400 degrees. At that point, all the oxygen is pressed out of the straw, making it nearly fireproof. And at that temperature, the straw produces lignin, a starch that acts as a natural glue that binds the strands.

No resins or other binders, or volatile organic compounds are added, making it environmentally friendly. The boards are wrapped in organic paper and cooled, then cut to specific sizes.

A win-win-win

Stramit is 50 percent owned by Evans and brothers Tim Kilpatrick, founder and CEO, and Kevin Kilpatrick, chief operating officer. The rest is held by four local investors. Tim Kilpatrick co-owned Pescor

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Plastics, and Stramit is in its former factory. It shares space with InPro Fabrication, a company co-owned by Tim Kilpatrick.

Before joining Stramit, Evans, who owned Buck's Awning Co. in Fort Worth, was vice president of sales and marketing for Agriboard Industries in Electra, Texas, a company that made a similar agricultural fiber product until 2009. Evans met Tim Kilpatrick, who sought the U.S. rights for Stramit late last year, after Stramit UK tried to set up operations here.

Texas Agriculture Commissioner Todd Staples spoke at the company's recent launch and said companies like Stramit USA add value to the state's \$100 billion-a-year agricultural industry.

"It's a win for agriculture, a win for the environment and a win for the economy," he said.

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