



SPoonER Advocate

Vol. 109, No. 16

SpooNER, WI

www.spooneradvocate.com

Thursday, March 26, 2009

\$1.00

Year after blast, Cortec poised for expansion

BY FRANK ZUFALL

Prior to the March 18, 2008, explosion that rocked the Cortec aerosol-filling plant in Spooner and seriously injured two men, the company's owner and president, Boris Miksic, said he had thought about expanding the operation.

Considering that the plant is on the tail-end of a \$5 million reinvestment, including the cost of fines and the state-of-the-art manufacturing and safety equipment installation, it could be said, "Expansion completed."

Anna Vignetti, Cortec's vice chief executive officer

and chief operations officer, said probably in May the plant will be fully 100 percent efficient, meaning it will be three times faster with four times the capacity of the old plant and with high-tech safety precautions she has referred to as "James Bond technology."

Vignetti said the company is poised to nail down huge contracts with industry giants like RustOleum, a company Cortec previously had secured a contract with to fill their aerosol cans, a contract that the explosion blew away like the east part of the building.

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One year after the blast

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"That was a huge contract, and if we would have secured it we would have had to hire more people," she said.

Instead of large contracts, on March 19 last year Vignetti and Miksic and the rest of the Cortec staff were ashen-faced, staring at a building the explosion pancaked to rubble.

"I felt so guilty about Aaron and Corey [Aaron Merchant and Corey La Bonte, the two men injured in the accident]," said Miksic. "I remember talking to the mayor [Louie Vilella] and asking him, 'Do you really want us to rebuild here?' And I was serious. I felt like there was something we could have done to have made the plant more safe even though we have a good safety program."

He added, "In the chemical industry, your worst nightmare is a chemical explosion."

Adding to the burden over the plant's explosion, 10 days later, on March 28, Miksic's father died.

"It was a very difficult period of my life," he said.

Almost before the dust settled, literally, chasing out the sound of the explosion were the voices of community support.

Miksic said he was overwhelmed by community support from the city of Spooner, Washburn County, and local and state governmental agencies.

Because of community support and because of his talented, dedicated workers and the history of Cortec with Spooner, he made the decision to rebuild.

"It has been very expensive for me," he said. "The insurance covered part of it, but in total this is costing nearly \$5 million."

A county supervisor who did not want to be identified said he believes one of the reasons the community has supported Cortec is the way Miksic and the Cortec organization supported the injured men and their families.

And the support continues. Vignetti said Cortec continues to hire a counselor who meets with any worker processing the after-effects of the explosion.

"Just the sound of the cans going through the machines puts some on edge because it reminds them of what occurred right before the explosion," she said.

Miksic and Vignetti both say the workers' welfare is first priority in bringing back the plant.

"We have made Aaron [Merchant] our safety manager, and we have a corporate safety committee working to make sure we are completely in compliance with OSHA's [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] standards," said Miksic.

"This is going to be the state-of-the-art facility, more efficient and much more safer. We are going to use every safety device out there, top-notch."

Miksic said the new efficiencies will make the Spooner plant better positioned to chase large contracts that it did not previously have the capacity to compete for.

"I am talking about filling up to 15.9 million cans a year," he said. "That means there are contracts even in Japan I can go after now. We will have four times the capacity of the old plant."

Although the new plant is not fully operational, Vignetti said the plant is operating at 75 percent efficiency as it brings the new machinery into the production process.

For those who remember the old plant, a walk-through in the new one gives the sense of being in a different space. The machinery is brand-spanking new. There are more enclosed rooms. It looks very clean for a production facility.

Miksic said within days after the explosion the company worked to fill orders, sometimes manually.

"We had contracts which we had to honor," he said. "I am so thankful to our people, who are so hardworking and dedicated."

Vignetti said the company was hit with a "double whammy": first the explosion, and then the slower economy. Cortec went through phases of reducing hours, then laying off a percentage of the staff, and then, recently, cutting the staff's wages by 10 percent.

"Everyone who has bought in has experienced a little pain," said Vignetti.

Cortec had a few quarters in the red before, she said, but "we stopped the bleeding" and now the company is back in the black.

"Before the explosion we were growing at 17 percent clip that year," she said, "and now we are holding our own."

Vignetti and Miksic are optimists who say the silver lining in the March 18, 2008, explosion is that now Spooner has a world-class plant poised to send product all over the world.

"We have been in discussion with the RustOleum people," said Vignetti. "We are hoping we can still land a big contract with them."

Miksic also is very positive about a product called EcoAir, an aerosol can that does not use propellant but instead uses compressed air. He said compressed air is much more of a "green product" and is much safer.



"We are also coming out of this stronger as an organization," Miksic said. "Our metal was really tested and our toughness and our ability. We are better because we came through this terrible time, and now we are stronger and harder. The teamwork was unbelievable considering what we had to go through. Our team has been great!"

Cortec gave all workers a paid day off last Wednesday, March 18, to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the explosion.

Open house

Vignetti said Cortec will hold an open house of the new facility for the public in the future, possibly in May.

Thinking big. The Cortec staff is ready to go into full production. They include (top, from left to right) Ed Bertges, Dawn Farely, Roger Hanson, Jeremiah Johnson, Jay Johnson, Chuck Tinsley, Corey Labonte, Erin Lester, Aaron Merchant, (not pictured) Ryan Wohlk; and (bottom, from left) Anna Vignetti, vice chief executive officer and chief operations officer; Cortec owner and President Boris Miksic; and his wife, Ines Miksic. Photos by Frank Zufall