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News

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Close to customers

Company's Pulaski County plant does \$15 million a year in sales

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by Joan Tupponce



Location was the driving force behind Mar-Bal Inc.'s decision in 1996 to open a manufacturing plant in Pulaski County. The Ohio-based company was looking for an area convenient to its customers in the Carolinas.

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HUMANA.

"The owners, the Balogh family, fell in love with Southwest Virginia," says Ron Poff, Mar-Bal's manager of new business development. "It's close to our customers, as well as to the interstates [I-77 and I-81] and the work force in the area, especially from a training standpoint with New River Community College nearby."

The company manufactures thermoset, a polymer material used in custom-molded parts and composites for the electrical, appliance and industrial marketplaces. It's particularly useful in applications where high heat or fire resistance is required, such as oven handles, oven consoles and circuit breakers.

"We take a recipe and compound our own raw materials for thermoset composites. For example, we mold large switch gear housings for electrical breakers," Poff says. "All of our raw materials and finished goods have to be UL approved."

The 54,000-square-foot plant near Dublin is one of three manufacturing plants owned by Mar-Bal. The other plants are located in Chagrin Falls, Ohio, and Cuba, Mo. In addition, the company has a Center for Technical Excellence in Chagrin Falls dedicated to research and development.

Since opening the Virginia plant, Mar-Bal has added new equipment. There's high-speed injection molding with robotic automation along with a machine that allows the company to do secondary processing or extra finishing. The Dublin staff has grown from 20 to 120 employees, representing nearly half of the company's overall work force of 335. "Our sales have grown exponentially over the years," Poff says. "We are currently doing about \$15 million out of the Virginia plant."

The company's largest foreign competitors are in Mexico, China and India. Mar-Bal has been successful in competing with those lower-cost countries by investing in automation and the skill sets of its employees.

Another sales plus: Mar-Bal's raw materials are a proprietary product. "We are able to leverage that," Poff says.

In 2010 the Virginia plant became an ISO 9001:2008 registered company, an industry standard certification that is difficult to attain. The standard shows that a company has made an investment in addressing technical requirements and quality checks. "It differentiates us from our competitors," Poff says.

There are many aspects of Southwest Virginia that appeal to Poff, especially the abundance of outdoor activities such as fishing, hiking and boating. The area is home to both New River Trail and Claytor Lake state parks. The 472-acre Claytor Lake State Park features everything from camping to swimming in the 21-mile-long Claytor Lake, just minutes away from Mar-Bal. "Being close to the lake is a way for us to showcase the area's beauty," Poff says.

The area economy

Pulaski County, including Dublin, has a transitioning economy, moving from textiles and furniture production to high-performance manufacturing. In the past decade, the county has lost 5,000 jobs in textile and furniture manufacturing but has seen gains in other areas. Large employers include Volvo with approximately 1,700 employees and James Hardie Building Products with about 250 employees. Other major employers include Xaloy, which manufactures large screws for thermoforming machines (which heat plastic to a pliable temperature), and Phoenix Packaging Operations LLC, a subsidiary of Phoenix Packaging Group that makes thermoformed rigid plastic packaging for customers such as Keurig, Colgate, Green Mountain Coffee and General Mills. The county also soon will gain Dove Vinyl Windows, which is expanding to Pulaski. Currently, the Pulaski area has five government-owned industrial parks as well as three privately owned industrial parks.

Where to stay

With a location near two major interstates, the area is home to several chain accommodations such as Hampton Inn and Comfort Inn. For those who prefer a quaint bed and breakfast, there's the 130-year-old, 10,000-square-foot Rockwood Manor in Dublin. It offers gourmet breakfast, wrap-around porches and clawfoot tubs along with whirlpool baths.

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