

Made in Tompkins: e2e Materials turns research into sustainable composite materials

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ITHACA -- e2e Materials foresees buildings constructed and furnished with renewable sustainable materials that require less energy to produce and avoid harmful chemicals in their fabrication.

The Ithaca-based company uses research on green composites developed at Cornell University in the early 1990s.

e2e, which stands for "Earth-to-Earth" to reflect its sustainability, uses locally produced and renewable fibers from plants, such as kenaf, that are processed with soy-based resin to make materials used in paneling and cabinets.

Kenaf is a type of mallow indigenous to West Africa used to make engineered wood and other fiber products such as paper. According to Patrick Govang, CEO of e2e Materials, e2e's process requires a third of the energy involved in producing standard wood, and are free of harmful chemicals such as formaldehyde.

Anil Netravali, a professor of human ecology at Cornell, first thought of producing a company that makes green composites in 2002. Netravali was looking for a way to replace petroleum-reinforced composites in building. Govang, then the director for the Cornell Center for Materials Research, started the company in 2006.

"In addition to the benefits that the technology brings to the marketplace and the products it replaces, it does so with the very competitive way to produce it," Govang said.

Govang said such practices not only were good for the environment, but saved money in transportation costs, enabling the products to be sold more cheaply.

"If you really want to be able to make significant change, you have to develop products that are cost competitive," he said.

e2e's building materials are used in products such as furniture and skateboards. California-bred Comet Skateboards opened manufacturing operations in Ithaca in late 2007 to be near the supplier of resin and related technology used in its skateboards.

E2e's materials were used to make wall paneling, kitchen cabinets and a reception desk for Syracuse University's Center for Excellence, which has achieved Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Platinum certification for reducing energy consumption and environmental impact.

E2e has four employees: Govang; Netravali; Jason Salfi, president of Comet Skateboards; and James B. Macons, executive vice president.

Zachary Shulman, managing partner of Cayuga Venture Fund, which invests in e2e, said the quality of materials was most important to customers, and sustainable materials needed to be well made.

"Builders are still going to use materials that are high quality, but are competitively priced," he said. "So I think having them green is an added benefit."

Shulman said sustainability was one of many factors he considered when deciding to invest in a business, and that profit was also necessary. "e2e's aspirations are to become profitable as it grows, and if that was not the case, it would not be able to be sustained," he said.

Govang said the recession has forced companies like his to do soul-searching regarding their purpose

"Emerging from that stronger has been rewarding," Govang said. "Not easy but rewarding."

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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