



Loma strikes it rich with plastic road mat

Wood planks getting the ax on oil fields

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CARENCRO, LA. — Paul Seaux and his son Ken tell people they were too ignorant about plastics to see its limitations.

Instead, the pair — with no plastics experience — created a new molding business, Loma Co., and a product that had never before been attempted successfully: a two-piece, plastic road

test the product before the plant started.”

Such was the unusual genesis of Loma, a new compression molder that is bringing plastics to the swampy marshes where oil and gas is drilled.

The company's plastic mats replace hardwood, the material of choice for oil and gas field roads for more than 75 years, said Paul Seaux, a former oil industry consultant who is now Loma president and chief executive officer.

The planks cover the marshy bogs and sunken mud where 18-wheel trucks pass over roads as long as 5 miles. The hardwood is nailed down in pre-fabricated sections.

But wood confounds those who must use it, he said. Loma's idea was to create a plastic mat that stays in place and lasts decades instead of a couple of years, Seaux said.

“There are problems created with wood,” Seaux said during an Oct. 29 interview at the company. “Nails get stuck in feet, the wood tears

up ankles, pieces come up loose and damage vehicles. You have to have a crew on-site almost every day to repair loose or rotten boards.”

Ken Seaux, a former safety agent for an oil-field general road contractor, said the pair started four years ago with only an idea.

Now, the product, a little more than a year old in its present design, has the attention of the U.S. Defense Department and one of the world's largest waste-disposal companies.

And Loma — an acronym for Louisiana oil field mats — has recorded sales of \$26 million in its first year. The company would like to license the technology to others wishing to build road-mat manufacturing plants, while the father-and-son inventors move to other ideas.

The road-mat idea was a risk in execution.

“We worked backward,” said

Ken Seaux, Loma vice president of operations. “We had the product idea sold before we knew how to make it happen. Now, we can have a new plant up and running inside 12 months. Most people still don't know how we did it.”

The pair started the project four years ago. It nearly fell through several times, when suppliers and technical consultants failed to forward its progress. And because the idea was not fully patented, the pair had to be careful not to divulge too much of their plan.

The 55,000-square-foot, three-building operation started commercial production in October 1998. Recently, it began producing four mats every 45 minutes and uses 105,000 pounds of material a day. The plant will run at full capacity next year, Paul Seaux said.

The mat design features a honeycombed inner piece with a flat, outer lip surrounding the mat. Two pieces, each weighing 520 pounds, are welded together into one 14-foot-by-8-foot mat.

Pressing Systems Ltd., a turnkey plant designer based in Richmond Hill, Ontario, helped develop the unconventional plant setup.

It includes a method to mold eight pieces simultaneously. The stacked molds are heated, and then cooled, by contact with steel platens in a press. Parts handling at the press is fully automated.

The parts are directed to a cleanup and welding system and then sent to a storage area. The perimeter of each mat is welded with 15 fasteners attached to the body structure.

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mat that tips the scales at just more than 1,000 pounds.

They opened a highly unusual \$20 million plant last year in Carencro. They used custom-built compression molding equipment, shuttling molds on what looks like an elevator lift, inside an automated plant that runs like a heavy, metal carousel. Experts told them their molding process would never work.

Through trial and error, they concocted a proprietary blend of high density polyethylene. Several plastics consultants told them it would fail upon molding.

And they decided to use a 7,000-pound aluminum mold, the sheer size of which had not been seen in the industry. The mold measures 94 inches by 166 inches, said Tom Meisels, vice president of tool shop FGL Precision Works Ltd. of Concord, Ontario.

“Nobody in the world had seen anything quite like this plant,” said Meisels, whose company built the molds. “A lot of mold makers would be intimidated. It was a very scary project; no machines even existed that could

