

Thermopolis firm gets grant to develop bentonite product

By JEFF GEARINO
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THERMOPOLIS — A Thermopolis company has received a grant from the state's Science, Technology and Energy Authority to help develop a new product made from Wyoming bentonite.

The product — called ET Formula 1 and developed by ET Ventures, Inc. — is billed by company officials as an environmentally-safe way to remove toxic hydrocarbons from wastewater streams.

Under the agreement, the STEA will invest \$120,000 to help ETV design, develop, test and manufacture the new use of bentonite, said Pat Neary, STEA's executive director.

If successful, officials hope the venture could help revitalize the state's bentonite industry, which has suffered from declines in oil drilling.

Bentonite is a silicate-type clay that is often used as a drilling mud for oil and gas exploration.

It is also manufactured into adhesives, cements and ceramic fillers.

The patented product will have a "dramatic impact upon how business and industry around the world handle their effluent discharge," said ETV executive vice-president Stuart Forrest.

ET Formula 1 is made from sodium bentonite and is currently being manufactured in small quantities at the Wyo-Ben facility in Lucerne, Forrest said.

Neary said the grant "holds great promise to help diversify Wyoming's minerals economy.

Plant expansion

Don Jackson, director of the Thermopolis/Hot Springs County Economic Development Company, said ETV several years ago developed a new formula for "disciplining bentonite to adsorb only toxic hydrocarbons."

The product does not absorb hydrocarbons, but rather adsorbs them, which leaves no byproduct from the process, Jackson said in a telephone interview.

"What they've essentially done is to add value to a product which we have been sweeping off the porches up here in Thermopolis," Jackson said.

Forrest said the STEA agreement will allow Wyo-Ben to begin expanding capacity at its Lucerne plant immediately. New equipment will be installed later this month, he said.

ET Formula 1 can be used effectively in oil drilling to remove oil and other hydrocarbons from water where traditional oil-water separators have had limited success, Forrest said in a release.

Wyoming, he noted, has many water-drive wells that generate large amounts of oily water.

Forrest said oily water can be passed through filtration systems using the formula and will return clean enough for use in other commercial applications.

Forrest said the company is also exploring products designed

exclusively to remove pesticides and herbicides from groundwater.

Potentially, Jackson said ET Formula 1 also could be used for swabbing out the oil-holding bilges of ocean-going supertankers.

Even highway spills could be covered with the product and scooped "up like cat litter, and it would be safe enough to bury in a sanitary landfill," he said.

Taxpayer assurances

Neary said the \$120,000 matching grant to ETV is consistent with STEA's charter that calls for providing assistance for technology-related businesses in Wyoming.

ETV is the kind of company "that probably couldn't go to the bank and get a conventional financing package," Neary said.

"And yet they do have some financial resources, they do have a patented product and they do have a considerable investment of their own," he said.

Neary said the STEA grant will essentially be used to help furnish the Lucerne plant with laboratory facilities which will allow ETV to customize its formula for different applications.

"So in a sense we're helping them to diversify their product through better chemistry," he said.

Neary also said the Wyoming taxpayer is at "minimal risk" with the grant because the agreement is secured by the company's fixed assets and the amount is matched by ETV in cash.

"We're trying to minimize the risk to the taxpayer by asking for 150 percent collateral," he said. "We're giving them \$120,000 and asking for \$180,000 in security."

Neary said Wyoming needs to diversify all types of industry, including the minerals industry. "What we like about this is that it does expand an existing industry in the state," he said.

Wyo coal continues to boom

LARAMIE (AP) — Wyoming has seen its third straight year of double-digit percentage growth in coal production, according to a state report.

Dan Vogler, head of the coal section of the Wyoming State Geological Survey, said Wyoming's 1995 coal production should total more than 263 million tons.

Vogler said that would be about

11 percent growth from 1994 levels. The growth primarily was due to the need for cleaner-burning fuel as required by the 1990 Clean Air Act amendments, he said.

The second phase of the Clean Air Act will go into effect in 2000. Vogler said he expects the second phase to boost Wyoming's coal production to more than 320 million tons annually.

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