



Etched In Stone

Technological innovations allow Alberta producer of concrete and stone products to displace cumbersome metal strapping methods with stretchwrapping film

Since it was founded in 1979, **Expocrete's** overriding goal and mission has been a simple one: to be a leading Canadian manufacturer and marketer of concrete products. Headquartered in Spruce Grove, Alta., a short drive out of Edmonton, the up-and-coming company also has established offices in Calgary recently, as it continues to seek to accommodate a growing market for its stone creations.

If you live within its geographic reach, Expocrete is the company you want to call on if you need to enhance your home residence or business with value-added concrete creations such as retaining walls, interlocked paving stones, sidewalk blocks, and other such stone- and concrete-based fixtures.

The company employs about 40 people at its 17,000-square-foot production plant—the payroll count rises as high as 55 staff during the peak summer hours—to manufacture and ship between 400 and 600 palletloads of product per day.

Like many other companies in its line of work, Expocrete has recently opted to dispense with the traditional method of metal-strapping its finished loads with stretchwrapping technology.

“Through the 12-month season, and dealing with rough terrain and high production, it is the only way that our product can make it to the customer in good condition,” Expocrete plant manager Al Sterling told *Canadian Packaging*.

“Our industry is constantly growing, and manpower is harder and harder to find,” Sterling expands. “By going to fully automatic stretchwrappers we can increase production and reduce our dependence on labor.”

Aside from the labor-saving considerations, there were other factors which influenced Expocrete's decision to give stretchwrapping a go.

For one, says Sterling, the company's dealers prefer dealing with stretchwrapped loads because it is easier to handle stretchwrapped pallets, as opposed to dealing with strapped bundles with clamps.

Then, as always, there are the paramount bottom-line considerations, according to Sterling.

“Stretchwrap is cheaper per bundle than steel strapping,” says Sterling. “Automatic stretchwrapping capital cost is much less than for the automatic strapping equipment.”

Still, when it comes to strength, it can be difficult to wrap one's mind around the concept that stretchwrap can equal, or even exceed, the strength of steel strapping. And make no mistake: strength is of premium importance at Expocrete, where the skids of concrete products weigh an average of 3,000 pounds apiece.

But any and all such concerns were quickly put to rest with the recent installation of a model WCRT Tornado 200 stretchwrapper from **Wulftec International Inc.** of Ayers Cliff, Que. Acquired last year by the Greek-based industrial machinery conglomerate **M.J. Mallis Group**, Wulftec continues to maintain a 150-employee facility in Ayer's Cliff, Que., about 120 kilometers southeast of Montreal, which generates about \$27 million in annual revenues from the sale of stretchwrapping equipment and related accessories.

Calgary-based industrial products distributor **General Fasteners Ltd.**, which bills itself as a one-stop shop for packaging and shipping needs for western Canadian businesses, handled the installation of the WCRT Tornado 200 stretchwrapper at the

Expocrete facility.

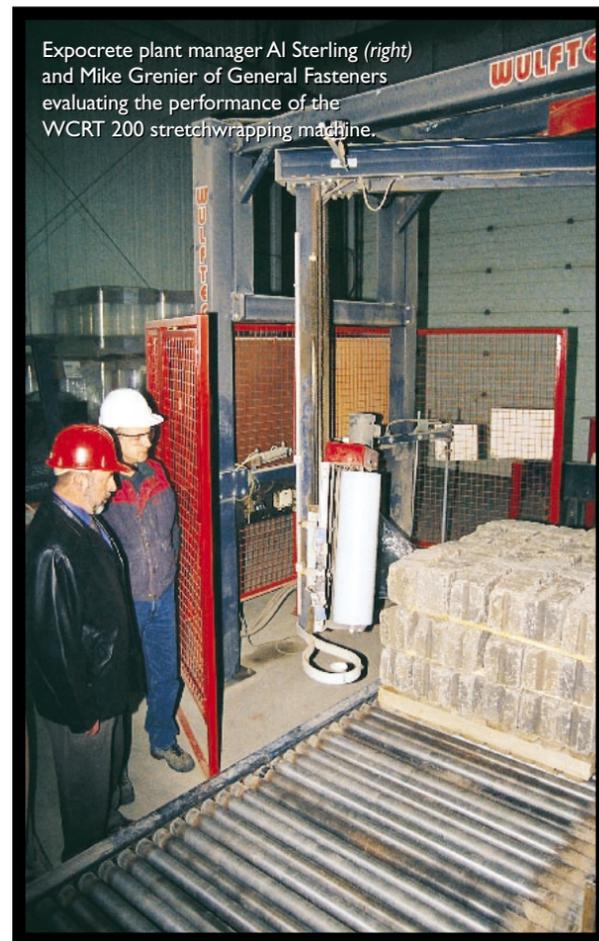
While all stretchwrappers may come across to novices as variation on the same general theme, those familiar with the technology are quick to point to the so-called “roping” function found on the Tornado 200 as a unique, productivity-enhancing feature.

The roping application involves two wheels on pneumatic cylinders, which are fired up to condense the full web of the stretch film into an actual rope made entirely of stretchwrap.

Secondly, there's the wrap itself. Expocrete currently utilizes 30-inch-wide rolls of 1.2-mil-thick TYCO TT1-3012 stretch film. This particular film is called a “cast” film, which is to say that it is manufactured through a process whereby the extruded liquid plastic passes through a series of dies—making it considerably stronger when applied in one direction.

While the cast film does not boast the overall stretch capabilities of two-way blown film, it has superior strength capabilities, which is just what you want to hear when you're shipping heavyweight blocks of concrete.

“This film has proven to be every consistent in its stretch capabilities and holding power on their (Expocrete's) concrete block products,” claims General Fasteners' Mike Grenier. “When it is roped by the Wulftec wrappers, it is virtually impossible to tear or break, and it can actually be seen pulling the blocks in



Expocrete plant manager Al Sterling (right) and Mike Grenier of General Fasteners evaluating the performance of the WCRT 200 stretchwrapping machine.



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Loaded skids of concrete products can weigh as much as 3,000 pounds each.

to the center of the load if they are protruding from the edge of the pallet base.”

All in all, such innovations in distribution and shipping technology are certainly bound to help Expocrete in its ongoing quest to expand and reach new customers.

After all, the company says it is planning to have another Wulftec stretchwrapping machine installed on its premises by the end of June and, although it may not be quite carved in stone, that is about as good a ring of endorsement as it gets in this business. □

For more information on:

Wulftec International Inc.
General Fasteners Ltd.

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