

Hidden treasure

Fortune 500 company quietly exceeding expectations here

Tucked away in the Henderson Southside Industrial Park is a small plant with a big reputation.

Sonoco Products, a \$3.7 billion Fortune 500 company with more than 330 locations worldwide, is a leader in the packaging industry. Sonoco Phoenix, a division of the parent company, produces easy-open metal ends here at its Henderson plant.

These aluminum and steel end caps can be found on a variety of canisters, such as those used for tennis balls, coffee grounds, and snack foods like Planters nuts.

Nearly one billion metal ends are manufactured at the local plant each year, and are then distributed around the world.

Such a major operation requires quite a large and diverse workforce, according to Plant Manager Wyatt Fritz. Sonoco Phoenix in Henderson currently employs about 120 workers, he said, in areas such as machine operation, maintenance, shipping, quality control and administration.

Fritz has been managing the Sonoco Phoenix plant in Henderson for about two and a half years but has worked for the company for more than 10 years. He transferred to the Henderson plant from the Sonoco operation in Wausau, Wisconsin, in 2005.

Fritz said his primary purpose is “to provide a safe environment for company employees and to lead the local plant in meeting division and corporate objectives.”

Safety has always been a major focal point for the company. The local plant was recognized in 2001 for becoming the first plant in Sonoco’s history to log more than 1.5 million injury-free man-hours. In June of 2007, the plant reached 1.2 million hours, roughly four and a half years without an incident. However, a cut to an employee’s forearm late in that month restarted the Henderson plant’s count.

“We are back to almost 100,000 injury-free hours right now,” Fritz said, “and we’re shooting for another million and beyond.”

Fritz said safety is not simply a priority at the plant, “it’s our number one value. Our goal is always zero injuries.”

According to the plant manager, safety is achieved through the participation of its local workforce and by adhering to corporate and division safety guidelines that are stricter than the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) requirements.

“Employee involvement is the key to having an effective safety program,” Fritz said. “We all strongly believe in it.”

In addition to its focus on safety, the local plant has also been very progressive in its recycling efforts.

Fritz said a lot of the materials utilized in the plant – from scrap metal to pallets to cardboard – is eventually reused or recycled.

Sonoco Phoenix of Henderson has also been active in the local community. Every year, the plant sponsors a company golf scramble, which benefits Riverview School in Henderson.

“We donated over \$2,000 to Riverview this year,” said Roy Mays, shipping supervisor and environmental coordinator for the Henderson plant.

Mays began working for Sonoco Products more than 30 years ago as a press operator, when the plant was located on Bob Posey Street. The plant relocated to Ohio Drive in 1991.

Over the years, Mays has risen through the ranks, from press operator to his current administrative position.

And now, in keeping with the family tradition, Mays’ son, Stuart, has also joined the plant’s workforce.

“I worked here when (Stuart) was born,” Mays said, “and now my son feeds his family through Sonoco.”

It's really a great company to work for."

Mays added that at least 20 of the plant's current employees have more than 25 years of experience at the plant.

"Sonoco is one of the preferred jobs in the Tri-state area," he said. "We keep our employees."

Mays said the Henderson plant is very strong, and he can only think of one time in the local plant's history that it has had to lay off employees. He credits this success to Sonoco's ability to adapt and grow over time.

"We have had to change through the years to meet the needs of our core customers," Mays said. "We change as they change."

Recently, the plant has installed a new \$4 million state-of-the-art line that will begin production over the next few years.

Fritz said the new high-tech line will be safer and more efficient and will replace some of the older, more outdated equipment the plant currently uses in its operation.

"We have reached capacity on a few of our lines," the plant manager said. "This new line will have a higher capacity, which will allow us to serve more customers."

Fritz said the outlook for Sonoco Phoenix and the Henderson plant is very good.

"Our plant is quite prosperous," he said. "And I believe we are here to stay."

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