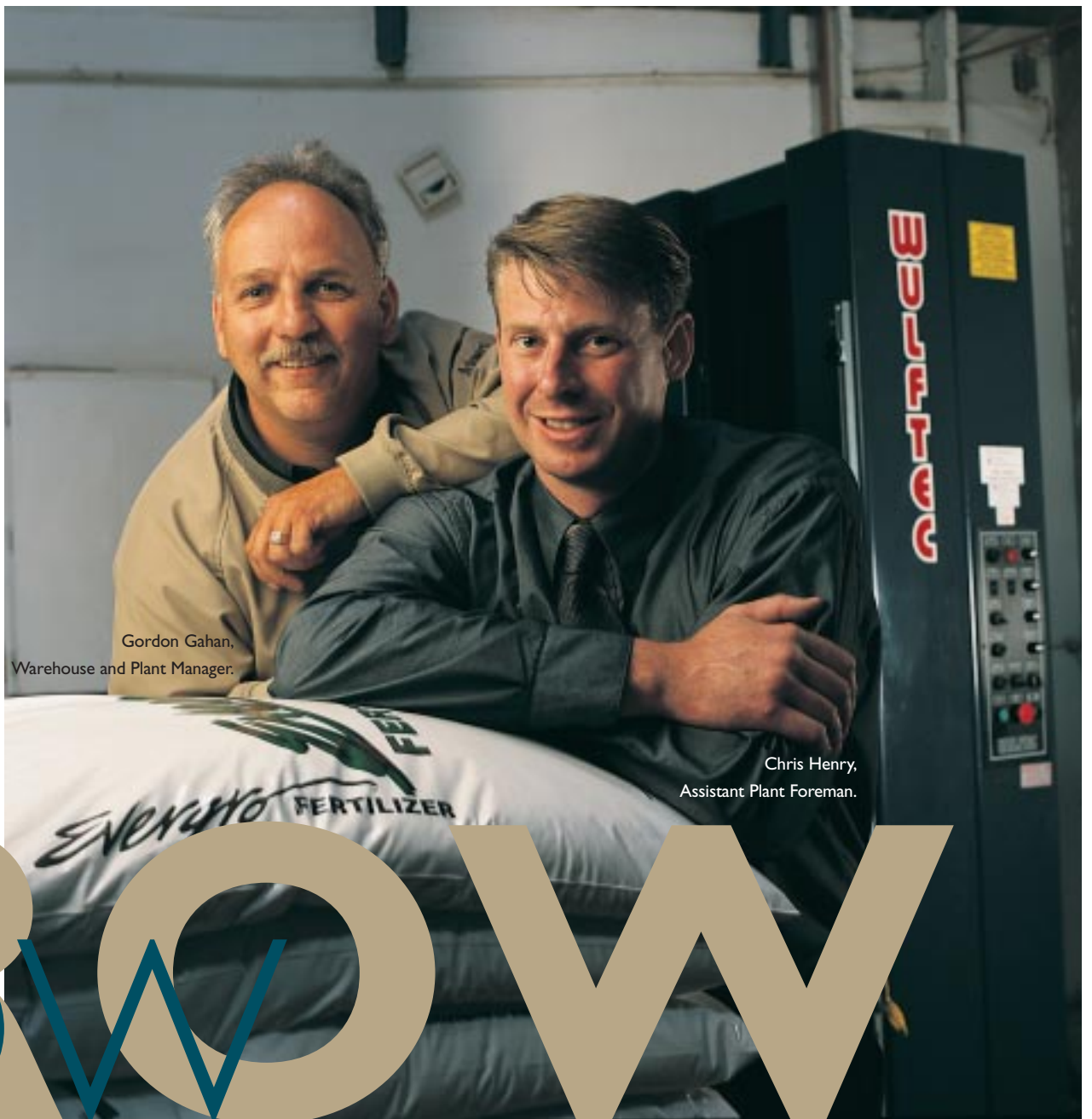


BY GEORGE GUIDONI, EDITOR  
PHOTOS BY DAVID ZAVITZ

Horticultural products  
manufacturer selects  
made-in-Canada  
stretchwrapping systems  
as part of comprehensive  
packaging operations upgrade



Gordon Gahan,  
Warehouse and Plant Manager.

Chris Henry,  
Assistant Plant Foreman.

# ROOM to GROW

Money doesn't just grow on trees, as everybody well knows, but there's plenty of green to be made in the business of helping trees, plants and vegetation of all sorts grow just right. You just have to be very, very good at it.

And if results speak for themselves, then **Evergro Group of Companies**—Delta, B.C.-based processor and distributor of horticultural products such as fertilizers, planting seeds and crop protection chemicals—has a lot of business growth ahead of it in the years to come. At least if the first quarter-century of the company's history is anything to go by.

Since it was originally incorporated in 1975 as **Agrico Sales Ltd.**, the former one-man, crop seeds merchant operation has grown into a well-integrated, multimillion-dollar enterprise comprised of three close-knit, but independently-operating businesses.

This troika is comprised of:

- **Evergro Products Inc.**, manufacturer of fertilizers and packager of retail horticultural products;
- **Evergro Canada Inc.**, specializing in lawn/turf maintenance (e.g. golf courses) products, agricultural field crop seedings, and crop protection agents;
- **Westgro Sales Inc.**, a joint venture with eastern Canada-based horticultural business counterpart **Plant Products Inc.**, specializing in products and systems for greenhouse and nursery farming.

With four additional branches in B.C. and another one in Calgary, the company distributes thousands of tonnes of its products throughout British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan, with clients ranging widely from the ranks of world-class golf courses to large gardening centers to tree-planting operations.

The three-pronged business model has served Evergro fabulously, according to product and marketing manager Bruce Vance, although it was never formally conceived as such from the start.

"It works quite well; I think we are quite unique in that we have shared employees, shared equipment, shared expenses and so on," says Vance. "It was thought originally that Westgro would spin off into its own company, but the arrangement of having three companies working under one roof has worked out really well—so well that we just continued on with it."

That shared roof will soon get much bigger, though, after the 100-plus-employee Evergro completes its move this fall to a much larger, 7.5-acre site just up the road from its current location.

"We're moving because of growth, we've run out of

space," says warehouse and plant manager Gordon Gahan, clearly delighted at the prospect of Evergro Products revving up production at a spanking new 27,000-square-foot facility—triple the size of the existing plant.

The big pending move has understandably been a topic of much discussion at the company over the last year, and in true Evergro fashion, everyone involved had their say.

"The first thing we did was gather employees from every facet of the company, sat down with all the committees, and talked about the things we would all want in the new facility," says Vance. "We covered the whole ground—things like production, distribution, accounting, administration, every aspect of it."

"Everyone at Evergro is always involved in making decisions in some way," he says.

In fact, Vance explains, the notion of employee empowerment has formed the core of Evergro's corporate philosophy from the outset, tracing right back to the company founders.

"One of the original co-owners once stated: 'The best I can do is spend time looking for really good people, provide them with what they need to do their job, create a very good working environment, and then leave them alone.'

"I think what that means is that we have always selected people that strive to do a good job and are always looking for ways to improve what they do, and that makes for very good morale around here."

"We have a very comprehensive benefits plan, we're always doing picnics, competitions and tournaments, all those things to provide an environment people want to be a part of. It's like a family here."

At any one time, says Vance, there are more than 2,000 different Evergro-made products out in the market, although the product mix is constantly changing due to the seasonal nature of many of the products.



The bag-filling operation at Evergro Products plant often goes through several changeovers per day to accommodate a wide range of bag sizes shipped from the facility.

## Stretchwrapping

Subsequently, the packaging of finished products is a very important and vital part of Evergro operations, especially since Evergro does “about 99 per cent of all the packaging we ourselves need,” says Vance.

About 5,000 square feet in the new facility has been dedicated exclusively for warehousing all the packaging supplies, he adds.

“And that includes everything from little bags, boxes, pails and buckets right up to bulk bags, which can hold a full tonne of product, and everything in between,” says Vance. “We also do a lot of private label jobs, and we have developed enough expertise even to help them with the creative design aspects. If we can’t do the creative ourselves, we’ll contract that job out, but we have everything we need here to build the package itself, whatever it may be.”

Vance says he expects many further improvements in packaging operations and efficiency to start kicking in after the move to the new plant—which will house seven different packaging lines—is completed.

“It goes back to the employee involvement again,



Evergro Products does virtually all of the packaging of its finished retail product right on the premises, utilizing a wide range of formats and sizes to offer an extensive product portfolio of about 2,000 different items.

input from people who will be doing the [packaging-related] jobs,” he says. “It will be a huge improvement; we will be employing many new technologies that will help us produce higher-quality products quicker.

“It will not be a totally automated plant, because it has been determined that this will move us away from our current advantage of being flexible.

“A lot of days, we’d run 10-kilogram bags for a couple of hours, then an hour of 25 kilos, then switch to a 50-kilo bag ... automation just doesn’t lend itself to that, which is what we need to do a lot of our custom work.”

An important part of the new packaging infrastructure at Evergro has already been in place at the current site for the last 20 months—stretchwrapping countless pallet loads of all types of product.

Manufactured in Canada by **Wulftec International** and installed by Wulftec’s exclusive western Canada distrib-



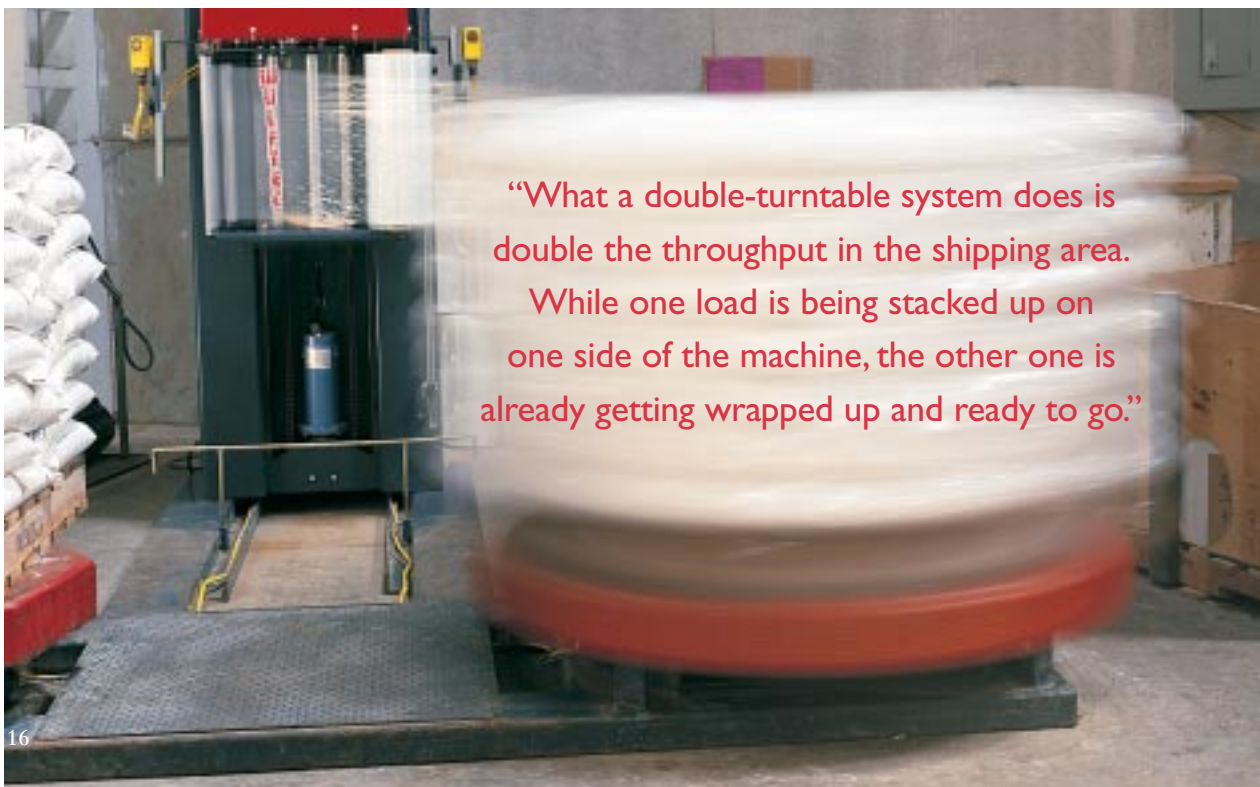
General Fasteners equipment sales specialist Mike Johnson (center) says he fully expected the Wulftec stretchwrapping systems to rise up to the challenges of high-throughput operation at Evergro.

utor **General Fasteners Ltd.**, the three stretchwrappers—including the star attraction, dual-turntable WHPD-200 model—have already more than earned their keep, according to fertilizer plant foreman Terry Oiom.

The dual-turntable model in particular has been a real hit with the plant workers, Oiom says, because it had eliminated many bottlenecks encountered with earlier single-table models, including the piling up of pallets in the shipping area and the downtime interludes during a pallet change.

“During peak (spring) seasons, there are four people on the production line, and the wrapping [of pallets] goes on all the time,” he explains. “Now, forklift operator puts a pallet on one side, and while that one is wrapping, he puts another pallet on the other side, takes the first one into storage, and comes back to do it again.

“So we’re always wrapping a pallet load, without



“What a double-turntable system does is double the throughput in the shipping area. While one load is being stacked up on one side of the machine, the other one is already getting wrapped up and ready to go.”

stopping. With a single load, there was always a backlog building up—not any more.”

Oiom says the system enables the shipping area to wrap 25 to 30 fully-loaded pallet loads per hour, or two loads per minute, in continuous operation.

“We are more than happy with it, we haven’t had any problems at all,” he states. “There’s regular maintenance, of course, but no electrical problems whatsoever.”

The machine’s heavy-duty, structural steel construction, as well as a sound design with fully-enclosed electrical/electronic components, make it especially well-suited for the working environment at Evergro, adds Vance.

“We’re dealing with fertilizer, and a lot of fertilizer products are very much like salt, very corrosive, so having enclosed electronics is very good for us, because it can get very dusty in there.”

The dual-turntable Wulftec machine is a quantum-leap improvement over the previous, 12-year-old stretchwrapper, says Oiom, which has been consigned to the back of the warehouse as a back-up since the arrival of WHPD-200.

The dual-table feature of WHPD-200 virtually clinched the equipment selection process after a couple of demonstration runs, Oiom recalls.

“With the older system, it was quite the job, manually, trying to feed your film through the rollers, whereas with this [Wulftec] system, you just pull the carriage, drop in the film roll, and it pretty much feeds itself. It’s very automated that way.

“We no longer have to cut the stretchwrap film manually, this one does it itself. Basically, all we do is pull on the film and stretch it around once to get it started, hit the [start] button, and it pretty well becomes self-working.

“The employees love the new system, it’s just so much easier to work with,” Oiom adds. “We didn’t really set out to buy a Canadian-made stretchwrapping system, we simply wanted to buy the best, and the fact that it’s Canadian-made is a nice bonus.

“We had some very good referrals regarding the systems from other companies using it.”

Manufactured by Wulftec International in Ayers Cliff, Que., Wulftec machinery enjoys an enviable reputation in industry circles for service reliability, low maintenance requirements, easy programmability, and ample load capacity.

The WHPD-200 comes loaded with all the advanced technological features that Wulftec is renowned for, including full PLC control, production capacity of up to 55 loads per hour, load capacity of up to 4,000 pounds, a patented 20-inch NO-THREAD powered pre-stretch carriage, a forklift-compatible base, and a long list of other value-enhancing extras.

Mike Johnson, equipment sales specialist with General Fasteners Ltd. who oversaw the Wulftec installation at Evergro, says he is pleased, but not surprised, with the thumbs-up verdict on the machine’s performance so far.

“It is a superb machine; I knew they would find it perfect for their needs,” Johnson says. “What a double-turntable system does is double the throughput in the shipping area. While one load is being stacked up on one side of the machine, the other one is already getting wrapped up and ready to go.

“It’s a machine built for high-throughput operations, which is exactly what they have at Evergro. We ship three full pallet loads of stretchfilm to their plant each month, and they use it all up.

“We [General Fasteners] are the only distributor of Wulftec equipment in western Canada,” he says, “and I’ll tell you, that’s a big competitive plus for us in this marketplace.” □

For more information on:

Wulftec International

Circle 408

General Fasteners

Circle 409