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Made-in-Sebringville lagoon crawler to be featured on Discovery Channel

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by JIM ALGIE

When Nuhn Industries Inc. of Sebringville began building its self-propelled Lagoon Crawler agitation pump 18 months ago, the company set its marketing sights on large-scale livestock operations mostly in the United States.

Since then, it has sold the remote-controlled, four-wheel-drive "agitation boats" to customers in Russia, China, the United States, Alberta and Manitoba. By early August the company had completed more than 100 units. Now, it's cranking out the US $165,000 units at the rate of two weekly and beginning to find Ontario buyers, vice-president Ian Nuhn said in an interview on Wednesday.

While large-scale livestock operations and the manure contractors who serve them remain likely targets, the 113-year-old family-owned business has discovered unexpected demand in surprising places, Nuhn said by cell phone from Drummondville, Quebec. He was there showing company wares at the nearby Expo-Champs farm show.

"Originally we designed it for the big, 30-acre lagoons in California; but we're finding more success in smaller pits around home," Nuhn said.

As well, mining operators have begun to show interest in the equipment as a way to manage settling pond sediments.

In August, Nuhn Industries opened a 34,000 sq. ft. addition to the company's Sebringville factory near Stratford. The company now has 85 employees and an annual growth rate Nuhn estimated at 40 per cent. He attributes a significant share of the growth to the development of the crawler and describes it as a major addition to the company's existing lines of manure handling equipment.

Newspaper coverage of the company's expansion led to interest from Discovery Channel producers of The Daily Planet, a science magazine program. An item on the Lagoon Crawler is to appear Thursday, Sept. 3 at 7 p.m. during the program's Extreme Machines Week feature series.

Established in 1902 by Ian's great-grandfather Simon Nuhn, a blacksmith, the family company began specializing in manure handling equipment in the mid-1900s under his father, Dennis Nuhn, who remains the major shareholder and is the company's president. Ian's mother, Marilyn, his sister, an uncle, aunt and brother-in-law are also involved.

Currently in charge of equipment design, Ian has about 12 years with the company. As the only family member who knew how to run a computer at the time, he became involved after the acquisition of a computerized plasma cutter. With a patent pending on the company's "amphibious agitator" crawler, Nuhn has continued high hopes for the device.

"We have about five in Ontario and we don't even have lagoons," Nuhn said. The increasing use of sand as bedding in large, dairy bans can lead to liquid manure-handling hitches which the Lagoon Crawler's powerful pump can help to avoid by keeping the sand in suspension, even in straight-sided manure tanks, he said.

The unit's 6.7 litre, 275 HP, Cummins diesel engine drives the vehicle's wheels and its 10-inch, 10,000 gal. per minute pump while also propelling the vessel when it's afloat on foam filled flotation tanks.

"It's a floating, amphibious, remote controlled agitation boat. It's a completely different product line and we had to learn a lot of things we didn't know from our experience making pumps and spreaders," he said.

"It's almost like a business on its own . . . and they're selling like crazy," Nuhn said. BF

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