

# Rubber & Plastics News

April 6, 2020 | \$99 per year, \$4.50 per copy

The Rubber Industry's International Newspaper

## COVID-19 The coronavirus pandemic

# Reacting to the global pandemic



R.D. Abbott is continuing its operations at its headquarters in Cerritos, Calif.

## AirBoss defense unit gains contract for PAPR systems

By Mike McNulty  
Rubber & Plastics News Correspondent  
NEWMARKET, Ontario—AirBoss of America Corp. has moved to the front lines in the battle against the coronavirus.

The company's AirBoss Defense Group received a contract March 31 from the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency for the manufacture of 100,000 FlexAir Powered Air Purifying Respirator (PAPR) systems, 600,000 filters and other related accessories.

A compact, lightweight system with an onboard lithium-ion battery installed in a waist-mounted blower unit, the FlexAir PAPR system uses two high-efficiency particle filters simultaneously, providing protection against particulates, aerosols and biohazards and offering defense against viruses like COVID-19, the company said.

Wearers of the system are protected by having contaminated air purified by filtration media mounted on a PAPR blower unit and delivered via a lightweight breathing hose to the user's head cover, the firm said.

"This is really an unprecedented situation," said Chris Bitsakakis,



The FlexAir PAPR system is both lightweight and compact, and is designed to make use of two high efficiency filters, which the company said can protect against particulates, aerosols and biohazards, including viruses like COVID-19.

president and COO of AirBoss Defense Group. "We're doing everything we can to help. The (coronavirus) spread puts us in the middle of ground zero, but we'll make this  
*See AirBoss, page 21*

## Rubber firms doing best to remain essential

By Jim Johnson  
Rubber & Plastics News Staff

Safe to say that the typical American doesn't give more than a passing thought to rubber most days. But the current COVID-19 pandemic is proving just how essential rubber, and the products made from the material, are to the country and the world.

At a time when some businesses deemed non-essential by federal and state governments are trying to skirt the rules and guidelines, those in the rubber industry have a mandate to continue churning out products or providing services.

Automotive and transportation sectors remain a key component to keeping the country operating, and the medical and industrial segments use rubber in a wide variety of applications. But the essential uses of rubber are wide and deep.

Guidelines from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security not only call on these essential industries to stay open during the pandemic, they also remind them of their obligation to help during these tough times.

"If you work in a critical infrastructure industry, as defined by the Department of  
*See Firms, page 21*

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# Tudertecnica in the eye of COVID-19 storm



From left, Pete Cannan, Andrea Deregibus and Andrea Compostella represent Tudertecnica at the 2018 NAHAD convention.

By Bruce Meyer  
Rubber & Plastics News Staff

PADUA, Italy—Andrea Deregibus and the 100-plus staff members at his specialty hose company have seen firsthand the devastation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy.

While no employees of Tubigomma Deregibus s.r.l., located in Padua in the Northeastern part of Italy, have tested positive for coronavirus—nor have members of their families—neither have they been immune to the impact of the virus.

"All of us, we know someone who is either ill or in the hospital, or is dead," said Deregibus, general manager and chief operating officer of the firm, which does

business as Tudertecnica. "One friend, who worked with us in the past, we found out last week died from coronavirus. Yesterday, we talked with another friend, who has been in the hospital three weeks."

As of April 2, the country had seen more than 105,000 positive cases and in excess of 12,000 deaths. The nationwide lockdown was set to last until at least April 13.

Yet through it all, the company has remained operational as it appeals an order that came down March 25 from Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, which Deregibus said effectively shut down virtually all rubber manufacturing in Italy.

Tudertecnica appealed the ruling March 26, asking  
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# FRX Polymers donates masks to fight virus

By Jim Johnson

Rubber & Plastics News Staff

CHELMSFORD, Mass.—A maker of flame-retardant specialty chemicals is helping as the world faces the COVID-19 crisis.

Chelmsford-based FRX Polymers Inc. said it is working with the Chinese American Association of Lexington, Mass., to purchase disposable masks that have been donated to nursing homes, medical and health organizations.

"This is just one little thing that we're doing. But there's lots going on and a lot of people are stepping up and helping," FRX CEO Mark Lebel said.

FRX is teaming with not only CAAL, but also the Westar Chinese American Alliance in the Boston area to raise money to purchase and distribute personal protective equipment.

CAAL works to enrich and empower Chinese Americans in Lexington "through civic participation, school engagement, heritage sharing, and community service," FRX said. Westar is an alliance of similar Chinese American groups in the Boston area.

Lebel declined to say exactly how much his Chelmsford-based company has donated, indicating he does not want the narrative to be seen as an effort to grab attention. "We're just trying to do some good things. That's all," Lebel said.

Ina Jiang is vice president of sales and marketing at FRX Polymers. She said the effort started out as a way to provide PPE for a particularly susceptible group. "We were talking about how can we protect our senior group, our most vulnerable group," she said.

From there, the effort grew to include raising money to provide to hospitals



FRX teamed up with the Chinese American Association to buy and donate disposable masks.

and institutions also in need.

It's funny how a few months can flip the script.

It was not that long ago, Jiang and Leber said, that efforts were being made to find masks to ship to China to help that country deal with its coronavirus outbreak. Now this effort not only has raised money to buy supplies for local need, but organizers also have used their contacts in China to develop a list of qualified suppliers.

"That's gold to a purchasing manager. We're trying to get that list in the right hands in Massachusetts to help our hospitals out," Lebel said. "We're just trying to help out. In times like this, that's what it's all about."

Organizers of the effort hope to be able to help not only the large institutions in the region that need PPE help,

but also the smaller hospitals and institutions that do not have the buying power of the larger players.

Lebel pointed to a recent report that 150 medical workers had come down with the virus in the Boston area.

"That is just unacceptable that that is going on. We're screwed enough as is. We don't need our medical professionals going down," he said. "It's unbelievable that this is going on. We're only as good as our weakest link. If there is one hot spot in the country, it's going to spread everywhere. We're not going to have an economy unless we get rid of the virus."

"Everybody is so worried. So scared. Nobody is going out. Nobody is going to buy anything. We need our doctors and we need to make sure our doctors are safe. We're going to be able to get over this."

FRX Polymers makes halogen-free

polymeric flame retardants marketed under the Nofia brand name.

Applications include automotive under-the-hood parts, cushions and gaskets for electric vehicle battery packs; noise, vibration and harshness foams for various transportation parts; and gaskets for electrical components.

Jiang said the regional effort, including CAAL and Westar, had raised more than \$150,000 as of March 27. That has allowed for the donation of some 180,000 masks. And fundraising will continue.

FRX counts several Chinese Americans as part of the company's 30-member work force, so getting involved with the CAAL was an important step for the company, Lebel said.

This effort from FRX and CAAL comes at a time when there is a heightened safety concerns within the Chinese American community due to backlash regarding the origins of the virus. Jiang pointed to recent incidents of "anti-Asian" violence against people in New York City, Philadelphia, Los Angeles and Midland, Texas.

"I'm very concerned about the things happening in the U.S.," she said. "It's heartbreaking to see this kind of brutality in the U.S. While we're helping our residents here, helping our medical workers here, we want to remind everybody how the U.S. was founded, why we should always treat everybody fair. There should be no tolerance of behavior like that."

Lebel said it's important for all Americans to call out and push back against prejudice and xenophobic behavior.

"It has no place," he said. "It's awful that this goes on. But then you see the hope and people just stepping up and doing all kinds of good deeds."

## Tudertecnica

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ing for an exemption since 94 percent of its hoses are used in such strategic sectors as pharmaceutical, chemical, food and beverage, energy and others, said Deregibus. He discussed the situation in a March 30 telephone interview with *Rubber & Plastics News*, along with Andrea Compostella, the firm's marketing and sales manager, and Pete Cannon, the hose maker's marketing consultant in North America.

In support of its appeal, Tudertecnica collected 83 letters from distributors around the world, asking the Italian government to keep the factory operational to "continue to fill the supply chain of our essential products," Deregibus said.

One letter came from a distributor in China, saying Tudertecnica's rubber-covered PTFE hoses are used by the company to make a raw material which is used in a medicine to help fight coronavirus in China. Without it, Deregibus said the Chinese company would have to stop production.

As of April 2, Tudertecnica still was awaiting word on the appeal, and its 100,000-sq.-ft. factory remains operational.

Cannon said the firm's distributors in North America—the hose maker does business exclusively through distribution—have been extremely supportive, and were among those who drafted letters in support of the appeal.

"From a North American perspective, our customers are very aware of the severity of the outbreak affecting Italy," Cannon said. "The one word I would say is 'concern.' They are concerned about health, safety and recovery."

"They also indicated that it is critical for them to continue filling the pipeline and supply chain because Tudertecnica products are used in strategic and critical industries."

He added that the distributors in the U.S. with whom the hose maker works are in the "essential category," able to continue operations amid the flurry of shut-downs across many parts of the nation.

As Tudertecnica's specialty hoses are used in critical industries, Compostella said they also are not easily



Tudertecnica gathered letters of support from more than 80 customers as it fought to keep its hose plant open.

replaced. "Some products have really kind of unique constructions," he said, adding that other producers don't have equivalent products for substitution.

### COVID-19 hits radar

Deregibus said the pandemic really began to hit home in early March, when the Italian prime minister went on television to announce that everything in Italy would be shut down.

"At the time, I was out with my wife on bicycles," he said. "We were seeing all the bars and restaurants full of people. I was saying, 'I don't know if people understand there is something wrong here.'"

Some of the spread likely is because Italians are "social animals," he said.

"They go to restaurants, they go to bars, they go to discos," Deregibus said. "And they stay in the square. We live in the square. Now we live at home."

Little by little, Italy shut down. First it was the shops, then the companies.

Now the only allowable destinations are food stores, pharmacies and newsstands.

From a personal perspective, Deregibus said he has not seen his 83-year-old mother in about a month, since the day the country was locked down. He has kept his distance because the majority of the fatalities in Italy have involved elderly people, and he fears spreading some virus

to his mother.

"We are losing the people who really created and made Italy strong in the world," Deregibus said. "I just bring the food and take out the trash. I do not get in her house, but I do have a lady staying with her. It's never been like this before. Normally I see her every other day."

### Staff concerns

At the hose maker's headquarters and factory in Padua, an internal committee has been formed to put in place measures to make operations safer, Deregibus said.

Members of the committee include Deregibus, a representative from the workers' union at the factory, and staff members from the safety, production and quality units.

He said it was imperative that the committee comprise people who are familiar with day-to-day operations and processes at the facility, because they are experienced in the changes that can make the most difference.

For example, one change involved limiting the number of people allowed in the locker room at the plant to no more than seven at a time. Another suggestion led to a new process of entering and exiting the facility, to limit contact between people.

"I am very proud of my people," Deregibus said. "They are the ones in operations."

Compostella stressed that team members worry most about the future. While much of the country is confined to their homes, those at the hose company are strangely lucky, he said, in that they are still working, so their routines haven't changed as much.

"People are worried about the situation, but what they are discussing is the future," he said.

What they may not be aware of, he added, is that when the nation opens back up, things won't be exactly the same. Travel likely will remain restricted, and the economy will take a hit, especially in a nation where the economy already was struggling. It will be especially difficult for companies that do the majority of their business in Italy. "In our case, we are lucky because we are exporting more than 80 percent of our products," Compostella said. "So yes, Italy is an important market, but it's just one of the markets."

Deregibus hopes others around the world are learning from Italy's early-front battle with COVID-19. "We made mistakes, but the hospitals are working," he said. "But this is a situation where we were not prepared. It is worse than a war, because in a war you can see your enemy. Here you don't know."