

GemThane Introduces Polymer-Coated Wood Siding

By Geoff Lee

When it comes to pre-finished wood siding products GemThane Siding System is confident it has created a better mouse trap that will catch on with builders and homeowners in Muskoka.

"This is a limitless market," says Ross Mitchell, president and general manager of GemThane.

"This plant will be the model for future plants located in areas where wood siding is popular."

GemThane is a subsidiary of Madison Chemical Industries Inc., a 100 per cent Canadian owned coatings company based in Milton, Ontario

Mitchell is also the CEO of Madison that produces high performance coatings for everything from water transmission pipelines and water towers, to wind towers and wastewater treatment plants.

GemThane began production of its polymer-coated wood siding the week of Nov. 20 at the old Alcan wire and cable building at 1964 Muskoka Beach Road in Bracebridge with the hire of six employees.

Ian Sudgen, co-ordinator of development services and chief planner for Gravenhurst, and Cheryl Kelley, economic development co-ordinator for Bracebridge, helped GemThane find a suitable factory site.

GemThane has leased 10,000 sq. ft. of space from Gravenhurst Plastics Ltd. and has spent over \$400,000 to install new processing equipment.

"This is our first foray into the consumer market and the first time we are applying the coatings ourselves," says Mitchell. The coating has been on the market for 20 years and we are applying a tried and true technology for the first time in a consumer product."

GemThane will take unfinished eastern white pine and transform it into polymer-coated wood siding.

Factory technicians will apply a polyurethane base coat called ArborSeal and a paint-like polyurethane top coat called Cottage Coat that comes in over 17 colours.

It's a spray-on product that has 10 times the abrasion resistance of typical consumer products. The top coat can also be applied with a brush or a roller and is sold in five litre kits for people who want to upgrade an existing home or cottage.

Mitchell says the product will appeal to consumers who value the warmth of wood without the hassles.

"Most brands of pre-finished wood typically use latex paint that is not waterproof," he says.

"Our product is so waterproof, you can line your swimming pool with it. It also has an additive that prevents bacterial growth and is environmentally friendly."

GemThane has lined up a network of local retailers to sell the product to builders and consumers throughout Muskoka and Georgian Bay.

"The reaction we are getting from contractors so far is positive," says Mitchell. "They are offering customers a superior product for the same installed price. Owners are also enthusiastic."

Asked why he chose Muskoka for the new plant, Mitchell says, "It's a quality-sensitive market; I wanted to set up a business model in which the supplier was local and I want to create jobs."

Jeff Sowrey who grew up in Emsdale is the new operations manager. Mitchell is still looking for a director of sales and says while they didn't get as many responses

as they thought for advertised production positions, "the calibre of responses was excellent. We are pleasantly surprised by the calibre".

"The biggest thing we can offer new employees is that they are getting in on the ground floor and the demand for wood siding is strong."

Asked how GemThane intends to maintain a competitive edge in the wake of high Canadian dollar and rising material costs, Mitchell says, "We are affected by the same negative factors as other manufacturers, but the only way to reverse that is to be innovative and creative".

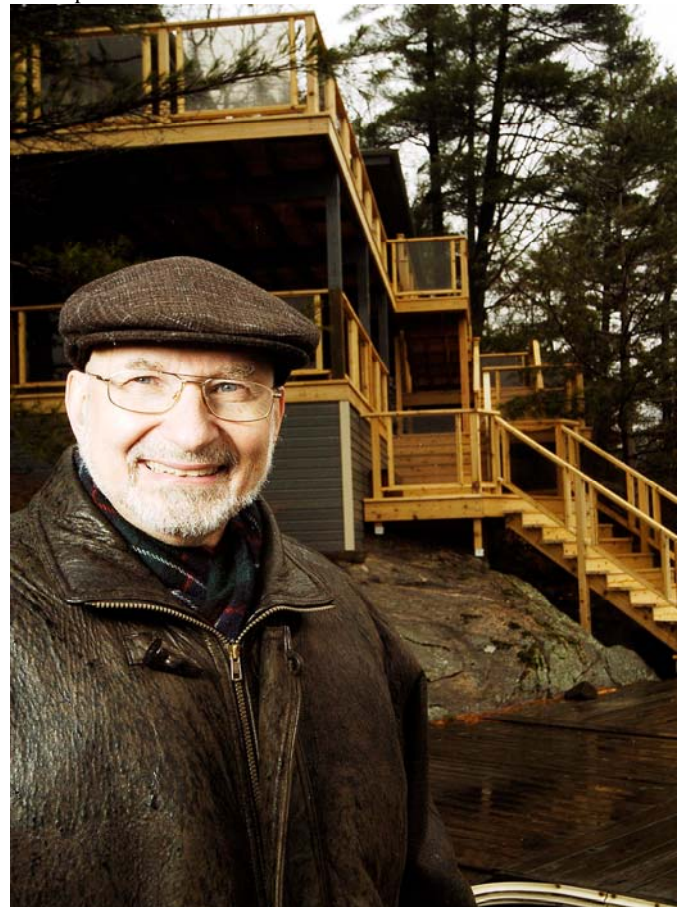
"At Madison, we invent a new product on average every 90 days. We also spend eight per cent of gross sales on research and development".

Mitchell says the idea for the polymer coated wood siding came from his own need to upgrade the siding on his first cottage on Muskoka Lake in 1996.

"When I power-washed it, 80 per cent of the paint came off. Being the CEO of a coatings company, I took an existing coating and adapted it to give it the appearance I wanted. The first application for a consumer coating was my own cottage."

Based on that success, Mitchell pre-finished the siding of his next cottage because nothing on the market was able to pass the performance tests he was looking for.

Mitchell also offers an insurance-backed warranty on all installations of the GemThane Siding System.



TESTING: Gemthane Siding System president Ross Mitchell says his wood coating product ensures maintenance free ownership. Mitchell is testing it on his own cottage decking shown in the background.