

People & Places

New use for old irrigation tubing

Ken Carhart recycles plastics to preserve poles in vineyards and hop yards

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

A little more than a month ago, Bend, Ore., entrepreneur Ken Carhart drove to the Carpenter family's hop farm in Yakima County, Wash., and hauled away discarded drip irrigation tubing.

The farm was pleased to be rid of it, and Carhart was happy to get it. Carhart will recycle the tubing into a material to wrap around wooden posts and poles to prevent them from rotting.

Carhart has been manufacturing and selling his patented product, Rotbloc, for several years. Only recently, however, did he learn that his best customers, farmers, have a surfeit of the raw material he needs.

The serendipitous discovery may give farmers an alternative to disposal fees and open a new phase in Carhart's venture in agribusiness.

"This whole thing has been a blessing and sort of a curse," he said.

Carhart, 46, once worked for a lumber distributor and sold wooden posts to farmers. The Environmental Protection Agency then tightened rules on wood preservatives, and options became more limited, Carhart said.

In 2013, he quit his job and drew on his experience with posts, agriculture and landscape architecture — that's what he studied at the University of Oregon — to design Rotbloc.

He contracted with a plant in Michigan to make Rotbloc in



Courtesy of Jessica Carhart

Rotbloc owner Ken Carhart, center, stands in front of irrigation tubing flanked by Austin Carpenter, left, and Colt Carpenter of Carpenter Ranches in Granger, Wash. Carhart recycles the tubing into a product that wraps around posts to keep them from rotting.

20-foot rolls and put them in 23 feed and grain stores.

The retailer's approach seemed to be "throw the rolls on the shelf and see if they sell," he said.

They didn't. Carhart said he was close to bankrupt. He was also sick. While he was trying to get his business going, he was diagnosed with Hodgkin lymphoma. He underwent surgery and chemotherapy. Running the struggling business he started didn't seem so bad. "It was a good distraction from my sorrows," he said.

Around this time Rotbloc took a different tack. While Carhart was sick, his wife, Jessica, with no sales background, cold-called farmers and found customers.

"Within 30 days, we were profitable and haven't looked back," he said. "She is the hero."

Craig Carpenter, whose family owns Carpenter Ranches in Granger, Wash., gave Carhart's product a try, hoping to extend the life of trellis

poles. "They would always rot right where they touched the ground," he said.

The waterproof material wraps around the post below ground level and a few inches above it. After three years, Carpenter said he sees a difference between wrapped and unwrapped poles. "You can definitely tell it's working," he said.

Another customer, Yakima Golding Farms of Toppenish, Wash., hopes to extend the life of its poles by 50 to 100 percent, the farm's manager, Mark Sechser, said.

The hop farm, owned by John I. Haas Inc., has 70 poles per acre. "There's a lot of pole money over there," Sechser said. "We're pretty excited about having our poles last longer."

Last year, the Michigan manufacturer suddenly closed without notice. Carhart obtained a loan from a nonprofit lender, Craft3 of Portland, and with the help of an engineer, Larry Braun, opened a manufacturing plant in Bend.

The plant can produce 225

pounds of product an hour, though Carhart said he hopes production can be boosted. The company gets plastic and rubber from recyclers in Washington and Oregon.

Several months ago, a farmer asked Carhart if he did anything with old irrigation tubing. Carhart said "no," but got to thinking and researching. Carhart found out the tubing was made from the low-density polyethylene plastic he needs.

Other companies, including several in California, recycle irrigation tubing, but for other products.

Besides hops, the Carpenters grow wine grapes and other types of fruit. Craig Carpenter estimates the farm has 300 rolls of discarded irrigation tubing, each 2 feet wide by 4 feet tall. The rolls are stashed in several places. A gardener occasionally asks for a strip, but that doesn't even dent the pile.

"We were trying to figure out what to do with it," Carpenter said. "There's a lot of it out there, and it's got to go some-



Western Innovator

Ken Carhart

Age: 46

Occupation: Owner of Rotbloc, a product that wraps around posts to prevent them from rotting

Education: Graduated from University of Oregon, studied landscape architecture

Family: He and his wife, Jessica, have five children, ages 23 to 7

Innovation: Found a use for discarded drip irrigation tubing

where. I don't know what other places are doing, but we sure found a way out for us."

He said he's happy that recycling is the way out. "We try to be as green as we can."

Since the first trip to Carpenter Ranches, Carhart has hauled away another trailer load of tubing from another farm. "I'm not sure what other outlet there is for that drip tube," Sechser said.

Carhart said most of his Rotbloc customers are in the Northwest, but he also has shipped the product to several foreign countries. On the material, he prints instructions in four languages: English and Spanish, Italian and German. The Carharts like visiting Italy, and Germany produces hops.

"We're preparing for success in Germany," he said. "The sky is the limit at this point."

Ag community comes together for Oregon State Fair

By ALIYA HALL
Capital Press

SALEM — Alea Minar, 14, has been keeping busy this year at the Oregon State Fair. A 4-H'er for six years, Minar shows in every small animal category.

"Rabbit, poultry, cavies (guinea pigs), pigeons and dogs," she listed off.

Along with showing animals, Minar, who is from Deschutes County, also competes in the static 4-H exhibits such as fashion, sewing, cooking, food preservation, art, photography and leadership.

This is her second year at the fair.

"It's really awesome," she said. "We have helpful stewards and volunteers, and great judges. It's running smoothly."

Minar enjoys all the opportunities that come with 4-H, and she said that it helps her grow as a person. Although she has many favorite parts, one of them is the lead up to the fair.

"Everyone is stressed out,



Aliya Hall/Capital Press

4-H and FFA members compete in one of the poultry competitions. This was the first year that 4-H and FFA members competed together.

and you're studying with your friends, quizzing one another and cleaning the animals," she said.

For 14-year-old Tatum Heathershaw from Washington County, the fair gives her the chance to be around people who share her love for poultry.

"There's not a lot of places like that," she said.

Once at the fair, Minar and Heathershaw said they liked meeting new people from around Oregon. This year in particular has given them ample opportunity to do that.

"It's the first year that 4-H and FFA club members have

shown animals together since I've been alive," Candi Bothum, 4-H program coordinator, said.

In past years, 4-H would show one week and FFA would show the other, but because many students are going back to school earlier and the groups use the same judges, it made sense to show all the youth competitions together, Bothum said.

"It's been fun. A great opportunity with great organizations," she said. "The state fair is an opportunity for kids to meet from all over the state. Young livestock raisers and ag enthusiasts — they're the

future of ag. A terrific group of young people."

Combining the shows also helped reduce the number of turnovers the clubs had to make to clean out the animal pens.

Bothum said that she thinks the two groups will continue showing together, but they have some logistical issues regarding space to fix for next year.

"It's a big group," she said, noting that the number of animal entries has gone up.

Elsewhere at the fair, the agriculture stage was also a hit, Brooke Broadbent, the showcase organizer, said. She

estimated an average of 30 to 50 people attended the presentations. For the activities it "ebbed and flowed." The most popular event was Egg Day, when 1,500 eggs on a stick were handed out.

Although the fair has stopped keeping daily attendance tallies, Dan Cox, the fair spokesman, said the fair had a good opening day and there were more discount incentives this year to bring people out.

"I've been around fair a long, long time and can see the ebb and flow of the crowd. We'll get a first wave that stays for several hours and then a second wave of people at night for the concerts," he said. "On the hot days close to 100 degrees we might see people heading inside more towards the AC, but the one thing we've always seen is Oregonians come out no matter what. It's an interesting thing."

Cox says the fair offered something for everyone.

"It's not just for the urban center," he said. "It's for the entire state."

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Through Saturday, Sept. 9

Eastern Idaho State Fair. 8 a.m.-10 p.m. Eastern Idaho State Fairgrounds, 97 Park St., Blackfoot, Idaho. Website: <https://funatthefair.com/>

Through Sunday, Sept. 10

Washington State Fair. 10 a.m.-10 p.m. Fairground in Puyallup, 110 9th Ave. SW, Puyallup, Wash. The Washington State Fair, commonly referred to as the Puyallup Fair, is the largest single attraction held annually in the state of Washington. Closed Tuesdays and Sept. 6. Website: www.thefair.com/

Through Friday, Sept. 8

Western Apicultural Society's 40th annual conference. University of California-Davis Harry H. Laidlaw Jr. Honey Bee Research Facility,

Davis, Calif. Bee Culture magazine editor Kim Flotton will address "The Rapidly Changing Bee Scene;" beekeeper and author Les Crowder will discuss managing honeybees in top bar hives; and bee expert Larry Connor will cover "Keeping Your Bees Alive and Growing." Cost: \$225. Website: www.westernapiculturalsociety.org/

Wednesday, Sept. 13

FSPCA Preventive Controls for Human Food — One-Day Blended Course. 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Hilton Garden Inn, 1741 Harrison St., Twin Falls, Idaho. The new Food Safety Modernization Act regulation requires every processing facility to have a trained resource person or "Preventive Controls Qualified Individual" who has completed a specialized training course (such as this one) that was developed by the Food Safety Preventive Controls Alliance and is recognized by the FDA. This person will oversee the implementation of the facility's food safety plan and other key tasks. Jeff Kronenberg, an assistant professor at the University of Idaho and Food Safety Specialist at TechHelp, will

offer this One-Day FSPCA Blended Course as an alternative to the traditional 2.5-day course. Cost: \$330. Website: www.techhelp.org

Thursday, Sept. 14

Food Safety Internal Auditor Workshop. 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Hilton Garden Inn, 1741 Harrison St., Twin Falls, Idaho. A comprehensive audit system is essential to a company's food safety and product quality. It provides confirmation that systems and procedures are operating effectively and identifies areas that require improvement. The Internal Auditor Workshop will teach you how to conduct internal audits in your facility against one of the GFSI Audit Schemes, which are becoming a standard for the food industry as a tool for assuring food safety and regulatory compliance and have become a customer requirement for many processors. Many of the schemes require formal, documented training for personnel who conduct internal auditing. This one-day course will provide attendees with a full understanding of audit requirements as well as promote personal pro-

fessional development. Cost: \$330. Website: www.techhelp.org

Friday, Sept. 15

2nd Annual Rice Weed Course. 8 a.m.-4:25 p.m. Rice Experiment Station, 955 Butte City Highway, Biggs, Calif. Website: <http://cesutter.ucanr.edu/>

Tuesday-Wednesday Sept. 19-20

Central Oregon Occupational Safety & Health Conference. The Riverhouse, Bend, Ore. Cannabis worker safety and health will be a topic, and small agriculture employers can learn about becoming conditionally exempt from Oregon OSHA inspections. Website: safetyseries.event.com/central17

Thursday, Sept. 21

OSU Small Farms School. 8:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Clackamas Community College, 19600 S. Molalla Ave., Oregon City, Ore. This day-long event features classes in a variety of topics important to small-scale farmers. Sponsored by Oregon State University Extension, the Clackamas Soil and Water Conservation District

and Clackamas Community College. Website: smallfarms.oregonstate.edu/small-farm-school

Saturday, Sept. 23

Goat Education Day. 8:30 a.m.-4 p.m. OSU Southern Oregon Research and Extension Center Auditorium, 569 Hanley Road, Central Point, Ore. Choose four classes from a selection of 11, two in the morning and two in the afternoon, for \$35. Or choose two morning classes and cheesemaking in the afternoon for \$50. Class topics are geared to both beginner and advanced goat owners from Getting Ready for Kidding Season and Holistic Goat Care to the foundations of Nutrition and Feed and the Making of Goat Milk Soaps and Lotions. Presenters include Dr. Charles Estill, OSU veterinarian; Gianacis Caldwell, author; and Christina Strickland and others from the Rogue Valley Dairy Goat Association. Register online at <http://bit.ly/JacksonGoatEdDay2017> or call 541-776-7371. Ask about a youth discount. Cost: \$35 to \$50. Website: <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/soresc/SF-classes>

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Index

California	9
Dairy	7
Idaho	11
Livestock	7
Markets	13
Opinion	6
Oregon	10
Washington	8

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