

Focus on R & D Spurs Growth for Calcium Products

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—Iowa State University Research Park

For more than three decades, Calcium Products has been perfecting the process of enriching soil to help ensure the seeds farmers put in the ground have the best chance to offer a big yield.

The company, which moved its corporate headquarters – including its research and development division – to offices in the Iowa State University Research Park in 2014, processes mined limestone and gypsum to correct soil pH and supply sulfur for growing everything from corn and soybeans to the turf on golf courses, ball fields and more.

“Because we are based in the Midwest, our product gets used primarily on corn and soybeans,” says Calcium Products CEO Mike Hogan. “But the neat thing is, our product is not crop specific. There are a lot of specialty crops around the Midwest and the country that use our product because they have seen that the way we are able to improve the soil has a

positive impact on their yield.”

Digging Deep

Calcium Products was founded in Gilmore City, Iowa in 1987 after the founder sold his limestone quarry off to Martin Marietta. At that time, the team switched focus to additional processing of the limestone in the region – objectively touted as one of the purest deposits in the world – thereby allowing it to be spread on fields to promote an optimum pH balance for growing crops.

In those early years, the pelletized limestone was being used to address acidic conditions persistent in soils in the upper Midwest. One main benefit was the ability for farmers to spread the product evenly and precisely without it blowing away like traditional limestone applications. As word spread about the benefits of the product the company was providing, production took off and by the mid 1990s the company experienced a period rapid of growth.

Ushering in that growth was the

development of a second product, pelletized from gypsum being mined nearby in Fort Dodge, IA, allowing farmers to spread it on their field to provide a perfect source of sulfur fertilizer. This major innovation helped Calcium Products distinguish itself as a leader in the industry. But the company didn't rest on this innovation. Instead they sought ways to partner with Iowa State University to drive their product further.

Perfect Partners

In 2006, Calcium Products formally began working with Iowa State researchers. Initially, the research and development (R & D) was pretty straightforward.

“The cornerstone of those research efforts was to prove the benefits and to help us provide objective information to our customers that would drive sales,” Hogan says. Among the first Iowa State researchers to work with Calcium Products was a PhD student named Andrew Hoiberg.

“My focus was on the impact the product had on turf,” says Hoiberg, who earned his PhD, and today serves as Calcium Products’ Vice President of Research & Development.

Hoiberg joined the leadership team in 2012 and has served as a catalyst in growing the company’s relationship with Iowa State, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), and other strategic research partners.

“As we were growing, we knew that we needed to dedicate additional resources to R & D,” Hogan says. “That was a driver in establishing a presence in Ames.”

Moving and Growing

In early 2014, Calcium Products moved its headquarters from Gilmore City to offices in the Iowa State University Research Park. The move offered a number of benefits.

“We really wanted to be where the R & D was happening,” Hogan says. “By having a physical presence here, we could work hand-in-hand with researchers at Iowa State and the USDA.”

Further, Calcium Products wanted to place a priority on recruiting high quality interns so the move to Ames made it easier to identify and employ students with specialized skills that could move the R & D function forward.

“Being here has allowed us to be a lot more visible,” Hoiberg says. “One of our strategies in moving here was clearly to recruit talent, specifically students.”

That strategy has been successful in several respects. Not only has the R & D function grown for Calcium Products, the company is now offering intern positions in sales and marketing. Since the move to Ames, Hogan says the company sales department has doubled in size.

Building on a Strong Foundation

Looking forward, Hogan and Hoiberg agree that the focus is on continuing to tweak the company’s offerings to make them more efficient and effective in addressing specific soil conditions. They are confident that as they continue to grow the breadth of R & D, they will continue to grow the number of clients they serve.

“Farmers and growers have been using our products for more than 30 years because they work,” Hogan says. “Our challenge now is to help cost-conscious consumers understand the value-add we provide. It is our R & D arm that will provide us the data to do just that.”

For Hoiberg, the focus is on continuing to dial in a formula that works for individual farmers.

“No two soils are exactly the same,” he says. “They can vary widely in their

composition from region to region and sometimes even from field to field. Our goal is to continue to study ways to address specific soil conditions from specific fields, so we can provide a tailored solution that provides just the right amount of product to have the desired result.”

Hoiberg sees his work as enabling further growth.

“I’m amazed each year that passes how much more I learn about the soils we are addressing and the product we are providing,” he says. “Right now, we are only on a fraction of the acres of crops globally. Our goal is to become a relevant piece of farming operations everywhere. We’ve been very successful in the Midwest and there are countless growers out there that we haven’t reached but can definitely help.”

SIDEBAR 1: About Calcium Products Since 1987, Calcium Products has been using pure-mined minerals to help growers achieve highly effective, natural soil enhancement. The source mine providing the raw materials to Calcium Products, in operation since 1880, is in the heart of one of the world’s purest limestone and gypsum deposits.

Calcium Products is headquartered in Ames and has facilities in the Iowa towns of Gilmore City, Fort Dodge, Alden, and Aplington. The company currently makes 2 main products and employs close to 70 people. Its plants operate 24 hours a day, five to six days a week.

Calcium Products has clients in every state in the United States and several foreign countries.

