—SP Photo by Richard Marjan

Claude Bourgault's Dryair heater is a clean, safe way to heat construction sites

Dryair business heats up

❑ Rapid growth experienced by St. Brieux firm

By Joanne Paulson
SP Business Editor

Claude Bourgault experienced first hand the nausea, headache and misery associated with carbon monoxide poisoning during a construction phase at Bourgault Industries.

Bourgault expanded its building in St. Brieux in 1982, and Claude Bourgault was in charge of the project. By the end of the second day, Bourgault went home with a severe headache and vomited throughout the night.

The cause of his illness was carbon monoxide released by the direct flame heaters used to warm winter construction sites.

There had to be a better way of heating buildings, thought Bourgault.

In 1998, now owner of his own company, Dryair 2000 Inc., Bourgault found the answer. It was a bad year for Dryair's grain drying product as harvest came on early and dry, so Bourgault began developing the construction heater.

"It was a little scary to make the leap, as we knew virtually nothing about the construction industry, but we had enough gutsy people that were willing to look a little foolish and jump in headfirst," said Bourgault once in a news release.

He need not have worried. The Dryair heater took off in the construction market almost immediately, and sales are now growing exponentially. They may reach $20 to $30 million in a couple of years, Bourgault estimates.

He has no trouble explaining why. Direct flame burners are placed inside new buildings, with fuel lines feeding diesel to the burner. All the combustion toxins are fed directly into the site, and workers compete with the flame for oxygen.

Bourgault points out that this is not the fault of the construction industry; there simply has not been a viable alternative in the past.

Direct flame heaters also generate a huge amount of water through combustion, which creates humidity inside the project and often delays drywalling, adding to the cost of construction. The heaters, which mainly run on diesel fuel, also come with a high risk of explosion.

The Dryair system, by comparison, uses a natural gas fuel source well away from the actual construction site. The gas heats a fluid called glycol, which is circulated to fan coil units inside the building.

Since there is no combustion inside the building, there is no carbon monoxide, no water, and no explosion risk, says Bourgault. Furthermore, the system reduces fuel costs by approximately half, which is cheaper for the building owner and better for the environment.

The product landed Bourgault an ABEX award for physical environment in 2000.

The construction industry has responded to the Dryair system with speed — and on some high profile projects. The system was used on the $2 billion expansion of Pearson Airport in Toronto, and this year is heating the new Detroit Lions football stadium.

Sales quadrupled in 2001, and Bourgault is quite certain they will rise again by several hundred per cent in 2002.

"We caught the attention of a company called United Rentals, which was our goal in the first place," said Bourgault. "We signed an exclusivity deal with them this year."

United Rentals is a $3 billion U.S. company with 800 stores.

Dryair heating systems have also caught the attention of the Canadian military, now using them for camp-based operations. Dryair also has developed a "ground thaw fluid reel" — a system that helps thaw the ground for construction purposes, and replaces hoarding and old-style heaters.

Dryair has added an office in Toledo, Ohio, and Ottawa, but the biggest requirement for future growth is people in St. Brieux. Bourgault hopes to hire more than 50 people in the next several months.