



THE ASSOCIATION & VOICE OF THE US SEWN PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

DIFFERENCE MAKERS

SEAMS' members proactive in finding solutions during nation's time of need

By Devin Steele

Here, in SEAMS' continuing series of stories highlighting some of our members who are rallying around the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) shortage, we are featuring two companies – Venus Group and Fairystone Fabrics – who have heeded the call.

As the go-to resource for the sewn products industry, we appreciate those members who have stepped up to address the critical need for these products during the COVID-19 pandemic. As you well know, our industry plays a vital role in the health, safety and well-being of our citizens, and we're excited to call out these astounding efforts. We are proud of you and excited to tout these incredible members:

Venus Group

Venus Group, based in Foothill Ranch, Calif., with additional cut-and-sew operations in Fort Lawn, S.C., specializes in a wide range of textile products, including naperies (linens, tablecloths, napkins, *et al*), towels, sheets and more for numerous markets, including restaurants, laundries, hotels, hospitals and government applications.

The company is a long-time manufacturer of healthcare textiles, including bed linens, blankets, patient gowns, scrubs, lab coats, mattress pads, bibs and more, so Venus leaders knew that Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) production was “in its lane” when the urgent need hit, according to Jeyur Patel, whose father (Raj) and uncle (Kirit) founded the family-owned and operated company in 1972. Venus moved quickly into U.S.-based manufacturing at its ISO 001-certified S.C. facility and rapid distribution of medical-grade, disposable face mask production, he added.

“Our customers really need these supplies, and we knew it would be a challenge from a supply chain perspective to rely on China for those products because of the skyrocketing demands,” he said.

“Consequently, to be able to get these products to our customers in a matter of days as opposed to weeks or months, we decided to manufacture them in the U.S. Not only could we get them to those who need them faster, but we could also control the product quality in-house.

Once the decision was made to move into PPE, Venus reached out to longtime partner Milliken & Company to learn more about its BioSmart antimicrobial fabric that is said to kill 99.9 percent of most bacteria and virus.

“The BioSmart fabric is soft, breathable and durable for over 75 laundries and a great fabric to make washable masks that many of our customers needed,” said Dennis Jackson, the company's vice president of production, distribution and quality control in Fort Lawn, S.C. “Once we determined the design for our face mask, the training curve for our employees was quick. In a matter of a few days our employees had mastered this process.”



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Also, in an effort to supply other items to fight the pandemic, Venus purchased three automated mask machines, he added. These machines will produce medical-grade disposable masks using nonwoven fabric that is latex- and metal-free – and made in the USA, Jackson added.

Once these machines are in production, the company will be manufacturing over 2 million mask per week with large quantities of orders to fulfill quickly, Jackson noted.

“All employees have been instrumental in making this happen, and are proud to play a part in fighting this horrible pandemic our country is going through,” he said.

The company also has pivoted into the distribution of thin-gauge, clear polycarbonate face shields that offer an additional layer of protection for masked workers.

Venus masks end up at various entities, including industrial laundries, hotels, grocery stores, healthcare facilities such as private and VA hospitals, and many other destinations, Patel said.

“We’re always careful about keeping the healthcare heroes at the front of the queue because they need these products the most,” he said.

And the company is nimble, Jackson pointed out. Venus tries to ship all orders within 24 hours of receiving, he said, adding: “On the BioSmart washable mask we are in a good inventory position and can ship orders very quickly.”

Venus Group typically runs two 10-hour shifts, five days per week, but once its mask machines are running, it plans to run them 24 hours, 7 days per week, Jackson said. “It is very important that we have product to cover customer needs,” he said.

Customer forecasts and inventory levels have always been important to Venus, and the company evaluates customer needs daily and manufactures to these needs, he added.

“Venus management has been very proactive searching for solutions to provide PPE products,” Jackson said. “Both management and all employees feel like they are doing something to make a difference in these difficult times. Venus Group and our employees are proud to be part of manufacturing PPE products to help.”

Going forward, he said, “It makes sense to onshore some if not all production. Maybe not all of it will come back to the U.S. because the cost is higher in the U.S., amongst other variables. But, I think that from a national safety perspective, you should have a certain amount of increased production here to prevent these types of shortages from occurring again so our healthcare professionals on the frontlines don’t have to reuse masks and other PPE products. We should be able to say that if our citizens need something like this, we have them covered.”



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Fairystone Fabrics

Fairystone Fabrics, a Burlington, N.C., textile manufacturer specializing in warp knitting, warping and sueding, has produced technical fabrics for automotive, filtration and some niche markets such as medical for many years.

The company, which produces laminated fabrics for several different levels of PPE gowns, has ramped up production in the medical field from six to eight tricot machines to 56 in nine weeks, according to company President Jim Bryan.

“We were given specifications by our customer and developed a number of samples until we found the best alternative,” Bryan said. “It is actually a fabric we made a number of years ago with slight modifications.”

The fabric has some unique features from a manufacturing perspective, and requires retrofitting machines with auxiliary equipment, he pointed out. Some it had in-house, some it imported from Europe and some it made from spare parts or used local machine shops, he added.

“We believe in continuous improvement,” Bryan said. “The fabric we make today is made on modern machines that are different than the ones we had 20 years ago. They require technical skills and knowledge to make the important adjustments for an efficient and first-quality product.”

The majority of its products are going to fulfill FEMA contracts, Bryan said. He added that he anticipates that there will be need to be additional contracts via that agency or DLA to complete the quantities needed to restore proper inventories of PPE and respond to the increased cases of COVID-19 that states are reporting after announcing Phase I and II easing of restrictions, combined with more access to testing.

Fairystone had to furlough 37 members of the team until it could make the changes necessary, he reported. The company started to call people back in week three (of the economic shutdown) and had full employment at the end of the fourth week, he noted. For the last eight weeks, most of the plant has run 24/7, and the company moved its annual shutdown three weeks in order to complete orders for the end of July, he said.

“We did have several retirements during this time and are looking for people with some experience in tricot knitting,” he said. “We’re always looking for good supervisory people to add to the team.”

Bryan reported that he and the team talk weekly about the experience of being a necessary business, pivoting from automotive into medical, “saving our company and our customers, providing lifesaving garments to first responders, patients and many others,” he said.

“We are proud to contribute our small part in this monumental effort,” he said. “We also talk about following CDC guidelines – wearing a mask at work and in public, staying quarantined with family or household members, washing hands often. We have increased plant sanitation routines and are lucky to have manufacturing areas with HVAC that controls temperature, humidity and dew point, plus air



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washers to purify the air. Our air turns over every 60 minutes. We are increasing employee cleaning of work areas on each shift as well.”

Bryan added: “We come to work every day, 24/7, thankful to have a meaningful job that has been flexible enough to change overnight and be successful,” he said. “We are hopeful that a portion of the on-sourcing of these products stays here.”