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**For More Information Contact:  
Muriel Mosher  
207-623-0680**

## **Howard Tool Co. Upgrades ISO Certification**

BANGOR – Marty Arsenault, owner of the Howard Tool Co. of Bangor, recently decided to upgrade his company's ISO designation, so he did the only thing he knew would work – he turned to the Maine Manufacturing Extension Partnership (Maine MEP).

“When I got my original ISO 9000 certification several years ago it was because of my work with the MEP,” Arsenault said. “I figured why change things now? The people at MEP know what they're doing and I knew I could count on them to see this project through.”

ISO stands for “International Standards Organization,” and the new ISO 9001-2000 signifies the company has met a rigorous set of internationally observed standards. Getting the upgraded ISO certification means Howard Tool may continue to compete on an international basis and makes the company available to a large pool of new, potential customers.

“My clients include NASA, the Army Tank Division and the Department of the Navy,” Arsenault said. “Believe me, without the ISO certification I wouldn't have the ability to compete on a national or international basis.”

“Marty and his employees deserve a lot of credit for the hard work they did to upgrade Howard Tool's certification,” said Rod Rodrigue, executive director of the Maine MEP.

“There is nothing easy about getting ISO certification and it takes a strong commitment by management and employees alike to see that it happens,” Rodrigue said. “All of us at the Maine MEP are dedicated to making the certification experience as pleasant as possible and ensuring that it is completed as quickly as possible.”

Arsenault agrees the project managers at Maine MEP know what they are doing.

“The certification process is very involved,” he said. “There is no way a company could do it on its own. The project managers at MEP and the consultants they recommend

are top-notch. Both take the time to do a lot of hand holding when we get frustrated with the project.

“The fact is, without the Maine MEP, I would have wasted a lot of time researching this project and I just don’t have the expertise to know where to go to get the help. I saved a lot of time going through the MEP,” Arsenault said.

Howard Tool Co. began the recertification project in May of last year. “The new ISO 2000 designation is more complicated than the original,” Arsenault said, “and much more management oriented.”

According to Arsenault, a great premium is placed on customer service, keeping track of orders, being on time with production and having a continuous plan to show improvement.

“Naturally, we still must produce a quality product every time,” he said, “but improving that quality, or the time it takes to make that product, is a high priority.”

While the economy and overseas competition has hurt many Maine companies, including Howard Tool (“We’ve gone from 54 employees to 11,” Arsenault said), the new ISO designation could help make things better.

“We’re a better company right now than we were before this process began in May,” Arsenault said, “and I feel capable of going out and looking for new customers no matter who or where they are.”

With that renewed confidence, Howard Tool Co. will soon begin a new marketing campaign designed to attract new customers looking to do business with an ISO 9001-2000 certification.

“Maine MEP is helping us design that campaign right now,” Arsenault said. “That’s another advantage of doing business with that organization. They are used to dealing with all aspects of a company’s business – from sales to production, from writing a business plan to marketing.”

Finally, Arsenault is delighted that his employees are so involved in the ISO process at Howard Tool. “Each of my employees is directly involved in the company right now,” he said. “Everything we do is an open book. They see what it costs to make our products and they work with management to set goals, lower our costs and help us make more money.

“They recognize we have a lot of work we would not have without the ISO designation. They also know it makes us credible as a company,” Arsenault said. “Let’s face it, my employees know if the company benefits, they benefit by being able to make more money and keep their jobs. In Maine, that’s a good thing.”

The Maine MEP is an affiliate of the NIST under the U.S. Department of Commerce. The national MEP is a network of manufacturing extension centers that provide business and technical assistance to smaller manufacturers in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Through MEP, manufacturers have access to more than 2000 manufacturing and business “coaches” whose job is to help firms make changes that lead to greater productivity, increased profits, and enhanced global competitiveness. For more information on the Maine MEP program call 1-800-637-4634.