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

Maine MEP Gives Boost to Aroostook County Project

CARIBOU – A new ergonomically designed kayak paddle is one step closer to becoming a reality thanks to the efforts of the Maine Manufacturing Extension Partnership and the Northern Maine Development Commission.

“Getting the Ergo Paddle off the ground has been a long and complicated process,” said Geoffrey Clarke of Grant Safety Products of Orrington, “but things are finally moving ahead thanks to the Maine MEP and the people at the commission.”

The paddle – designed by attorney Larry Merrill of Bangor – was patented in 1997 and was originally set to be fully developed and manufactured in 2003. However, there were complications during development of a prototype and the manufacturing of molds to make the carbon fiber oar.

“We almost had to give up on the idea of making this oar,” Clarke said, “because things became so complicated and financially difficult. Fortunately, Brian Sutherland of the Maine MEP’s office in Caribou helped us write a request for and receive a Rural Development Grant that now makes the project possible.”

“We believe this project is especially important because plans are to develop, manufacture and market the Ergo Paddle in Aroostook County,” said Rod Rodrigue, president of the Maine MEP. “We are always pleased to assist companies that will improve the economy of Aroostook County.”

Clarke – whose company seeks new products to patent, manufacture and market – said working with the Maine MEP has been great. “The MEP project managers are easy to work with, are flexible and have been willing to spend the time necessary to guide us through this very complicated process,” he said.

Flexibility is especially important to Clarke and his partner, James Grant, because both of them have full-time jobs and work mostly nights and weekends on GSP projects.

Fortunately, those nights and weekends have paid off as Duplessis Associates of Van Buren has now offered to build a mold and prototypes for the Ergo Paddle and do the manufacturing long term in Aroostook County.

“Delano Duplessis is fabulous,” said Clarke. “The history of what he has done and his skill level is beyond reproach. He was one of the first American companies to manufacture carbon fiber tennis rackets and bicycles.”

While using carbon fiber means the paddle will sell for about \$400, Clarke said the potential for sales remains high. In fact, according to the National Marine Manufacturers Association, 340,000 kayaks were sold in 2002, 85 percent of which were of the recreational or touring variety. Based on those numbers, estimates indicate 70 percent of recreational sales are to first-time buyers.

Given those numbers, indications are that if the Ergo Paddle is properly introduced into the market, first-year sales could be about 3,000 paddles. “With a wholesale cost of about \$200 each, the Ergo Paddle would bring in about \$600,000 to Aroostook County,” Rodrigue said. “In addition, there is the potential of six to eight new jobs in the county during the first year.”

A teamwork approach has already begun in Aroostook County. First, MEP and NMDC helped with the loan program, the precision metals department at Northern Maine Community College helped develop the molds for the Ergo Paddle and Duplessis Associates has designed the ovens in which the paddles will be fired.

Projects such as this are nothing new to Clarke and his partner at GSP. An inventor himself, Clarke and his partner look for inventors with new products that require the proper paperwork to be patented. “We take care of the patent and trademark paperwork, help refine the product and take it from design to manufacturing and on to sales,” he said.

In fact, GSP has been developing and marketing Maine products since 1985. At the present time, GSP holds the exclusive rights to four products developed by Maine inventors, has exclusive rights to two other patented products from outside the state and has successfully commercialized three Maine products or services.

“We’re very excited about some of the patented products we are about to introduce,” Clarke said. “One is called the Protect-A-Lock and the other is a machine that will stamp a sleeve of three golf balls with a person’s name, logo or symbol.”

Clarke is especially excited about the Ergo Paddle because it takes the strain off the back, shoulders, arms, elbows and wrists of the kayaker. “Kayakers who paddle regularly

often develop problems just like people with carpal tunnel,” Clarke said. “The Ergo Paddle eliminates those problems, while not taking anything away from the speed or control of the kayak.”

“It has been a great pleasure working with Geoffrey Clarke and James Grant in helping to move this project forward,” said the MEP’s Rodrigue. “Their enthusiasm, foresight and inventive vision are a real plus for Aroostook County and the state of Maine. We look forward to working with both men several times during the next few years.”

Clarke feels the same way about the Maine MEP and NMDC. “As we progress on this project and near the marketing stage, I plan to involve the MEP as much as possible,” he said. “And I look forward to working with MEP project managers throughout the state as we continue to develop and manufacture Maine products.”

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.