

Sylvite celebrates 40 years of service to agriculture

Company grows from three employees to largest independent fertilizer wholesaler in the country



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Putnam – From the first handshake with Hugh Loomans he makes an immediate impression.

All his fingers are missing on the right hand, lost in a meat grinder at the age of six.

Still it hasn't stopped him from playing baseball, golfing or becoming owner of the largest independent bulk fertilizer wholesaler in Canada and the only independent wholesaler in Ontario.

Loomans was shaking hands with many of the hundreds of people who attended a celebration marking the 40th anniversary of Sylvite Agri-Services at Putnam, one of the company's four locations in Ontario.

Sylvite was founded by Alex Henry and Don Rutherford with Loomans purchasing half of the business from those partners in 1983.

Like Loomans, they had wanted to operate independently so they purchased the fertilizer business from Hudson Bay Mining and Smelting, which eventually went on to become Potash Corp Saskatchewan when it was nationalized.

Mining companies ended up with fertilizer deposits as a byproduct of the mining industry and didn't know what to do with them. Companies were formed to market the fertilizer which basically was integrated backwards into the agriculture industry.

The name 'Sylvite' was derived from the deposits of potash found in sylvanite ore.

When Loomans came to the business there were three employees. Today there are over 300 providing a wide range of agriculture services and products as well as industrial chemical supplies.

By 1987 he had bought the other half of the business and in 1989 he took on a partner, Bob McNaughten, coinciding with expansion into the United States.

In 1993 the company had



Sylvite owner and CEO Hugh Loomans greeted people as they arrived at the company's Putnam location for a 40th anniversary celebration.

completed the purchase of Coldspring Agri-Services as well.

The company is still a family owned business which influenced the decision to host a celebration with a carnival theme, under a sunny blue sky with inflatable slides and castles for children, axe throwing challenge for adults and a live band for all to enjoy.

"The next generation is important to agriculture," said Loomans. That would include his daughter Cassandra who works with him at the company's head office in Burlington.

Loomans graduated from the agriculture economics program at the University of Guelph before working for Shur Gain and then a national mineral and chemical company before buying into Sylvite.

"I wanted to be my own man," said Loomans of that bold move.

Certainly the company has prospered since then supplying wholesale fertilizer to Ontario and the rest of eastern Canada.

Sylvite also has business locations in California and Florida with its Pennsylvania business covering northeastern U.S. recently sold to Growmark. That move was made to consolidate more of the business in Ontario, said Loomans.

It is also a reflection of the ongoing consolidation that characterizes agriculture service companies and the farms they serve for that matter.

"The changes in agriculture

are staggering," said Loomans. Not too many farmers are handling bags of fertilizer as huge machines have been created to spread bulk product. Several gleaming examples were on site as the company has also upgraded all its spreading equipment.

Some farmers are planting 500 to 1,000 acres a day so getting fertilizer to them when they need it is a challenge – especially with the wet spring and the delayed planting season this year, said Loomans.

This spring the company moved 18,000 tonnes of fertilizer in four and a half days from its ship pier terminal in Hamilton.

In that regard the company has 135 trucks on the road and recently purchased another trucking company to accommodate its transportation needs.

Included in Sylvite's part

time staff are some farmers. Efficiencies are often realized by trucking soybeans to the ship yard terminal and back hauling fertilizer.

Further efficiencies are realized between the five different entities working under the Sylvite banner. Industrial chemical products destined for a pulp and paper plant at Thunder Bay can be combined with transporting of grain to an eastern Canada destination or fertilizer drop off.

Sylvite supplies most of the independent bulk fertilizer distributors in Ontario.

As such it requires adequate storage space including 100,000 tonnes at the warehouse in Putnam, 70,000 tonnes at its facility in Hamilton, 40,000 tonnes of rented storage space from Hensall Co-op, 30,000 tonnes from its facility in Trois Riviers in Quebec.

Besides its warehousing capa-

bilities, Sylvite retails seed, fertilizer and crop protection product under an agronomic component, supplies grain marketing as well as blending, storage and packaging of finished products.

Products are exported to six countries with a long list of other exporting opportunities currently being explored

"There have been more fertilizer products developed in the last five years than in the past 15 years," said Loomans. These would include slow release fertilizers created for more efficient plant uptake while reducing environmental concerns.

Loomans is aware that fertilizers – both chemical and organic – have come under an increasingly critical eye of environmentalists.

Both he and his partner have been involved at the governing level for the industry with Loomans being a past chair of the Fertilizer Canada board and McNaughton serving on a similar American board in the United States.

A "4R Nutrient Stewardship program" has been developed by Fertilizer Canada that signifies applying fertilizer at the right time, with the right product, in the right place and right amount. The program is being adopted around the world now.

"Farmers are good stewards of the land," said Loomans adding "They do not want to spend money on fertilizer and see it run away into a creek."

Sylvite operates from five locations in Ontario – Avon, Norwich, Putnam, Silverhill, Sunnyside.

"It is an exciting day with all the divisions of the company coming together as one," said Loomans of the gala celebration of 40 years in business.



Several pieces of new fertilizer spreading equipment were on display.