

## NRT Delivers Goods and Economic Development

By Dave Yanko



Truck owner/operators Dale Peacock and Rene Gareau with Wendy Featherstone of Northern Resource Trucking.

Photo: Kevin Hagarth

It was an opportunity to bring training and employment to members of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band that led to the establishment of Northern Resource Trucking Limited Partnership (NRT) in 1986. So successful was the enterprise that, today, a dozen Saskatchewan First Nations and Métis communities share ownership in this dynamic business that supplies transportation services to mining companies operating in the province.

“What those communities are looking for is employment and a successful business investment, and they’re getting it

themselves,” says NRT Executive Assistant Wendy Featherstone.

Kitsaki Management, the economic development arm of the La Ronge band, launched NRT as a 51-49 percent partnership with Trimac Transportation, a premier North American trucking firm (today Trimac has a 29 percent stake). The band had people in need of jobs who were living in a region in which the mining companies had pledged to provide lasting benefits. Trimac had trucking experience and equipment.

NRT, based in Saskatoon, employs more

than 100 people including office staff, company drivers and leased operators. But the company’s impact on northern communities reaches beyond employment numbers.

“Our training program has been incredibly successful,” says Featherstone. “In fact, we lose most of our trainees to other companies. But whether they’re driving a rock truck for Cameco, working for the provincial highways department or driving a taxi in La Ronge, the training they got at NRT provided them with that job opportunity.”

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# Small Town, Big Business: Pound-Maker Leads the Way

By Dave Yanko

Forty years after a group of Lanigan-area farmers launched a feedlot operation in response to tanking international grain sales, and 20 years after they added an integrated ethanol plant, Pound-Maker Agventures remains an icon of community enterprise.

“We still get numerous visits from people from around the world,” says Brad Wildeman, president of Pound-Maker and the son of one of the original feedlot owners. “Local investors can look at the scale of this and say, ‘you know, we can do this in our little town, too.’ I think it sort of captures the imagination of a lot of people.”

Wildeman says Pound-Maker is the first and only ethanol plant in Canada that is fully integrated with a feedlot. It’s

owned by about 250 mostly local area investors – farmers who also sell their grain to the operation – and employs about 50 staff, many of them “young people who fill up the service clubs and keep the hockey rink going,” he says. The company generates revenues of \$50 to \$60 million annually, he says.

Pound-Maker’s primary business is cattle finishing – the feedlot prepares cattle for packing plants in Saskatchewan (when the Moose Jaw plant is operating), Alberta and the US. The integrated ethanol plant provides an important secondary business that works hand-in-hand with the feedlot.

Distiller’s grain and thin stillage, the solid and liquid by-products of ethanol production, are used as protein-rich feed

supplements for the cattle while the ethanol is sold in the province, explains Wildeman. Pound-Maker gleans a variety of efficiencies from the integrated operation.

“First, we tend to buy all our product directly from our shareholder base. And second, we don’t sell any excess products – everything from our ethanol production is used right here in our (feedlot) facility and it’s fresh, every day.”

Pound-Maker does face challenges. It’s always difficult selling beef during a recession, especially so when the Canadian dollar is high and the industry depends on international markets for 60 percent of its sales. Everyone’s working hard, he says, to find new markets

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Photo: Kevin Hogarth

Brad Wildeman, President of Pound-Maker Agventures

# Gaining Footholds Through Quality

By Dave Yanko

Do right by the pets and the rest will follow.

That's a simple yet demanding tenet Horizon Pet Nutrition follows in its efforts to build a strong player in the highly competitive North American pet food space. And so far, it has served the Rosthern-based company well.

"It's getting across," says Jason Skotheim, vice president of operations at Horizon. "That's what's building the trust and that's what's building a lot of customer support. We're growing at an aggressive pace for a new, small company."

Horizon grew out of the 2004 BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) scare in the U.S. that resulted in Canada shutting its doors to U.S. manufactured pet food. Skotheim, who was then working as a research economist at the University of Saskatchewan, was chatting with two people who had ties to the retail pet food industry. They told him "it's unbelievable how much U.S. pet food there is in Canada," Skotheim recalled.

"And I opened my mouth and said: 'Why don't we produce our own?'"

The three became partners, incorporating Horizon in August 2004. Their pet food began hitting the shelves in 2006.

An essential part of doing right by the pets is sourcing ingredients close to home – Skotheim says Horizon chose Rosthern for its operations because the area straddles Saskatchewan's northern and southern growing areas, affording the company a wide range of "some of the best ingredients in the world." Horizon pays a premium to ensure it's using the very best of these high-quality ingredients in the company's two dry pet food lines, one of which features low-glycemic grains and lots of fresh meat and the other a grain-free line featuring meat and low-glycemic pulse crops.

Jason Skotheim, Vice President of Operations for Horizon Pet Nutrition.



Photo: Kevin Hogarth

The "Complete" and "Legacy" lines are premium pet foods that save pet owners money in the short and long run, he says. High-quality ingredients make the food more "bio-available" to pets, leaving the animals feeling full with less food than what's required from some of the other brands, says Skotheim. Their coats are shinier and their energy levels remain high much longer because the food "burns" slower.

Horizon's biggest challenge is getting its food into pet dishes, says Skotheim. The company depends more on word of mouth than marketing budgets; it's important for people to know what the company is doing and how it is conducting its business.

But in addition to the high-quality ingredients grown in Horizon's backyard, Skotheim sees strong advantages to doing business in Saskatchewan. Saskatoon Regional Economic Development Authority undertook ground work that saved the partners a great deal of time and effort, he says, while the business community and residents of Rosthern have strongly supported the business from the beginning. That enthusiasm is reflected in Horizon's employees.

"People here are willing to work. They want to be *doing* – producing a product they can take pride in. And that really makes coming to work a lot of fun." ❧

# Solid Innovation Serves Mobile Sales Industry

By Dave Yanko



Photo: Kevin Hogarth

Craig Fisher, CEO of Solid Innovation.

Prince Albert's Craig Fisher had been in the banking business for 15 years in 1986 when he saw an opportunity to make a difference.

"I was deeply involved in business operations, lending, micro-computers, and computerization," says Fisher, adding he particularly enjoyed business banking and learning how businesses operated. "I left because I had a yearning for more pioneering – more development – and a wish to bring to business the power of micro-computing."

Fisher, founder and CEO of Solid Inno-

vation Inc. (Solid), made good on his wish.

Solid delivers software and services for the route accounting industry. What's route accounting? If you've ever been to your neighbourhood Mac's or 7-11 convenience store and noticed someone unloading products from a truck, stocking them on store shelves or removing product whose best-before date has past, you've seen the need for route accounting. Route accounting is the accounting behind mobile sales, sometimes referred to as direct store distribution.

Fisher says that every day some 20 to 25

different mobile sales representatives visit any given convenience store. They typically use hand-held computers (personal digital assistant or PDA) as well as mobile printers to carry out the invoicing, transaction recording and inventory control associated with mobile sales. Solid creates the specialized applications, software and services required by companies using this business model, and its software plugs in to a range of third-party business systems.

"We service the largest national network in Canada and arguably the largest association in North America," he says,

adding Solid also does business in the USA, Caribbean, South America, Hawaii and Cyprus.

Solid employs seven people and owns a comprehensive and highly automated website featuring an online store, service and support, online demonstrations and tutorials, and a searchable knowledgebase. In addition, the company works closely with more than 40 sales agents across North America.

The fundamentals of business transactions are much the same as they've always been, says Fisher. What's changed

is the technology that delivers them. And he believes Solid has been very good at ensuring the programs it provides run well using new technologies and equipment.

"Our goal today is to make these handheld computers easy to use and that's largely what we do. When you can put that kind of power in the hands of business people, not only do they get a lot more work done ... it is also done accurately."

Fisher is very optimistic about the future of his business and the

Saskatchewan economy, in general. He credits provincial government policy for much of his enthusiasm.

"We have jobs and we have our population climbing for the first time in, what, 30 years? There's no question that some of this is due to the luck of the draw, things like commodity prices. But I guarantee you: the whole attitude about business wanting to locate in Saskatchewan has markedly changed. It's a welcome 180-degree turn. I believe all residents of Saskatchewan will benefit from this change." ↘

## NRT

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NRT's training school offers an open, six-week training course in trucking. If candidates wish to become NRT truckers, however, they'll need to take an additional 12-month course.

NRT's clients are primarily uranium mining companies, although the firm works with a gold project, as well. NRT uranium company work involves shipping everything needed by a mine site in order to mine, mill and haul uranium, as well as to provide necessities for staff on site. The work includes shipping sealed containers of yellowcake (milled uranium oxide) to Saskatoon, where it is transferred to other carriers for shipment to its destination. Careful monitoring of the transport vehicles ensures no radiation has leaked from the yellowcake containers. In NRT's 23-year history, none ever has.

Safety is NRT's ultimate concern. Truck drivers travel through desolate areas – and through home communities – on what are often very challenging and narrow roads. And they do this in large, specialized trucks with two trailers, which can make driving very demanding for them and anyone who encounters them on the road – NRT promotes

the use of two-way radios among all who travel these northerly routes.

Featherstone says the company's success is a direct reflection of its attitude toward safety and service, adding "you'll never meet a more professional and tough group of people" than those who drive for NRT.

Featherstone believes the future looks bright for NRT and for Saskatchewan's economy. As the world moves to reduce its dependence on fossil fuels, she says, nuclear is an efficient way to generate and store the amount of clean energy the world needs.

"For us, there's a huge resource of people in northern Saskatchewan who are ready, willing and able to be involved in this economy. We have the advantage because our communities are the ones who have already stepped forward to say 'we're doing this'." ↘

**"For us, there's a huge resource of people in northern Saskatchewan who are ready, willing and able to be involved in this economy."**

# King of the Road

By Lyle Hewitt

Photo: Stuart Kasdorf Photographics

On the surface, roads seem fairly low-tech. After all, the basic technology of road building has been around since ancient times. But Curtis Berthelot, P.Eng., founder and president of PSI Technologies, is on a mission to see road technology evolve from the Flintstones to the Jetsons.

The Saskatoon-based company has already won acclaim for its innovative methods maintaining and strengthening roads with recycled materials. Berthelot, however, has even bigger dreams – a future where smart roads can report when they need to be repaired and might even in some cases be able to repair themselves.

## Road hogs

For people in the infrastructure industry, Saskatchewan is a little bit like New York City: if you can make it here, you can make it anywhere.

It is a well-known fact that Saskatchewan has more miles of road per capita than any other jurisdiction in Canada. Not only are there a lot of roads here, but they take a beating.

“The resource and agriculture sectors require heavy use of trucking. The climate is more severe and damaging to roads here than in many other places. As a province, we spend a lot of money maintaining those roads and that cost is just going to go up. Road building materials are getting scarcer. Cement is getting more expensive. There’s a great need here in



Curtis Berthelot, P.Eng, founder and president of PSI Technologies

Saskatchewan to find better and cheaper ways to maintain roads.”

Berthelot has made that challenge his life’s work.

## King of the road

Berthelot exudes that special sort of

enthusiasm typical of successful entrepreneurs.

“I was raised in the trucking industry and in university I studied material science. For me, there couldn’t be any better job in the world than working with roads and the transportation industry.”

It’s a quality he believes is essential for anyone in business.

“You have to love what you’re doing and have a vision for it. You have to be passionate about what you want to achieve. It’s the passion that will see you through. It fuels your discipline and pushes you to learn continually.”

Berthelot founded PSI in 1998 as a road engineering consulting firm. From the outset, the company had an aggressive research and development agenda, spending up to 30 per cent of their annual budget on R&D.

It was a risky policy for a company that started out as a one-man operation. Berthelot credits government research support with helping the company achieve many of its breakthroughs.

“We were very fortunate to have the support of the Saskatchewan road agencies and the National Research

Council Canada Industrial Research Assistance Program. In recent years, we’ve also had research investment from the provincial government. Even so, our research budget is a risk we have to manage.”

So far, it's a gamble that has paid off for PSI.

### Looking beneath the surface

One of PSI's first achievements was perfecting and marketing a system of ground penetrating radar.

The standard practice in the road building industry is that, when a section of road shows signs of deterioration, the entire stretch of road is ripped up and replaced. PSI system takes a much more sophisticated approach to road maintenance.

By scanning a stretch of road with radar and other diagnostic systems, PSI can create a patchwork analysis that allows road crews to carry out repairs with near-surgical precision only on the areas that need repair.

"We can tell if one area needs to be replaced but another area right beside it is in good shape and maybe another area close to that just needs to be strengthened rather than outright replaced."

### Better than the blue bin

The innovation Berthelot is most proud of is the company's road recycling technology. PSI's advances in materials science are allowing road crews to reuse asphalt paving on site, dramatically reducing costs and use of resources.

"If you look at the infrastructure industry worldwide, this has the potential to make a huge difference in our use of the planet's limited resources. It exceeds anything that could ever be achieved by household recycling programs. This could have a significant global impact. I feel very privileged to be involved with it."

Yet despite the promise of PSI's technology, Berthelot sometimes faces an uphill battle marketing it.

"The protocols of the modern road building industry were established just after World War II and they really haven't changed very much since then. People in my profession, the engineers, tend to be very conservative and cautious. That's

important and it's the right approach to take. We have to be careful to make sure the new systems are safe. On the other hand, it can be frustrating to deal with when you are trying to market innovate systems."

**"The protocols of the modern road building industry were established just after World War II and they really haven't changed very much since then."**

### Highway to the future

Berthelot's vision of sustainable infrastructure will help keep the highways of today in good shape but he isn't stopping there. He's already investing in developing the roads of tomorrow.

"I'd like to see roads built with sensors that could tell us when they need to be repaired and how much weight they can sustain. This would not only make road maintenance more efficient but it would also help the transportation industry by developing a more accurate system of weight ratings."

This isn't a far off dream. Last May, Berthelot signed a strategic alliance with another Saskatoon infrastructure innovator, International Road Dynamics (IRD), to design and market a system of road sensors under the brand name

Know Your Road™ and Road Load™.

Berthelot is also working on technology to allow Saskatchewan roads to fix themselves.

"This is technology that's been successfully tested in other places over the past 30 years. One such system involves making tires with special compounds that react with the polymers in the asphalt to help it 'heal' over time. So far this has worked best in warm climates but we are doing some materials research at the Canadian Light Source Synchrotron to try to come up with compounds that will work in Saskatchewan."

### Heading for the horizon

Berthelot's inventive drive has helped PSI grow rapidly in a short time. The company today employs around 70 people, sells its consulting services across Western Canada and enjoys annual gross sales in the range of \$8-10 million. Berthelot's goals, however, are much larger.

"In five to 10 years, I want to see this company making \$50 million a year in sales to customers world wide. Through our partnership with IRD, we have opportunities to market to emerging markets like India, China and South America. These are lofty goals but you have to aim high or you won't get anywhere."

No matter what happens in the future, Berthelot is determined to stay true to his Saskatchewan roots.

"This is where I was born and raised, and it's where I want to raise my kids. But it's more than that. Because we have a relatively small population, almost everyone in the business community knows each other and is supportive of each other. They know that one person's success helps everyone else. I don't think you could find that in too many other jurisdictions." —

# Pound-Maker

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for beef and to regain access to former ones like Japan and Korea.

But Wildeman says Pound-Maker has faced many challenges in the past and he's confident the company will continue to flourish. Part of his confidence comes from the advantages of doing business in rural Saskatchewan.

"Saskatchewan is home to about 50 per cent of the arable land base in Canada and we grow a whole lot of feed grain

here," says Wildeman. "We have a competitive advantage when accessing primary materials like grain and straw, and we also have a pretty good natural gas supply – pretty low-cost energy."

And while the competitive gap has narrowed between the Saskatchewan and Alberta workforces, Saskatchewan's strong work ethic remains a fundamental advantage to anyone doing business in this province, he adds.

Celebrating its 40th anniversary, Pound-Maker continues to thrive and be recognized as a groundbreaking enterprise.

"I think if you ask other community ventures – other feedlots and ethanol plants – who comes to mind when they think about this kind of operation, I think our name would be the first one mentioned," says Wildeman. "We've been very successful." 

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