'Pool Noodle' Manufacturer Helps Clean Up The Gulf

Stephen Tait, Associated Press Writer

MARYSVILLE, Mich. (AP) — Barry Jorgensen has never traveled to the Gulf of Mexico. That doesn't mean he isn't concerned about the extensive oil spill affecting that region.

"I'm disgusted with what is going on there," said Jorgensen, 50, of Marysville.

Now, Jorgensen is getting a chance to help.

As process engineer at Fagerdala World Foams in Marysville, he has helped create a product being used in the manufacture of booms used to prevent spilled undersea oil from spreading in the gulf.

The product?

Basically, it's an oversized "pool noodle."

Fagerdala, based in Sweden, makes traditional ones for various companies — colorful, hollow tubes children use to float around on in water.

These specialized products aren't the colorful variety, however. Instead, the foam "logs" — as those at theplant call them — are 6 feet long, 6 inches in diameter and completely white.

Charlie Cronenworth, the plant manager, said Fagerdala was contracted — through a professional contact with Walker-based Prestige Products — to make 3 million feet of pool noodles to float the booms for the gulf.

The booms themselves are manufactured by the Walker company, Cronenworth said. In addition to the noodles, the floating barriers use fabric skirting to keep oil in place.

Prestige Products has reported it has been making about 100 completed booms daily.

And, so far, Fagerdala has produced about 300,000 feet of the necessary noodles. That's a tenth of the goal.

Cronenworth said the increased work has meant adding the equivalent of six full-time employees to Fagerdala's work force for the past three weeks.

That work increase is likely to continue "for a minimum of a year," he said, as the

ongoing oil spill crisis creates a continued demand for containment booms in coastal areas.

Jorgensen said it took many hours and many tests to devise a way to make oversize noodles.

"We got it right," he said.

The company uses small pellets of recycled foam mixed with isobutene — a hydrocarbon that at normal temperatures is a colorless, odorless, flammable gas — to make the product.

Jorgensen said the mixture is melted, then highly pressurized, which keeps it in a liquid form. It then is cooled and depressurized, making the material expand to form the noodle.

The noodle then is cooled in a water bath, cut and shipped to Grand Rapids.

"It is a difficult product (to make)," Jorgensen said.

Jorgensen said he thinks of the generations of fishermen who are losing their livelihood and others whose lives are affected and is pleased at being able to help them in some way.

He's also proud the company is using recycled material. The material comes from the company's own operation — from scraps cut from other foam products — and from a sister plant in Marine City.

"We are kind of proud that we are using recycled material to help clean up an ecological mess," he said.

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