An Acadiana connection

From the Arctic Circle to Peru, Lafayette-based company is making its mark in the world

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LAFAYETTE — The crew of an Apache gunship landing at a training site in Grafenwoehr, Germany, will do so thanks to an Acadiana connection.

That same connection can be found in the steamy jungles on the Amazon on a pipeline project in Peru.

And it can also be found on the windswept, frozen surface of Sakhalin Island near the Arctic Circle.

All three of those sites are linked back to a two-story building just off Johnston Street on Town Center Parkway which is the headquarters of Soloco.

Soloco is the producer of something that is officially called the Dura-Base Composite Mat System. It's a plastic mat system that can be connected rapidly to build either a path or platform for heavy equipment to operate on without damaging the environment.

"One of the things that this company has done in the past is to provide board roads for the oil companies," said Keith Pearson, vice president of marketing and sales for Soloco.

A board road is, as the name implies, a road made of large boards that are placed side by side, allowing access to drilling sites or wellheads.

The old mats were fabricated out of wood, and that presented some problems," said Don A. Couvillon, marketing manager.

At one time, the company had its own mill where raw lumber was cut into the necessary boards to be used for the roads.

Now the company has its own manufacturing plant where about 35 employees churn out the sand-colored mats.

The plant is the result of a joint-venture project between Soloco and the Senus Family to produce the Loma Co.

"One of the problems with that practice was that we were cutting down the forests," Couvillon said. "Did we really want to cut down our forests for a product?"

In addition to the environmental concerns, there were economic concerns, Pearson said.

The lifespan of the boards was about three to five years -- or less, depending on moisture in the soil. In addition to their short lifespans, they were also very heavy, and that meant added transportation costs for the company using them.

"In 1996, we began research and development into something that would be more economical, more cost effective and more suitable for sensitive environments," Pearson said. By 1999, with all of the work being done at its Lafayette-based office, the company developed the Dura-Base mat system.

Using the mat system is as simple as putting a model kit together. The mats are plowed to each other and can form a road or cover an entire field for an onshore drilling rig.

Unlike the hardwood boards, the mats distribute the weight evenly, avoiding any damage to the ground underneath.

"Few people in the public realize how much environmental concerns are thought of by the oil and gas industry," Pearson said. "I believe that was a lot of ignorance and arrogance on the part of See ACADIANA on Page 11B
The mat system was a hit, Couvillon said, for both the economic and environmental reasons that the company had hoped for.

"The old hardwood mats could not be decontaminated," Couvillon said. "If you put them down in a marsh, you could never get them really clean."

A company wanting to go into areas such as the swamps and marshes of south Florida could not use boards that were contaminated. The boards could contain seeds of a type of plant life that could ruin the local ecosystem. The lighter weight mat made it easier to carry on a single load, cutting down expenses and transportation costs. And the lifespan was another selling point.

While the boards in the hardwood mats might last less than five years, the lifespan of the Dura-Base mats is estimated to be about 20 years.

"After it was developed and marketed, we realized that there were other applications and other markets that we could try for," Couvillon said.

"There's a thrill to realize that something produced here in Acadiana is being used in so many areas," Pearson said. The military liked what it saw, and the Dura-Base mat system has been involved in about 17 military exercises since 1980.

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The mat system has been used at training bases for Apache gunships in Germany and in several landings where Marines and Navy personnel needed a quick path laid down for vehicles to move inland from landing bays and landing craft.

Solco is looking at three major markets, Couvillon said: the oil and gas industry; the military; and heavy construction.

"I don't think many people realize the impact that companies in south Louisiana are having on the world," Pearson said. "We have projects that our mats are being used on from the Arctic Circle down to Peru. And all of this was done here in Acadiana."