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contents

SPRING 2025, VOLUME 141, NUMBER 1

FEATURES

COLUMNS

DEPARTMENTS

SERVICES

Shaking Things Up

By John O'Brien, Managing Editor
jobrien@paperage.com

Two big transactions have taken place in the past 9 months in the packaging sector of the paper industry. First, Smurfit Kappa on July 5, 2024 completed its acquisition of WestRock, creating Smurfit Westrock. And I need to point out that there is no longer a capital "R" in Westrock.

As you noticed from the cover, Tony Smurfit is our Executive Papermaker of the Year, and although he has been – and continues to be – on a comprehensive tour of mills and converting plants in North America, Europe and Latin America, he was gracious enough to answer a few questions we had for him (see pages 22-25). He and his team have a lot of work in front of them and I wish them success in the future.

The second big transaction is International Paper's acquisition of DS Smith, which was completed on January 30 of this year under the leadership of its relatively new CEO, Andy Silvernail. Mr. Silvernail took over as IP's CEO on May 1, 2024 and then elected as Chairman on Oct. 1.

Beyond the actual IP and DS Smith transaction, what I found to be really interesting has been the straightforward comments from Silvernail about IP and how he and his team are implementing dramatic change across the company, especially when it comes to capital investment.

The following is just a fraction of candid 'color' provided by Silvernail during his fourth quarter 2024 earnings call on Jan. 30, 2025:

"…no offense to anybody, it's a ludicrous process that we have right now and we are radically changing it in terms of time, in terms of responsibility, in terms of who has authority and signing responsibility and we will dramatically change that time line. And then changing that time line, we take the handcuffs off of our people.

"And it's not just the dollars invested. You've got literally thousands of people who are chasing things that are unproductive and those people could be working with our customers on innovation. They could be working on productivity. And we need to take the handcuffs off our people and allow them to freaking run.

"If you grab any one of our mill managers and you were to ask her or him, what does it take to win? They know, they know. And we have, in many ways, handcuffed them with decisions on capital investment, with decisions that are very bureaucratic and frankly, not setting and upholding very high expectations.

"I believe there ought to be perfect alignment between our owners, our Board, the management team and everybody who works in this company. There should be no daylight between the expectations of action and the expectations of performance between anybody."

However, the most relatable statement from Silvernail was his back-to-basics take on accountability.

"A lot of people complain about having to do these kinds of things and do quarterly calls. I think they're great. I grew up getting a report card. You get a report card and you have to go home and you have to talk about why you got an A or why you got a D. And there's no hiding. And I love it. I grew up playing sports; scoreboards are great, right? You are what the scoreboard says you are. There is no confusion in this organization about what the scoreboard says we have been. No confusion at all. And our goal is to be one heck of a lot better."

I also wish success to Andy Silvernail and IP/DS Smith going forward, and look forward to following the progress.

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NORTH AMERICA

International Paper to Close Red River Containerboard Mill and Other Facilities Across US

International Paper in February announced the permanent closure of the company's Red River containerboard mill in Campti, Louisiana; a recycling plant in Phoenix, Arizona; a box plant in Hazleton, Pennsylvania, and a sheet feeder facility in St. Louis, Missouri.

All facilities will cease operations by the end of April 2025.

The Red River containerboard mill closure is expected to reduce the company's containerboard capacity by approximately 800,000 tons on an annualized basis.

In total, 495 hourly employees and 179 salaried employees will be affected. The company will work to minimize the impact on employees by using attrition, retirements and

current vacancies at other International Paper locations. Team members at these locations will receive outplacement assistance, access to mental health support resources and where possible, severance benefits.

"The decision to close any facility is difficult because of the impact on our team members, their families and the surrounding communities," said Tom Hamic, executive vice president and president, North American Packaging Solutions, International Paper. "We greatly appreciate the contributions from our departing team members and will do all we can to support them."

International Paper noted that it is undergoing a transformational journey to become a stronger sustainable packaging solutions company. A critical step in this journey is to streamline IP's footprint to focus investments on facilities that will best serve customers and accelerate

ND Paper Plans to Restart PM 25 at Biron Mill in Wisconsin

ND Paper announced plans to restart PM 25 at its Biron, Wisconsin, pulp and paper mill. PM 25 was idled in April of 2024.

PM 25, which underwent a grade conversion rebuild about 5 years ago, is now designed to produce recycled linerboard and corrugating medium.

ND Paper said that it expects to restart PM 25 in the second half of 2025, adding additional capacity to the Biron mill's existing recycled packaging product portfolio.

In addition, the mill's other paper machine, PM 26, was converted from coated publication papers to recycled packaging grades in 2022.

"With the successful conversion of PM 26 at Biron to recycled packaging and the growing demand for ND Paper's packaging products, the company is pleased to add the capacity of PM 25 back to its portfolio," ND Paper said.

ND Paper currently offers 30# – 70# Recycled Kraft, and 23# – 35# Recycled Liner and Recycled Medium. The 100% recycled furnish is supplied by a newly built 1,400-ton OCC pulping facility and a newly built 700-ton OCC pulping facility.

First Quality Tissue Selects Defiance, Ohio, as Location for New Tissue Mill

First Quality Tissue has selected Defiance, Ohio, as the location for a new tissue mill that will produce Ultra-Premium Towel and Tissue products.

In August of 2024, First Quality announced plans to expand its tissue production capacity with the installation of two new Thru-Air-Dried (TAD) paper machines, along with associated converting facilities, at a yet to be determined location.

The company estimates the first of the two new machines to be operational in the first part of 2028.

This new investment will add additional capacity to First Quality's existing operations,which currently includes eight TAD machines at two manufacturing sites located in Lock Haven, Pennsylvania, and Anderson, South Carolina.

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NORTH AMERICA

Greif to Close URB Mill in Fitchburg, MA; Cease Production on A1 Containerboard Machine in Austell, GA

Greif will permanently close the containerboard and uncoated recycled paperboard (URB) mill in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, and permanently cease production on the Number 1 Paperboard Machine (A1) in Austell, Georgia.

"Decisions like these are extremely difficult because of the impact it has on our colleagues and their families, as well as the larger community," said President and CEO Ole Rosgaard. "We are grateful to our colleagues in Austell and Fitchburg for their contributions to the company and are committed to helping them navigate next steps by providing severance benefits and outplacement assistance."

In total, approximately 140 positions will be impacted. Ceasing production at A1 — a non-integrated URB asset for the company — is a result of increased cost and declining demand in its major end use markets of furniture, books, and binders. The combination of high operating costs and the need for significant capital investment were the determining factors in the decision to close the Fitchburg mill.

Together, these actions will reduce the containerboard capacity of Greif's mill network by 100,000 tons, and URB capacity by 90,000 tons.

"We believe strongly in the fundamentals of our business. These strategic actions will refine our participation in the market and help us maximize the profitability of our mill network and our overall business portfolio" Rosgaard said.

The company expects to cease production on the A1 asset by the end of March 2025 and Fitchburg by May 2025.

Saica Group to Build $110 Million Corrugated Packaging Plant in Anderson, Indiana

Spain-based Saica Group has announced plans to invest about $100 million in the construction of a new corrugated manufacturing facility in Anderson, Indiana. Construction will begin in May 2025. This will be Saica's second corrugated plant in the US. In April of 2022, Saica started up a new corrugated packaging plant in Hamilton, Ohio.

The new 350,000-square-foot facility in Anderson is designed to produce over 1,200,000 MSF of corrugated packaging. The site will include manufacturing, converting and production areas, along with a warehouse and office space.

The plant is also connected to a railroad line which allows to unload paper rolls while reducing transport costs. This site will also serve as a backup plant for clients already being served from Saica Pack Hamilton.

"Saica is committed to stability and long-term growth in the US. This investment is the proof that we are moving forward with our plans in the American continent as we are convinced that we can provide products that will differentiate us in a crowded market," said Susana Alejandro, President and CEO of Saica Group.

After construction is complete, Saica expects to create more than 50 full-time jobs during the first two years of the plant's operation and more than 100 after it has completed its ramp-up phase some years after the startup.

Based on the Saica's plans to create more than 100 new jobs in Indiana by the end of 2030, the Indiana Economic Development Corporation (IEDC) committed an investment in Saica Group of up to $2 million in incentive-based tax credits and up to $150,000 in training grants.

The IEDC also offered up to $300,000 in Industrial Development Grant Fund incentives to support infrastructure improvements surrounding the new site. These tax credits are performance-based.

Saica expects to start operations at the new corrugated facility during Q4 2026.

Kruger to Diversify Production at Wayagamack Mill to Include Label Paper Grades

Kruger will invest $6.5 million to implement an innovation project aimed at diversifying production at its Wayagamack Mill in Trois-Rivieres, Quebec, Canada.

The initiative will enable the production of label paper grades, Kruger said.

"The new, state-of-the-art equipment will enhance the mill's capacity for innovation, versatility and sustainability, helping to secure the future of its operations and its 285 jobs," Kruger stated in a press release.

The initiative was made possible by a $2.5 million funding from the Government of Quebec under the Programme Innovation Bois of the ministere des Ressources naturelles et des Forets.

In 2017, the Wayagamack Mill started to shift to specialty paper, including backing paper. The mill will continue to manufacture various coated paper grades.

RECOGNITION

Sappi North America CEO Mike Haws Named Mainebiz 2025 Business Leader of the Year

Sappi North America announced that its President and CEO Michael "Mike" Haws has been recognized as a Mainebiz 2025 Business Leader of the Year in the CEO of the Year category. The Mainebiz Business Leaders of the Year awards recognize executives across Maine's industries who have demonstrated outstanding leadership, innovation and commitment to economic growth in the state.

The recognition highlights Haws' leadership in driving environmental innovation, workforce development and strategic investment, strengthening both Sappi's industry standing and its impact on Maine communities.

Under Haws' leadership, Sappi North America is in the final stage of completing the $400-million-plus transformation of Paper Machine 2 at the company's Somerset Mill in Maine.


Mike Haws

"Mike's leadership has been instrumental in Sappi's growth and transformation," said Patti Groh, Director of Marketing and Corporate Communications, Sappi North America. "His vision has not only strengthened our business but deepened our roots in Maine, where our mills and our people play such an important role in the local economy and community fabric."

Beyond capital investment, Haws has championed employee engagement, safety and recruitment. Under his guidance, Sappi has maintained its EcoVadis Platinum rating for the fifth consecutive year, placing it in the top 1% of organizations globally for sustainability. He has also prioritized modern workforce strategies-including digital outreach and co-op programs-to ensure a strong pipeline of talent for the future of manufacturing.

"I'm honored to be named a Mainebiz 2025 Business Leader of the Year," said Haws. "This award reflects the hard work and dedication of our entire Sappi team, who continue to push boundaries in both innovation and environmental stewardship."

NORTH AMERICA

International Paper to Build $260 Million Greenfield Box Plant in Iowa

International Paper (IP) has acquired land in Waterloo, Iowa, for the construction of a state-of-the-art corrugated box plant.

According to the Iowa Economic Development Authority (IEDA), IP plans to construct a 900,000-square-foot corrugated products manufacturing facility.

"The project represents a $260 million capital investment and is expected to create 90 jobs incented at a qualifying wage of at least $23.01 per hour," the IEDA said in a written statement.

In addition, the IEDA board awarded IP tax benefits through the High Quality Jobs program.

The new box plant in Waterloo will be in close proximity to IP's containerboard mill in Cedar River, which produces recycled containerboard from Old Corrugated Containers (OCC).

Commenting on the Waterloo plant during a fourth quarter 2024 earnings call, IP's Chairman and CEO, Andy Silvernail, told analysts, "The facility will be strategically located close to some of our best customers, specifically in the protein segment, while being

in a freight advantage distance from one of our mills. The plan is to start construction this year and targeting for a start-up in 2026. So again, it's a best-in-class facility designed specifically to delight our customers, achieve a low-cost position to drive profitable growth."

Sylvamo to Invest $145 Million in South Carolina Paper Mill and Sheeting Plant

Sylvamo has announced major investments at its two South Carolina facilities. The company plans to invest approximately $145 million in high-return projects to reduce costs and significantly enhance the capabilities at its mill in Eastover, South Carolina.

Sylvamo will invest approximately $100 million to speed up one of its paper machines by the end of 2026. The investment will enable the machine to produce approximately 60,000 additional short tons of uncoated freesheet annually.

The company will also invest roughly

$45 million for a new replacement sheeter at its Sumter, South Carolina, sheeting plant. The state-of-the-art cutsize sheeter will lower costs and add flexibility to service customers when it's online by late 2026.

"We believe investing in our low-cost assets will strengthen our competitive advantage. Eastover is one of the most competitive paper mills in the world, and it will continue to be an important part of our story for years to come," said Jean-Michel Ribiéras, Sylvamo's Chairman and CEO.

Sylvamo is also entering a 20-year partnership to outsource its Eastover woodyard operations. Modernization will enable more efficient, reliable, cost-effective wood processing and additional flexibility. It will also allow the company to avoid approximately $75 million in capital spending over the next five years.

Irving Paper to Permanently Shut Down 50 Percent of Its Papermaking Operations

Irving Paper, located in Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada, will permanently shut down 50 percent of its operations as a direct result of New Brunswick's uncompetitive industrial electricity rates.

The company made the announcement to the 140 impacted employees on Feb. 26, effective immediately.

In remarks to workers, Irving Pulp & Paper Vice President Mark Mosher said, "Our employees are not just colleagues, they're family. That's why the decision to permanently downsize is a difficult one, but necessary to ensure the company's long-term sustainability in the face of skyrocketing electricity rates.

"As New Brunswick manufacturers face more and more significant headwinds, it is becoming increasingly difficult to shoulder the impact of soaring electricity costs and remain competitive in an international market," Mosher explained. "We have been working collaboratively with the current Government of New Brunswick toward a solution, but presently there is no viable alternative for full operation of both paper machines.

"We will continue to work with the provincial government to try to develop a plan to allow the continued operation of the remaining 50 percent of the mill, prior to the additional 10 percent electricity rate increase on April 1, 2025."

Irving Paper is a manufacturer of graphic paper for use in magazines, catalogs, newspapers and advertising flyers. Over 95 percent of Irving Paper's annual manufacturing output (400,000 tonnes of paper) is exported to 65 countries.

EUROPE

UPM to Permanently Close Paper Mill in Ettringen, Germany

UPM in March announced plans to permanently close its paper mill in Ettringen, Germany, during July 2025, which will reduce the company's annual capacity of uncoated mechanical paper by 270,000 tonnes.

Should the plans be implemented, the number of positions affected in Ettringen is estimated at 235.

"In a dynamically changing market that has been characterized by overcapacity for years, operational competitiveness is key to underpinning our long-term commitment to the still sizeable graphic paper markets," said Gunnar Eberhardt, Executive Vice President, UPM Communication Papers.

"With the plans announced [on March 11], we are continuing to selectively adjust our paper capacity to a profitable customer demand. This would ensure an efficient and flexible use of our remaining paper assets," Eberhardt added.

Operational Efficiency Measures

By benchmarking and sharing best practices across all mills, UPM Communication Papers aims to enhance efficiency, improve cross-departmental flexibility, and streamline organizational structures within its mill operations in Augsburg, Schongau, Kaukas, Kymi, Rauma, Jämsänkoski, Blandin and Caledonian.

In addition, UPM sees further optimization potential by centralizing processes and organizational structures within logistics operations in the German mills.

All affected mills and functions will follow up with their own implementation steps during 2025, and the company is committed to working closely with affected employees, handling possible employment actions in accordance with local legislation.

Considering all announced planned changes, UPM said there would be a total of 462 positions impacted: 107 in Finland, 314 in Germany, 34 in the UK, and 7 in the USA.

EUROPE

Stora Enso Starts-up New Board Machine at Oulu Mill

Stora Enso's new consumer packaging board line at its Oulu pulp and paper mill in Finland has started production ramp-up. The first customer deliveries are expected in the second quarter of 2025.

In October of 2022, Stora Enso announced its decision to convert the remaining idled paper machine (PM 6) at the Oulu mill into a highly flexible consumer packaging board line for folding boxboard (FBB) and coated unbleached kraft (CUK), with an annual capacity of 750,000 tonnes. The project is being completed according to the original timeline and budget of approximately

EUR 1 billion.

Voith performed the full-line paper machine conversion for Stora Enso.

The new packaging board line is expected to reach EBITDA breakeven by the year-end 2025 and full capacity during 2027, at which point annual sales are anticipated to be approximately EUR 800 million.

According to Stora Enso, renewable packaging is its largest growth segment. The targeted consumer products markets are frozen, chilled and dry food, as well as beverage multi-packaging, primarily for customers in Europe and North America.

Following this investment and the earlier conversion completed in 2021, the Oulu site will produce unbleached pulp, kraftliner, and consumer board in both reels and sheets.

Metsä Board to Close Tako Board Mill in Tampere, Finland

Metsä Board has announced its decision to permanently close the Tako board mill in Tampere, Finland, with production expected to end during the second quarter of 2025.

The Tako mill has two folding boxboard machines with annual production capacities of 70,000 and 140,000 tonnes. This represents approximately 13% of the company's current annual production capacity of approximately 1.6 million tonnes of folding boxboard.

Mika Joukio, CEO of Metsä Board, said, "The change negotiations with the personnel were conducted in a constructive spirit. Finding new jobs for the people being laid off is our primary goal, and we also aim to help with employment by offering reemployment training and support."

Metsä Board noted that the closure of the Tako mill will not affect customer deliveries, as the company's total annual folding boxboard production capacity is sufficient to meet current demand. After the mill closure, Metsä Board's annual folding boxboard capacity will be approximately 1.4 million tonnes.

AUSTRALIA

Norske Skog to Sell Boyer Mill for NOK 190 Million

Norske Skog has agreed to sell its Boyer mill, located in Tasmania, Australia, to Boyer Capital Pty Ltd, for about NOK 190 million (approx. US$18 million).

The Norske Skog Boyer mill has an annual production capacity of 150,000 tonnes of newsprint and 135,000 tonnes of LWC (lightweight coated) magazine paper.

"We are very pleased to conclude our orderly exit from Australasia with the divestment of the Boyer mill," said Geir Drangsland, CEO of Norske Skog. "The discussions with David Marriner and Boyer Capital have been ongoing for some time and we believe they represent the ideal owner to both continue the production of publication paper and develop the industrial site for future activities. Norske Skog will now focus fully on the successful ramp-up of containerboard production at the Golbey mill and completing the BCTMP study at the Saugbrugs mill."

Completion of the sale is expected during the first quarter of 2025, subject to customary closing conditions.

Following the sale, Norske Skog will have four mills, all situated in Europe, with a total combined capacity of 760,000 tonnes of containerboard, 840,000 tonnes of newsprint, 200,000 tonnes of SC magazine paper, and 265,000 tonnes of LWC magazine paper.

NEW ZEALAND

Oji Fibre to Permanently Cease Producing Paper at Kinleith Mill

Oji Fibre Solutions in February announced its decision to permanently shut paper machine 6 (PM6) at its Kinleith pulp and paper mill in Tokoroa, New Zealand.

PM6, the mill's only paper machine, has the capacity to produce approximately 330,000 tonnes per year of kraft linerboard (from virgin fiber and recycled fiber).

The mill also produces about 265,000 tonnes per year of bleached softwood market pulp.

On Nov. 20, 2024, Oji Fibre CEO Dr. Jon Ryder first announced proposed plans to simplify Kinleith Mill's operations by focusing on pulp and discontinuing "loss-making" paper production.

"Manufacturing paper has become unprofitable. Paper production at Kinleith Mill has suffered significant losses for several years and we see no prospect of the situation

improving," Dr. Ryder said at that time.

After a few months of consultations with employees and unions, Oji Fibre determined that shutting PM6 would be the only path to simplify operations at Kinleith Mill and further stabilize and strengthen the company.

"After extensive work and considering a variety of options and feedback from Unions and our team, we see no feasible alternative to our proposal to simplify operations, which will keep Kinleith Mill operating, maintain jobs in the region and continue reliable supply of product to our customers," explained Dr. Ryder.

"Therefore, we will proceed with our proposal to transition the mill to a new operating model by focusing on pulp and ceasing loss-making paper production. We can confirm, we will permanently shut the PM6 paper machine at Kinleith Mill at the end of June 2025 and move to a paper import model for our packaging operations.

"We plan to continue producing paper at Kinleith Mill through to the end of June 2025. This provides a period in which options for affected staff can be explored; while ensuring we meet our customer obligations and provide a smooth transition to alternative paper supply arrangements for our packaging operations," Dr. Ryder concluded.

INDUSTRY SUPPLIERS

Valmet to Deliver TAD Tissue Machine to Irving Consumer Products in Georgia

Valmet will deliver a third Advantage ThruAir Drying (TAD) tissue machine to Irving Consumer Product's mill in Macon, Georgia.

The value of the order was not disclosed.

Prior to this machine order, Valmet has delivered two TAD machines to the Macon mill with successful startups in 2019 and 2021.

"I am very pleased to announce our Phase 3 expansion at Irving Tissue Macon. The USD 600 million investment will add another 100 jobs and include a third ThruAir Drying papermaking machine, additional converting lines, and a new fully automated warehouse," stated Robert K. Irving, President of Irving Consumer Products.

Valmet will deliver a complete tissue production line, including stock preparation equipment. The new line will feature an Advantage ThruAir tissue machine equipped with an OptiFlo II TIS headbox, ThruAir Dryers, an air system, and an Advantage SoftReel reel.

The scope of the order also includes mist and dust control systems, automation systems, basic mill engineering, Valmet Performance Center services, and services for installation and commissioning.

Once operational, the production line will increase Irving Consumer Products' annual tissue production capacity by 75,000 tons.

The startup of the new machine is planned for 2027.

Voith Paper to Expand Roll Service Center in West Monroe, Louisiana

Voith announced that it is modernizing and expanding its roll service center in West Monroe, Louisiana. The expansion will be Voith Paper's largest, most recent investment in North America, underscoring its firm commitment to the future of the paper industry.

The West Monroe roll service facility first opened in 1991.

The investment will add needed workspace for continued growth in addition to adding jobs. The project will result in a faster and more seamless service experience, expand capacity and enhance logistics processes. The increased space will also provide additional training areas for employees.

"At Voith Paper, we are committed to the paper industry and meeting the needs of our customers," said Jeff Berg, Vice President Operations FRS NA at Voith Paper. "By investing in the West Monroe location and optimizing our internal processes, we will provide more efficient, reliable and timely support to paper producers in North America. This project underscores our long-term commitment to our customers, employees and the local community."

The expansion project is expected to begin in mid-2025 and continue throughout the year. The facility will remain fully operational during this time.

Pritzker Private Capital Agrees to Acquire Buckman

Pritzker Private Capital ("PPC") in March announced the signing of a definitive agreement to acquire Buckman, a family-owned specialty solutions provider for water treatment and industrial processes. PPC will invest alongside members of the Buckman family and management to provide additional resources to support the company's growth, product innovation and market expansion.

Terms of the transaction were not disclosed.

Founded in 1945 by Stanley Buckman, Buckman has been continuously owned by the Buckman family since its founding. Buckman serves the world's largest ingredients, chemicals and industrial companies with solutions for water processing, paper and packaging recycling and real-time digital tools to monitor and regulate product dosing. The company operates six manufacturing hubs and more than 1,300 employees serve customers in more than 90 countries around the world.

Buckman's current leadership team, including CEO Junai Maharaj, will continue to lead the company post-closing.

The deal is subject to customary closing conditions and is expected to close in the second quarter 2025.

Optimize Rolls, Maximize Savings

The paper industry is currently facing a wave of rising costs. With fiber and energy prices continuing to rise, mills must find new ways to boost efficiency without compromising quality or production capacity. One area that can significantly improve efficiency is roll maintenance.

A key aspect is maintaining calender rolls at their required tolerances. Research shows that grinding calender rolls to tight tolerances reduces caliper variation. This enables paper mills to achieve desirable sheet properties with less loading and therefore, less fiber. By minimizing excessive calender loading, fiber savings become achievable, easing the impact of rising pulp costs.

Calender rolls are not the only opportunity for roll maintenance improvements. Precision ground press rolls improve press section efficiency, allowing for the removal of excess water, thereby minimizing wet streaks in the sheet. Press section dewatering is much more energy-efficient than water removal in the dryers. Increased press section effectiveness means that the sheet needs less time in the dryers. This improvement enables higher machine speeds and greater production with the same amount of steam generation, cutting energy costs per production volume.

Precision Roll Grinders offers industry-leading tight tolerance grinding with four strategically located facilities, providing mills with the expertise and accessibility needed to optimize roll performance. The benefits of Precision Roll Grinders' tight tolerance grinding go beyond just theory: real-world data confirms its impact on efficiency and cost savings. Precision Roll Grinders' Application Engineering Team works closely with mills to analyze machine performance, identify roll-related opportunities, and develop precision grinding solutions that maximize productivity. Their team helps mills achieve measurable improvements by leveraging decades of experience and data.

Study results illustrate how paper mills utilize precision-ground rolls to unlock fiber savings, increase machine speed, and improve energy efficiency. **Figure 1** illustrates the distribution of moisture variation before and after installing precision-ground press rolls, highlighting the 17.5% reduction in moisture variation. Given the improved moisture control, **Figure 2** demonstrates the resulting increase in machine speed, which allows for an additional 8.5 million linear feet of paper to be produced annually,without requiring additional steam generation. Similarly, **Figure 3** shows that installing precision-ground calender rolls reduces caliper variation by 27%, enabling the mill to use less loading on the calender and less fiber in its sheet.

Precision Roll Grinders' industry-leading expertise, technology, and insight into roll grinding solutions go beyond providing service. Precision Roll Grinders serves as a strategic partner, helping mills proactively optimize roll performance rather than simply reacting to wear and breakdowns. In a time when efficiency is critical, precision roll grinding is not just maintenance, it's a strategic advantage.

MORE EFFICIENT PRESS SECTION DEWATERING

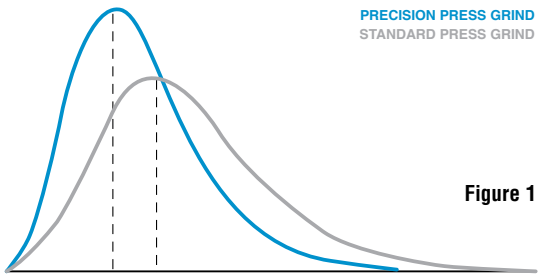

Figure 1

17.5% Improvement in Moisture Variation

REDUCED DRYING TIME NEEDED

More consistent moisture requires less time in dryers

8.5 M LINEAR FEET OF ADDITIONAL PAPER PRODUCED ANNUALLY WITHOUT ADDITIONAL STEAM GENERATION

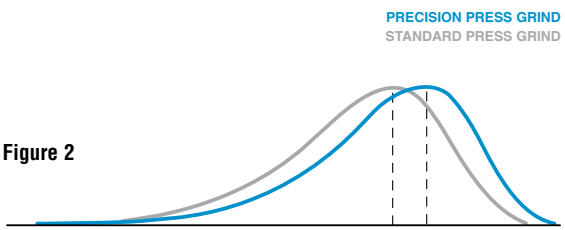

Figure 2

20 FPM Increase in Machine Speed

PRECISION CALENDER ROLLS REQUIRE LESS LOADING AND LESS FIBER IN SHEET

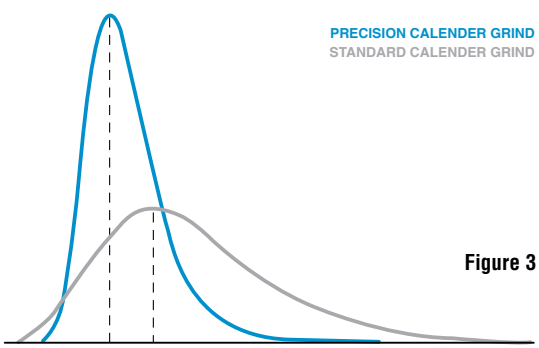

Figure 3

27% Caliper Variation Improvement

Sofidel Takes Delivery of New Yankee Dryer at Circleville Mill in Ohio

Sofidel's tissue mill in Circleville, Ohio, took delivery of a new Yankee Dryer on March 2. The Yankee Dryer will be installed on a new Valmet DCT 200 tissue machine, which will be the mill's third machine and is scheduled for start-up in the third quarter of 2025.

The Circleville mill, which started-up in October of 2018, currently operates two Valmet Advantage NTT tissue machines. Each machine has the capacity to produce 70,000 metric tons per year.

Long Voyage from Karlstadt

The Yankee Dryer, which weighs approximately 321,000 lbs (160.5 tons) and has a diameter of 18.5 feet and a width of 22 feet, was manufactured at Valmet's facility in Karlstadt, Sweden, before being shipped across Europe to the Bremen Ports in Germany.

The journey to the United States began on December 12, 2024, and took about a month to reach the port of New Orleans, arriving on January 14, 2025.

Due to the size and weight of the Yankee Dryer, transportation took place in stages, with the equipment traveling approximately 40-60 miles per day in compliance with road weight restrictions. The full route plan from Portsmouth to Circleville had been carefully mapped out to ensure safe and efficient delivery. The addition of the new Yankee Dryer helped further enhance the facility's capacity and efficiency.

After clearing the New Orleans port, the Yankee Dryer embarked on its journey up the Mississippi River, continued along the Ohio River, and finally arrived in Portsmouth, Ohio, on February 22.

After some preparation, the dryer began its escorted journey to the Sofidel Circleville facility on February 27 and was delivered on March 2.

The new tissue machine has a production capacity of 70,000 tons per year. When fully operational, the Circleville mill will reach a total production capacity of over 200,000 tons per year. ■

APRIL 23-25, 2025
PPC Spring Outlook & Strategies Conference
Paperboard Packaging Council
JW Marriott Indianapolis
Indianapolis, Indiana, USA
paperbox.org/event

APRIL 30 - MAY 2, 2025
AICC 2025 Spring Meeting
The Independent Packaging Association
Hyatt Regency Coconut Point Resort
Bonita Springs, Florida, USA
www.aiccbox.org

MAY 4-7, 2025
TAPPICon 2025
TAPPI
Minneapolis Convention Center
Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA
tappicon.org

MAY 20-21, 2025
Converters Expo
BNP Media Packaging Group
Lambeau Field
Green Bay, Wisconsin, USA
www.packagingstrategies.com/converters-expo

MAY 28-31, 2025
PACWEST Conference 2025
PACWEST
Fairmont Château Whistler
Whistler, BC, Canada
www.pacwestconference.com

JUNE 1-3, 2025
International Pulp Week
Pulp and Paper Products Council
Pan Pacific Vancouver
Vancouver, BC, Canada
internationalpulpweek.com

JUNE 2-3, 2025
AICC 2025 Southeast Summit
AICC, The Independent Packaging Association
The Westin Atlanta Gwinnett
Duluth, Georgia, USA
www.aiccbox.org/events/event_list.asp

JUNE 24, 2025
2025 WPC Annual Meeting
Wisconsin Paper Council
Lambeau Field
Green Bay, Wisconsin, USA
www.wipaper.org/event-calendar

AUGUST 11-13, 2025
Fastmarkets Forest Products Latin America Conference
Fastmarkets
Renaissance Hotel São Paulo
São Paulo, Brazil
www.fastmarkets.com/events

SEPTEMBER 16-18, 2025
Paper Meets LIVE! 2025
AF&PA and NPTA
Opal Sands Resort
Clearwater Beach, Florida, USA
www.afandpa.org/events

SEPTEMBER 29-30, 2025
Specialty Papers US
Smithers
Chicago, Illinois, USA
www.specialtypaperconference.com

OCTOBER 18-24, 2025
CorrExpo 2025
TAPPI
The Westin Savannah Harbor Golf Resort & Spa
Savannah, Georgia, USA
events.tappi.org/event/correxpo/home

PAPER


Jaakko Nikkilä

- *Billerud* has appointed **Jaakko Nikkilä** as President, Billerud Europe and member of the Group Management Team, effective May 1. Formerly, Nikkilä held the position of Executive Vice President at UPM, heading the business area Specialty Paper. Nikkilä will replace **Matthew Hirst** who left Billerud on January 31, 2025. **Ivar Vatne**, Billerud's President and CEO, is acting as the interim President of Europe until April 30.


Bernardo Larraín-Matte

- Chilean pulp and paper producer *CMPC* has nominated **Bernardo Larraín Matte** as its new Chairman, along with his renewal as a member of the Board. Matte will replace **Luis Felipe Gazitúa Achondo**, who has served as Chairman of CMPC since 2016. The leadership change will be effective as of the company's shareholders meeting in April.


Gregory Boisson

- *Fedrigoni Group* announced that **Gregory Boisson** has joined the organization as General Manager for Fedrigoni Special Papers North America. Boisson brings extensive experience from his tenure at Imerys, where he has held progressively senior leadership roles.


Drew Gardner

- *Finch Paper* has appointed **Drew Gardner** as Chief Executive Officer, effective February 1. Gardner succeeds **Debabrata Mukherjee**, who has led the company since 2013 and will continue his service as Chairman of the Board. Gardner joined Finch Paper Paper as Vice President, Operations in July 2023 and was named President and CFO in April 2024. Prior to Finch, he was a Senior Associate with Atlas Holdings, which has owned and operated Finch since 2007.


Tim Nicholls

- *International Paper* has named **Tim Nicholls** as Executive Vice President and President of DS Smith, an International Paper company. Nicholls has more than 30 years of industry experience including a variety of business and finance leadership roles. He has served as the CFO of International Paper since 2018 and also held the CFO role from 2007 to 2011. From 2014 to 2018, Nicholls led IP's Packaging business in North and South America. IP also announced that **Lance Loeffler** has joined the company as Senior Vice President and CFO. Prior to IP, Loeffler served as CFO at Halliburton for four years and most recently was the SVP, Middle East and North Africa Region.


Lance Loeffler


Shruti Singhal

- *Mativ Holdings* on March 11 announced the appointment of **Shruti Singhal**, current member of Mativ's Board of Directors, as President and Chief Executive Officer, effective March 11. Singhal succeeds **Julie Schertell**, who has stepped down as President and Chief Executive Officer, and as a director. Singhal previously served as CEO of Galata Chemicals and Chroma Color, and has held roles of increasing responsibility at global businesses including DSM, General Cable, Solenis, Ashland, The Dow Chemical Company, Rohm and Haas, Cognis (now BASF) and Henkel. Singhal holds an MS degree in Chemical Engineering from Drexel University, a BS in Chemical Engineering and completed the Global Marketing Management Program at The Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania.


Marko Pekkola

- *MM Kotkamills* appointed **Marko Pekkola** as the new CEO as of the beginning of 2025. Pekkola succeeds **Päivi Suutari**, who served as the company's CEO since autumn 2021. Pekkola has served as MM Kotkamills' Deputy CEO and CTO during 2024.


Sal Soldana

- *Ox Industries* recently promoted **Sal Soldana** to General Manager of its Aurora, Illinois, converting facility. Soldana joined Ox Industries in December of 2022 when Ox acquired the Aurora converting plant from WestRock. Soldana served as Production Manager at the Aurora facility since August of 2022. Soldana holds a Masters in Business Administration from Northern Illinois University and a Bachelor of Science, Business Administration and Management, from Chicago State University.


Tyler Rajeski

- *Twin Rivers Paper Company* recently promoted **Tyler Rajeski** to Chief Executive Officer, effective February 1. He succeeds **Debabrata Mukherjee**, who will continue his service

to Twin Rivers as Chairman of the Board. Rajeski joined Twin Rivers Paper in April 2022 as Vice President of Finance and was named CFO in August 2022. In April 2023, he was named President in addition to his role as CFO. Previously, Rajeski held Associate and Senior Associate positions with Atlas Holdings, which acquired Twin Rivers in 2013.

INDUSTRY SUPPLIERS

- *Engineered Recycling Systems* announced that **Mark Haire** has joined the company's Technical Sales Team. Haire brings 30 years of experience in engineering, manufacturing, and sales.


Mark Haire

- *Kadant Black Clawson* has promoted **Kenny Leathers** to President. Leathers is responsible for the company's operations in Lebanon, Ohio. Previously, Leathers served as Vice President of Sales and Marketing at Kadant Black Clawson. Leathers succeeds **Chris Demler**, who was promoted to vice president of Kadant's fiber processing business.


Kenny Leathers

- *Kadant Johnson* announced the promotion of **Chad Corte** to President. In this capacity, Corte is responsible for the company's operations in Three Rivers, Michigan. Corte was promoted to vice president and general manager of Kadant Johnson in July 2024. He served as vice president of finance from 2021 to 2024 and as the director of customer service from 2015 to 2021. Corte began his career at Kadant Johnson in 2007.


Chad Corte

- *Valmet* in December 2024 appointed **David Nelson** as interim Head of Valmet's North American business, succeeding **Jukka Tiitinen** as of January 1, 2025. He has assumed this interim role in addition to his current responsibilities as Vice President, Sales and Marketing, North America. Nelson brings over 35 years of expertise in pulp, paper, and related industries. Prior to his current role, he led Valmet's Services Sales Team in North America, and was the Director of Sales, US North, from 2008 to 2020.


David Nelson

EPA Takes Bold Action to Ensure Achievable Regulation for U.S. Forest Products Manufacturers

By Heidi Brock, President and CEO, American Forest & Paper Association

The U.S. forest products manufacturing sector is the embodiment of our shared national identity as a hardworking, innovative, and prosperous country. Yet that prosperity is too often threatened by excessive and unnecessary regulations that can harm businesses and send manufacturing — and American jobs — overseas. For U.S. manufacturers like the paper industry to succeed and deliver lasting economic benefits — and essential products — to the American public, it is vital that federal decision makers in Washington pursue a balanced, science-based regulatory agenda.

In March, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) took promising steps to improve its regulatory framework and ensure achievable regulations for U.S. manufacturers. This includes significant progress toward streamlining permitting processes, rightsizing standards to be achievable, and reconsidering unachievable emissions rules with limited benefits.

The paper industry has historically advocated for data-driven regulations from EPA not only because they protect public health and our environment, but because they also allow opportunities for good-paying job growth and economic development in the manufacturing sector.

In March, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) took promising steps to improve its regulatory framework and ensure achievable regulations for U.S. manufacturers.

Already, the forest products industry employs more than 925,000 individuals with an annual payroll of nearly $80 billion. These jobs support an estimated 1.63 million additional jobs across our industry's value chain of suppliers and in local communities, many of which are in rural America. Together, these hardworking Americans enable our industry to account for approximately 4.7% of U.S. manufacturing GDP.

Yet, unachievable EPA regulations would have made it challenging for our industry to grow this contribution further. For example, the agency's Good Neighbor Plan air regulation incorrectly included the paper industry despite our sector's reductions of emissions below the agency's own proposed threshold. Had it remained in place, the rule would have required our industry to redirect nearly half a billion dollars from other beneficial investments — such as efficiency upgrades that could create jobs and improve our global competitiveness while lowering our emissions per ton of production.

Similarly, under its National Emission Standards for Hazardous Air Pollutants (NESHAPs) program, EPA overlooked both the billions of dollars of investments by the paper industry and other sectors to reduce air pollutants and its own determination that its regulation had appropriately protected public health. Additionally, the agency's excessively stringent National Ambient Air Quality Standards for particulate matter (PM NAAQS) relied on a dubious approach that resulted in an unachievable standard — and without providing a workable compliance plan. The result is permitting gridlock that undermines the ability to

modernize and expand American manufacturing facilities like paper mills and many others.

The combined cost, complexity, and volume of these poorly crafted regulations threatened to grind to a halt efforts to grow local economies in states throughout our country like Wisconsin, Michigan, Georgia, and Pennsylvania. Importantly, EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin has offered a path for more sensible conditions to make way for the paper industry's continued contributions to America's manufacturing strength.

While our industry applauds these changes emanating from Washington, D.C., it is essential that we ensure these commonsense regulations remain durable in the long term. Like many other U.S. manufacturing sectors, the paper industry requires policy certainty to make critical investments in our facilities, product innovations, and communities. Our industry's capacity to add to the American manufacturing success story is at its best when we are guided by clear, consistent, and data-driven regulatory policies that benefit both our economy and the environment.

Our future success depends on a strong American manufacturing sector. EPA's decision to streamline its regulatory processes is a notable development that not only recognizes this fundamental role but creates a pathway to further modernize U.S. manufacturing, including the paper industry.

About AF&PA

The American Forest & Paper Association (AF&PA) serves to advance public policies that foster economic growth, job creation and global competitiveness for a vital sector that makes the essential paper and packaging products Americans use every day.

The U.S. forest products industry employs more than 925,000 people, largely in rural America, and is among the top 10 manufacturing sector employers in 44 states. Our industry accounts for approximately 4.7% of the total U.S. manufacturing GDP, manufacturing more than $435 billion in products annually. AF&PA member companies are significant producers and users of renewable biomass energy and are committed to making sustainable products for a sustainable future through the industry's decades-long initiative — *Better Practices, Better Planet 2030.* ■

Smurfit Westrock – Considerable Combined Potential

Bringing together two highly aligned companies — Smurfit Kappa and WestRock — has created a true global leader in paper-based packaging.

By John O'Brien, Managing Editor

"With over 100,000 people worldwide operating in 40 countries, generating net sales of over $31 billion last year, it's important to remember that in creating this company, we didn't want it to be just big, but we wanted it to be the best."

– Tony Smurfit, Group President & CEO of Smurfit Westrock.

It was back in early-September of 2023 that news outlets began reporting Ireland's Smurfit Kappa and US-based WestRock were in advanced merger talks to create a global paper-based packaging giant. Shortly after those first "rumors" popped up, the Boards of Smurfit Kappa and WestRock on September 12 announced the signing of a definitive transaction agreement to create Smurfit Westrock.

The mega-deal called for Smurfit Kappa to buy WestRock for about $11.2 billion and combine the two companies.

The transaction became official at the close of business (New York time) on Friday, July 5, 2024. On the morning of July 8, Tony Smurfit, Group President & CEO of Smurfit Westrock, along with colleagues, family and friends, celebrated the new company's debut on the New York Stock Exchange.

Since then, a lot has taken place.

Speaking with analysts in February of this year, Mr. Smurfit pointed out, "Firstly, we delivered to plan at $4.7 billion of adjusted EBITDA (in FY 2024). We did what we said we were going to do. Secondly, we developed a synergy program, which we are more than confident we're going to meet, if not exceed the $400 million, and this will be completed by the end of the current year with the benefits realized this year and next. Thirdly, as we've delved into the business, we've seen many more opportunities than initially thought, at least, in excess of $400 million — an additional $400 million."

Extraordinary Scale and Geographic Footprint

With operating facilities in many regions around the world, Smurfit Westrock has over 500 paper converting facilities, along with 62 mills producing a wide range of sustainable packaging papers and specialty papers. To support many of those mills with raw materials, Smurfit Westrock processes over 14 million tonnes of recovered paper and has some 300,000 acres of planted forests, mostly in Brazil and Colombia (South America).

For reporting purposes, Smurfit Westrock has identified three operating segments:

- North America, which includes operations in the U.S., Canada and Mexico.
- Europe, the Middle East and Africa ("MEA"), and Asia-Pacific ("APAC").
- Latin America ("LATAM"), which includes operations in Central America and Caribbean, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru.

According to the company, the North America, Europe, MEA and APAC, and LATAM segments are each highly integrated within the segment and there are many interdependencies within these operations. They each include a system of mills and plants that primarily produce a full line of containerboard that is converted into corrugated containers within each segment or is sold to third parties.

Smurfit Westrock has 62 mills producing a wide range of sustainable packaging papers and specialty papers, along with over 500 paper converting facilities.

Beyond Containerboard

In addition to containerboard, each operating segment produces a variety of packaging grades and products. The North America segment also produces paperboard, kraft paper and market pulp; other paper-based packaging, such as folding cartons, inserts, labels and displays and also engages in the assembly of displays as well as the distribution of packaging products.

The Europe, MEA and APAC segment also produces types of paper, such as solid board, kraft paper, and graphic paper; and other paper-based packaging, such as honeycomb, solid board packaging, folding cartons, inserts and labels; and bag-in-box packaging (located in Europe, Argentina, Canada, Mexico and the U.S.).

The LATAM segment also comprises forestry; other types of paper, such as paperboard and kraft paper; and paper-based packaging, such as folding cartons, honeycomb and paper sacks.

Performance-led Culture

Mr. Smurfit has emphasized that a performance-based approach is an important key to the future success of the new company. "We apply an owner-operator model and a performance-led culture with decentralized operations, where every manager has P&L responsibility for their own operating unit," he told analysts. "This, of course, means a sharp commercial focus, whereby the company supports management to improve efficiency, operating costs and to deliver for our customers. And of course, this can only be done if we reward and continually train our people at all levels of the organization to make them feel unique and part of a unique culture."

On the morning of Monday, July 8, Smurfit Westrock made its debut on the New York Stock Exchange.

Mr. Smurfit's vision, leadership and experience has played a pivotal role in creating Smurfit Westrock, thusly changing the landscape of the paper-based packaging industry. In recognition, PaperAge has named Tony Smurfit as our 38th Annual Executive Papermaker of the Year.

PaperAge (PA): What was it about WestRock that compelled you to make an offer for the company?

Tony Smurfit (TS): We saw a compelling strategic, commercial and financial rationale for combining Smurfit Kappa and WestRock and quickly realized the cultures were complementary as well. Bringing together two highly aligned companies created a true global leader in paper-based packaging. WestRock brought significant U.S. market share along with a strong footprint in Brazil and Mexico and its expertise in consumer packaging was also a very attractive addition to our product portfolio. As Smurfit Westrock, we have unparalleled geographic diversity, a culturally aligned customer focus and we're a big player in North America.

PA: What are some of the most significant achievements that have taken place since officially becoming Smurfit WestRock on July 5, 2024?

TS: Making our debut on the New York Stock Exchange on 8th July last year

Smurfit Westrock manufactures a range of kraftliners, testliners and flutings for the manufacture of corrugated board and packaging.

Being an expert in packaging design and automation, Smurfit Westrock can supply both the machinery and the packaging that runs on it, to ensure they operate seamlessly.

Smurfit Westrock boasts a global network of 30 Experience Centers where customers have the opportunity to collaborate with professionals from the company.

was a historic moment. Being there with the team that worked so tirelessly to get to that point, along with our families, was a day to remember. Since then, we have been focusing on our integration to build a truly great company. Notable achievements have included delivering a strong financial performance and winning over 100 awards for our innovative and sustainable packaging solutions. We also designed and produced a cardboard bed which was used at the 2024 Olympics in Paris. We then collected the beds afterwards and recycled them to turn them into new boxes — true circularity. The Smurfit Westrock Foundation continues to support worthy causes particularly in the area of childhood education. Financially, we are on track to deliver the $400 million we anticipated in synergies from the combination by the end of the year and believe there will be more to come as we continue to capture efficiencies.

PA: You applied a 'performance-led culture' at the former Smurfit Kappa Group with great success. Is this being carried forward to Smurfit Westrock? And if so, please tell us about it.

TS: Absolutely. From a people and talent management perspective, we are continuing to operate as we always have; investing in people to ensure we have the right people with the right skills in the right jobs. And this is very much still a meritocracy — the best people rise through the ranks and it doesn't matter if they are from Smurfit Kappa or WestRock. We also have continued our Open Leadership flagship senior leadership development program which is delivered in partnership with INSEAD. This is one of several programs run by the Smurfit Westrock Academy which cater for people at various stages of their careers.

PA: What is behind your philosophy of delivering 'value over volume'?

TS: Experience has taught us that you need to understand the profitability of every single mill and box plant in the system. That visibility on underlying profitability has always been a feature of the business in Smurfit Kappa and has carried through to also be an integral part of what we do at Smurfit Westrock.

We operate a decentralized model and remuneration is based on the profitability of the boxes being sold rather than the volume. This ultimately delivers more value for our customers and for the company.

PA: As you and your team evaluate assets, what are some of the more significant factors involved in decisions on capital allocation?

TS: At present we are working to get to know all the WestRock assets — what is clear so far is that the quality of both the mills and packaging facilities is good. Capital allocation is consistent with the approach we have always taken historically — return on investment is the chief consideration. We also take a disciplined approach to ensure that it makes sense from an operational perspective.

PA: From the standpoint of paper-based packaging, where do you see some of the more promising opportunities for growth for Smurfit Westrock?

TS: As a global leader in paper-based packaging we have an exciting journey ahead of us. Over the last five years we have seen more companies switching to paper-based packaging from less sustainable alternatives because essentially it creates good business sense. Our customers know that right-sized packaging has the ability to drive down both costs and emissions. There's also a really strong culture of innovation in Smurfit Westrock; we are also constantly looking to how we can extend the capabilities of paper like, for example, adding coatings which enable it to withstand heat or moisture.

Smurfit Westrock provides recycling solutions to ensure paper and cardboard packaging is recycled responsibly, efficiently and reliably.

PA: If you think about your style of leadership, how would you describe it?

TS: I've an open style of leadership. I listen a lot and I also make sure that people are listened to. I like to bring people together. I travel every week to visit our plants and mills and meet the people who are going the extra mile every day. This is always a very worthwhile experience and a reminder of the huge amount of talent that is within this organization. ■

Creating a Competitive Edge in Meeting Customer Needs

As a paper mill's pulp infeed process becomes more complex, so does the need for an advanced infeed system and associated equipment to feed its pulpers.

By Peter Hanna and Luc Babin, EPIQ Machinery

The handling and conveyance of pulp bales, including feed systems and warehousing, may seem like a straightforward step in the overall papermaking process, but increasingly complex paper "recipes" calling for a number of different pulps make this an area where advanced automation technology — particularly robotics — can increase efficiency and productivity while greatly improving worker safety, especially within the dewiring process.

Dewiring

Although efforts have been made to eliminate wires from pulp bales, such as repulpable strapping and glued bales, wire remains the primary material used to secure bales.

It has maintained its prevalence because it provides package strength for just about any type of bale or stack handling. Overall, we see the use of wire about 75% of the time compared to other methods of securing pulp bales.

EPIQ offers automatic dewiring with its 'Next Generation' K2K Robotic Dewiring System. When pulp bales are secured with wires, the K2K system removes them efficiently and safely. The solution can be complete as a system package or can be individual pieces of equipment that can be retrofitted into a mill.

K2K Robotic Dewiring System. *Photo courtesy EPIQ Machinery.*

Generally, not more than one dewiring robot will be needed in a typical system. By having an automated dewiring system, not only do the mills improve Health and Safety, but also reduce the pulper maintenance needs due to a much lower chance of metal contamination.

The EPIQ K2K dewiring systems sense for wire and are 'smart' enough to sense when a bale is wireless. In that case, the bale passes through the system without interruption.

Sometimes, we come across repulpable straps. The 'dewiring' system can be adapted with a pulp strap cutter for this situation.

Robotic Destacking Creates Efficiency

To complement the dewiring system, EPIQ has designed a robotic destacking of pulp bales that provides paper mills with an efficient solution to ever-changing mixes of pulp moving through their feeder systems, or in some cases, the rejection of a bale of pulp.

When a bale is rejected, it needs to be replaced to ensure the batch size and pulp recipe is correct. And, swinging between pulp species further complicated the reject-refeed process. For example, and especially in tissue mills, pulp blending happens frequently and this has contributed to the development of robotic destacking in the last five years.

Usually, pulp is stacked six bales high, but if a recipe calls for nine bales of a particular pulp, the destacker needs to take six bales from one stack and three from another. The robot can pick off the top of any stack. It makes for a much more efficient process.

EPIQ Destacker: A Game Changer in Pulp Feeder System

A few years ago, one North American non-integrated tissue mill contacted EPIQ for an expansion project. The mill was producing 150-200 tons per day. For many years, it had a simple process of feeding pulp to its pulpers. But its growing business drove the need to increase production and widen its portfolio of tissue products. What had been a straightforward process gradually became more complex — a challenge that many mills face.

So, as the pulp infeed process became more complex, so did the mill's necessity for a more advanced system and associated equipment to feed the mill's pulpers. More specifically, the mill needed to expand its pulp feeder system to accommodate five pulp species in five stack lanes capable of feeding three pulpers. The tissue mill decided to install an EPIQ robotic destacker.

EPIQ's scope of supply included five stack infeed systems, Fanuc robots, and MDI metal detector, Rockwell control system (in Europe, EPIQ uses Siemens) — all feeding three batch pulper conveyors. Wires removed by the robot are automatically compacted in a large wire baller for easy recycling.

Service/Support is Key

Any robotic system EPIQ installs is fully supported by the company's trained technicians that work with E&I personnel who are responsible for operations in a mill.

EPIQ gives training to the E&I people. And, importantly, we can provide service remotely or on site. As a matter of fact, 98 percent of calls from the field are handled over the phone.

Looking back at the evolution of robotics, up until the 1990s, robots in the pulp infeed process were not common and mills were understandably hesitant to install them. However, as they became more common, especially in roll wrapping and converting, the concept of expanding their use to other parts of the mill was not so much of a concern.

Robotic Destacking System. *Photo courtesy EPIQ Machinery.*

In North America, where there are many older mills in operation, space can be at a premium and process flows can often be convoluted. It can sometimes be a challenge to configure a new automated system but emphasizes that robots now can work in extremely tight places.

Plus, today's younger generation is excited about working with robots. They are comfortable with new technology. They have robotic education from their school days and want to use it.

Pulp Feeder Systems Continue to Evolve

EPIQ is now working with a client with six small remote pulpers spread across a mill. The facility is looking at one satellite dewiring system with wire-free bales, which are then re-stacked two-high and sent to the pulpers on an Automated Guided Vehicle (AGV) — no fork trucks.

As with the implementation of many new technological processes, there are capital costs involved. However, considering the safety risks and production ineffic iencies associated with older methods of dewiring bales and feeding pulp to pulpers, the ROI from a state-of-the-art dewiring and pulp feeder system is well worth the investment.

About EPIQ

EPIQ Machinery transforms heavy industrial material handling through Industry 4.0 capabilities, combining automation, robotics, and digitalization to deliver intelligent, end-to-end solutions. Its strength lies in offering fully integrated systems that connect multiple products, with complete digital ecosystem solutions. ■

About the Authors. *Peter Hanna is Regional Sales Director – North America, and Luc Babin, is Product Line Manager – Pulp and Paper Systems, EPIQ. For further information, email: info@epiqmachinery.com.*

Domtar Starts-up New PCC Plant at Nekoosa Mill

By executing a high-ROI project with a strategic partner, Nekoosa now has an unlimited supply of PCC on-site.

By Dan Persica, Sr. Manager, U.S. Public Affairs & Special Projects, Domtar

Two of Domtar's values are collaboration and entrepreneurship, qualities the Nekoosa, Wisconsin, mill recently demonstrated via a partnership that turned a costly sourcing challenge into an innovative project with environmental, operational and economic benefits. Partnering with Omya, a leading global producer of essential minerals and a worldwide distributor of specialty materials, the mill built an on-site plant to ensure a reliable source of precipitated calcium carbonate, a key papermaking ingredient.

The new PCC plant came online in September 2024, solving several supply challenges.

The Challenge: Regional Closure Affected PCC Supply Chain

In 2020, the PCC plant that supplied multiple Wisconsin paper mills, including Domtar's Rothschild and Nekoosa facilities, closed. PCC is a vital component of paper, comprising up to 25 percent of the final sheet content. As a result, PCC previously sourced approximately 10 miles from our Nekoosa mill required shipping from a supplier located 200 miles away in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. The high-water content of PCC when shipped over this distance meant the cost to transfer the product exceeded the value of the ingredient itself.

The change in suppliers disrupted both mills, leading to:

- higher environmental impacts
- delays in paper machine schedules and customer service
- chronic supply shortages
- unsustainable material expenses

"Domtar had to adapt to these sudden changes in availability and cost of its PCC supply," says Quality Solutions Manager Kurt Mehlberg, who championed the project.

The Solution: Build an On-site PCC Plant

Thinking creatively, Domtar and Omya researched constructing a four-story PCC plant at the Nekoosa mill. Studies by Omya and AFRY, an engineering consulting firm serving the pulp and paper industry, confirmed Nekoosa as a viable location for such a plant, offering proper carbon dioxide content, secondary CO2 supply options, favorable logistics and sufficient product storage capability.

In July 2022, the companies agreed to build a 27,500 dry-ton-per-year Omya-designed, -owned and -operated PCC plant within the Nekoosa mill's existing footprint. The plant would supply PCC to the Nekoosa and Rothschild mills, in addition to external customers. Central procurement was instrumental through the entire project, ensuring a reliable PCC supply chain to the mills while facilitating collaborative capital project development, approval and execution.

Both companies invested significant capital for engineering, permitting, demolition, foundation work, utilities and CO2 supply, as well as PCC manufacturing, storage and unloading facilities. Construction was complete by July 2024, and the PCC plant became operational in September 2024.

"This investment demonstrates our commitment to supporting the paper industry by providing sustainable, high-quality solutions that enhance production efficiency and reduce environmental

Left to right: Andrew Smith (Finance Director), Steve Henry (President of Paper and Packaging), Bill Edwards (Senior Vice President of Pulp, Paper, and Packaging Operations), Mike Verhulst (Senior Project Manager), Greg Linscott (Vice President of Manufacturing).

impact," says Marty Sheehan, Omya's North American sales director. "We are dedicated to innovation and partnerships that drive the future of paper manufacturing."

The Results: Improved Sustainability, Streamlined Production, Cost Competitiveness

The new PCC plant offers significant benefits:

Environmental:

- 15,000-short ton annual reduction in Domtar's carbon footprint by:
- reducing transportation by more than 1,180,000 miles
- reusing carbon dioxide from Nekoosa's lime kiln and recovery boiler exhaust stacks for PCC production
- Long-term sustainability improvements

Efficiency:

- Improved PCC utilization, operating efficiencies and customer service
- Increased flexibility in paper machine scheduling, and elimination of unnecessary grade change losses
- Maximized PCC usage and expanded innovative grade development
- Improved personnel time efficiency

In July 2022, Domtar and Omya agreed to build a 27,500 dry-ton-per-year Omya-designed, -owned and -operated PCC plant within the Nekoosa mill's existing footprint.

Economic:

- Enhanced ability to fully utilize PCC, optimize operating efficiencies and ensure customer service
- Supporting Nekoosa and Rothschild's cost competitiveness
- Safety of supply

"By executing this high-ROI, three-year project with a strategic partner, Nekoosa now has an unlimited supply of PCC on-site that allows for flexibility in our papermaking schedules and effective grade development," says Jason McCauley, Nekoosa mill general manager.

About Domtar's Nekoosa Mill

Established in 1883 and named after the Native American word for "swift running water," Nekoosa is a small residential community located on the Wisconsin River. There, Domtar's fully integrated specialty paper mill has the capability of generating 100 percent of its electricity to produce a variety of publishing, specialty and security papers, as well as many functional coating base stocks such as thermal, point-of-sale receipt, carbonless, labels, poly base, repositional notepad and saturating.

The mill, with around 430 employees, has 3 paper machines with the combined capacity to produce 168,000 short tons per year of paper, and one fiber line with the capacity to produce 155,000 air dry metric tonnes per year of pulp. More than 80 percent of the Nekoosa Mill's manufacturing byproducts are beneficially reused and recycled. ■

Beyond the Clipboard: Elevating QCS Service

With paper mills focused on ways to achieve production, quality and efficiency goals, maintaining the health of the measurement and control equipment is vital.

By Kevin Starr, Global Pulp and Paper QCS Service Manager, ABB

As the pulp and paper industry modernizes, the Quality Control System (QCS), which covers a wide range of frames, sensors, actuators and measurement techniques, plays an increasingly important role in driving efficiency and productivity. This comes down to its crucial function of enabling measurement and control, from the headbox to the reel. This control system is integral to equipment performance, requiring complex and labor-intensive preventative maintenance to stay in peak condition. Digital innovations can help reduce some of this manual workload, freeing up key team members to work on more value-added tasks such as control tuning and process optimization.

Quality Control Key to Increasing Industry Demand

Quality is more critical than ever, especially as consumer shopping habits have changed significantly and the demand for robust and sustainable packaging options has grown. Alongside this is the competitive manufacturing environment, with companies expecting production to be as cost effective as possible, with minimal tolerance for downtime and a focus on maintaining high quality standards. These expectations demand continuous improvement, to enable mills to remain competitive within this advancing environment where customer requirements have never been more important.

While the QCS is vital to achieving these expectations of production efficiency and quality, the routine preventative maintenance checks required to keep it operating at its best have their own costs. The traditional 'clipboard'-based approach of manual data gathering is not optimized for modern operations on its own and has limitations in timeliness and efficiency. This is where advances in digital connectivity for QCS really shine. By routinely analyzing real-time data from QCS equipment, predictive maintenance monitoring software can detect anomalies as they occur and alert qualified personnel to the nature of the problem in order to identify suggested mitigation steps. The way this technology is implemented is

The physical limitations of how many checks a service technician can do in one day can present a challenge to the 'clipboard' approach.

key to improving and optimizing maintenance scheduling, intervention and managing downtime.

A Digitally Driven Future for QCS

What does the future of the industry look like with the use of a digitally enhanced QCS? The current methods of using a QCS service exist as a manual process, predominantly performed by on-site technicians. Visual inspections carried out by operators involve a series of hands-on, preventative maintenance duties and activities which can be accomplished on a daily, weekly, or other time basis. This also includes regular reporting, checking equipment functionality and cleanliness, measurement reliability and recording key performance indicators (KPIs) from the equipment.

There can be challenges to this 'clipboard' approach. The physical limitations of how many checks a service technician can do in one day are a factor, along with the technical constraints involved with taking an overall snapshot of a mill's QCS that may not have the data resolution to capture an issue that occurs intermittently.

It would take additional time and experience from technicians to identify problematic trends and dive into the root causes of them. By implementing digital monitoring, the measurements and signals coming from the QCS can be analyzed continuously, without the need for human eyes to review every data point. This can be optimized to alert key stakeholders whenever a problematic trend or measurement develops. It is important to remember, however, that the human element remains a key driver for performance. Mills can continually optimize operations by monitoring mechanical, electrical and calibration signals, but success won't be achieved if disciplined physical inspections do not remain in place, as not all process parameters can be digitized.

With the digital revolution now beginning to influence QCS services, it is vital to always be connected to machines' processes and data in real time, to distribute information remotely to experts who can help problem-solve issues. This not only significantly reduces resolution time but also accelerates programs to become more proactive about preventing issues before they occur. The benefits of digitally enabled systems and solutions, when installed and maintained in collaboration with a specialist technology provider, are extensive. By successfully bridging the gap that has traditionally existed between information technology and operations technology (IT & OT), mills can reduce production and maintenance costs and maximize uptime and quality

By successfully bridging the gap that has traditionally existed between information technology and operations technology (IT & OT), mills can reduce production and maintenance costs and maximize uptime and quality control.

control. Digital solutions can also be enormously beneficial in supporting efforts to monitor and optimize resource consumption and reduce carbon footprint.

Whilst data and its measurement are important, 'big data' can have its limitations when looking at how to drive real business value for pulp and paper. Given the industry doesn't necessarily need large quantities of historical data alone, it needs solutions that leverage that data to keep pace with the rapidly changing operating mill environment.

Digital innovation can help mills adapt to market requirements with less friction. By utilizing powerful tools to help automate daily and weekly tasks, down time spent on routine maintenance can be decreased without reducing quality of output or creating production issues. When data is extracted from the QCS automatically and reported directly to key stakeholders, the team on the ground can be freed up to work on the bigger picture of production.

The extraction of this data can also be provided to off-site experts in real time to remotely aid in the troubleshooting process which serves to greatly improve service delivery. The importance of human capital shouldn't be underestimated. It is also crucial to maintaining service levels and preventative maintenance. Bringing this QCS information directly to the field service team is key to improving service delivery, in place of the team having to search for issues themselves. By implementing a system where KPIs are monitored and alerting thresholds are set, the service team can reduce the amount of time spent on reviewing data and more time fixing issues and performing value-added actions.

With the digital revolution now beginning to influence QCS services, it is vital to always be connected to machines' processes and data in real time, to distribute information remotely to experts who can help problem-solve issues.

The Hybrid Approach to QCS Service

With paper mills focused on ways to achieve production, quality and efficiency goals, maintaining the health of the measurement and control equipment is vital. This is accomplished with a comprehensive preventative maintenance routine, enabled by the synergy of experienced field technicians, the traditional clipboard approach and emerging technologies. ■

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AI Generates Ideas for Packaging Design

PaperAge editor's note: *The following article is from Metsä Board's Professional Magazine, "BOARD", Winter 2024 edition.*

Metsä Board is exploring ways to use artificial intelligence in packaging design. Metsä Board's packaging design team has been testing the use of AI in packaging design, and Northern Lights Oat Meal is an example.

"We established an experimental brand and used AI to create a new oat-based granola product for it. We wanted to brand a product that represented Nordic food and clean nature," says Ilkka Harju, Packaging Services Director at Metsä Board.

AI can generate various, sometimes striking, ideas faster than humans, and prototypes can be quickly produced with digital printing. This is how AI speeds up the design process.

To obtain useful ideas from AI, you need to know how to use it. Designers must understand the strengths and weaknesses of the AI solutions they use.

"We established an experimental brand and used AI to create a new oat-based granola product for it. We wanted to brand a product that represented Nordic food and clean nature."

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"I've used various AI engines for design and have integrated them so that they interact. You must formulate explicit, clear and descriptive prompts for AI to get the desired result," says Vesa Nurminen, Art and Creative Director of Futupack.

The graphic designer refines the AI-generated alternatives to create the desired visual object, ensuring it meets the necessary requirements. Additionally, knowledge of materials remains an area where human expertise is essential. ■

Metsä Board, part of Metsä Group, is a producer of lightweight and high-quality folding boxboards, food service boards and white kraftliners. The company is based in Finland.

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