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Veneer revolution

Banana trunk waste to timber

By **MARTIN RASINI**

AN Australian company with a small factory on the Atherton Tablelands believes its cutting-edge technology has the capacity to make the panelboard and veneer industry environment-friendly and to bring jobs and incomes to banana-growing communities around the world.

Papyrus Australia holds a patented technology that converts banana-trunk waste into alternatives for timber-based products and has a long-term plan to license its system offshore on the back of strong initial interest in its products from Europe and the Middle East.

The depth of interest was gauged last year when Papyrus unveiled its Beleaf-branded banana-trunk veneer and fibreboard products at the Monaco Yacht Show, Europe's premier trade show for furniture, panelling, flooring and other architectural products.

Ted Byrt, chairman of Papyrus which last month won the 2010 Australian Business Award for Innovation, says the purpose of exhibiting at the Monaco show was to test the market for the company's veneer and panelboard products.

"The interest was exceptional, particularly from The Netherlands and other northern European countries, and revealed strong demand for two product lines; veneer sheets for furniture, and a panelboard substitute for particle-board, chipboard and other timber-based materials.

"However, at the time we were not able to produce panelboard in commercial quantities.

"That has been our focus for the past year and we are now close to commissioning and trialling a panelboard machine at our Walkamin factory."

The banana-trunk technology has been developed by Ramy Azer, a mechanical engineer and founder of Papyrus Australia, who in the mid-1990s began investigating 'green' fibres and manufacturing processes to provide alternatives for wood-based products.

He formed the Adelaide-based Papyrus Australia in 2004 and it listed in 2005.

The company's products utilise organic glues and are fire retardant and water resistant.

Mr Byrt says commissioning of the panelboard machine is part of a plan to make the Walkamin factory, a showpiece for the Pa-

pyrus technology.

"Factory facilities are expected to be completed in a matter of weeks.

"When everything is in place, Europeans and other interested parties will be able to view the factory and determine for themselves the value of investing in such facilities.

"The Walkamin plant has a single cutting machine and the next step is a factory with five cutting machines, to be built in Australia or Egypt.

"Papyrus Australia's commercialisation strategy is to become a technology-licensing company, establishing banana-veneer and banana-fibre production factories in locations where banana is grown.

"The factories need to be on plantations and will provide new economic drivers for banana-growing communities, many of which are in second- or third-world countries."

Mr Byrt says Europe will source product from elsewhere, most likely from Egypt.

"While the technology enables production of a range of products, including various types of paper, our initial focus will be on the veneer and panelboard product lines.

"We have a number of

parties interested to invest in the technology and expect construction of a commercial plant to begin next year.

"You begin to understand the potential for this technology when you consider that the world has 10 million hectares planted to bananas and our Walkamin factory's annual production utilises the waste from just 200ha.

"We see the technology as increasingly relevant and significant, given the US's Formaldehyde Standards for Composite Wood Products Act, which President Barack Obama signed into law last month."

The Act requires that, by 2013, wood products sold in the US meet a formaldehyde emission standard of about 0.09 parts per million.

Formaldehyde is used as a bonding agent or solvent and there are concerns in the US about the potential health hazards posed by high concentrations of the chemical in composite wood products.

"It is without doubt that the Papyrus technology is well placed to provide both the furniture and construction industries with a new, innovative, low-cost and environment-sustaining solution."



Ramy Azer



Banana trunk being processed into veneer and panelling at Papyrus Australia's Atherton Tablelands factory