

MOBILE REGISTER

Theodore company's blast-resistant trash cans in demand in fight against transit terrorism

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There is the wastepaper basket, the garbage can and even the industrial-strength Dumpster. And then there is Dave Fannon's 2,000-pound, bomb-swallowing can of steel.

Fannon, president of Centerpoint Manufacturing Inc. in Theodore, holds the patent on a blast-resistant trash receptacle capable of absorbing the explosions from dynamite, pipe bombs and other explosive devices potentially used by terrorists.

Founded in 2002, the company in March began offering two versions of its so-called BlastGard MTR trash cans after extensive testing at the Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville. In June, Centerpoint landed a \$735,000 contract to supply 190 trash cans to the Washington (D.C.) Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, to be installed in the city's subway system.

More to come?:

The deal may be the first of bigger orders to come. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security has said it is looking for suppliers of bomb-resistant trash cans, and virtually every major American airport and passenger rail system is reviewing its potential exposure after the July 7 London train bombings.

"We got a wake-up call after 9/11, but what happened in London really raised the awareness level of just how vulnerable we still are," Fannon said.

Centerpoint is one of about a half-dozen companies now manufacturing a blast-resistant trash can. One of the biggest, the Israeli-owned Mistral Group, has come under fire after reports surfaced that its products -- already installed at airports and train stations in Boston, New York and Chicago, among others -- had failed a series of military tests.

Mistral denied that its products had failed any such demonstrations.

Still, transit officials from each of those cities appeared before Congress on Tuesday, asking for federal guidelines that would regulate sales of antiterrorism devices, which have proliferated since 9/11.

"There are a lot of snake-oil sales men, and they are calling on us every day," said Polly Hanson, chief of police for the Washington Metro. "There needs to be a list of federal standards, and they can't come out after

you have bought all the equipment."

While most of the Mistral cans were imported from Israel, at least some were assembled in Mobile.

Bill Green, owner of Gulfstream Sheetmetal Inc., said he was hired to build trash cans for Mistral beginning in 2002 and almost immediately began expressing concerns about the company's claims for its products, according to published reports. Green said he had a falling out with Mistral after he accused the company of manipulating test results and overstating the durability of its trash cans.

"If anybody ever put a real bomb in one of those cans, people are going to get hurt," Green told the New York Post in April.

Green did not return a message left at Gulfstream by the Mobile Register on Friday.

New opportunities:

Fannon said he and Green got to know one another after Green was hired to work at Batchelor's Mechanical Contractors Inc., a Mobile construction and maintenance firm. Fannon sold his interest in Batchelor's in 2001, and said he was looking for new business opportunities. When Green stopped building trash cans for Mistral in early 2002, Fannon said, the men discussed forming their own business.

"(Green) saw problems with the existing products that were out there, and he came to me with the idea that maybe we could build something better," Fannon said. "I agreed that the market clearly was there if we could come up with a design that worked."

The two incorporated the business as Centerpoint and began working out of a garage in Theodore, Fannon said.

"Initially, we were like a couple of boys putting firecrackers into Coke cans. We had some spectacular failures and really blew some of those containers to pieces. But we kept learning from our mistakes until we finally kept it all together."

Sought new partner:

With a basic design in place, Fannon in 2004 purchased Green's share of the business. Fannon said the split was amicable and that Green wanted to devote himself to a marine maintenance company he had established in Theodore.

Fannon set about finding a partner who could further refine the product and help introduce it to the marketplace. Last November, he signed a five-year agreement with BlastGard International Inc., a Clearwater, Fla.-based manufacturer of variety of blast-mitigating products.

Fannon said he was able to improve the performance of his trash barrels by adding a lid designed by BlastGard technicians. Citing competitive concerns, Fannon declined to disclose details of the product's design, which he said includes a unique steel alloy and layered walls that help contain the force of an explosion.

'Best product out there':

The washing-machine-sized cans "are far and away the best product out there on the market, and we're on the verge of some tremendous opportunities," said James Gordon, BlastGard's chief executive officer. "They only look like conventional trash bins. In time, they're going to save lives."

In addition to the federal government, Gordon said, potential customers include military bases, convention centers, shopping malls and colleges. In all, there may be up to a half-million public trash cans that could need replacing, and Gordon said he expects to sell 5,000 of the cans by the end of 2005.

Fannon has hired the Mobile-based lobbying firm run by former U.S. Rep. Sonny Callahan, a Mobile Republican, to help open doors in Washington. At Fannon's urging, Callahan and Associates also worked to include language in the 2006 appropriations bill for the Department of Homeland Security that will establish federal testing standards for blast-resistant receptacles.

"We think that's a critical step because the government ought to have evidence that these products work," said Dan Cushing, a Mobile lawyer and partner in the Callahan firm. "With the concerns we have now, particularly after the London bombings, Americans need to be assured that their safety isn't being compromised."

Fannon said Centerpoint employs nine workers but he expects that number to double within the next six months as the company wins new orders.

Fannon also is scouting locations in both Mobile and Baldwin counties for a new manufacturing plant, saying Centerpoint is fast outgrowing its space near Bellingrath Gardens in south Mobile County.

The plant's existing capacity can produce about 50 trash cans a week, he said.

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