

2015 WILLISTON BASIN
PETROLEUM CONFERENCE

CANPOTEX &
SASKATCHEWAN POTASH

THE BIG BUSINESS
OF HOSTING EVENTS

BUSINESS & INDUSTRY

SPRING 2015
VOLUME 4 ISSUE 1

Saskatchewan



45 YEARS & 5 DIVISIONS STRONG

NORTHERN STRANDS IS GROWING
WITH SASKATCHEWAN

THE
MINING
EDITION



45 Years & 5 Divisions Strong: Northern Strands is Growing with Saskatchewan

BY PAUL SINKEWICZ PHOTOS ZIQI ZHANG PHOTOGRAPHY

Mining and construction — two of the heavyweights of the Saskatchewan economy — rely on largely unseen, critical systems to function properly. Northern Strands is a key supplier of those systems.

Like the bones, sinew and muscle of a body, wire rope, fittings and riggings are the moving parts that make industry work. They keep underground treasure like potash flowing to the surface, and help hoist construction materials skyward as buildings take shape.

With health and safety in mind, Northern Strands has been supplying

industry since 1970, evolving into five major divisions that offer needed tools and technical knowledge in mine hoisting and attachments, general rigging, engineered fall protection, suspended access and training.

Owner Garry Clarke insists his team members have a technical base of knowledge to properly assist their customers, right down to the staff

working the order desk in the Saskatoon and Regina offices. Clarke says he doesn't want to just sell product, but provide technical knowledge that will give his clients what they need to get their work done. "The motto is 'exceed their expectations.'"

"When clients ask our sales staff for a product, we are going to politely interrogate them to make sure they are getting what they need," says Clarke. "You might find out you are missing something. Maybe it will be something like not having the correct factor of safety for a particular job. So for example, if you are hauling workers, you need a 10:1 factor of safety. They will know that and



help you get what you need. These are trained rigging people who could probably teach rigging courses themselves. They know the right questions to ask.”

That respect for technical knowledge permeates the culture of Northern Strands.

When owner Clarke speaks about the company’s co-founders, such as his long-time friend and mentor Larry Mote, it is with a tone of reverence. When that group banded together in 1970 to serve the needs of Saskatchewan’s burgeoning potash mining industry, each brought years of experience to the table. Right from the start, Northern Strands had secured the rights to distribute France’s Arcelor Mittal mining rope in North America.

Mote had done so well selling that by the mid-70s he was the sole owner of the firm. He began to expand the product line to include wire rope and rigging, and eventually the attachments used on the ends of the ropes.

Tracking the firm’s sales soon required a map of the world, not just Saskatchewan, as Northern Strands supplied mines and dams from Colorado to Yellowknife and Timmins to Mongolia. “He [Mote] really knew his customers and had good relationships with them,” Clarke says. By the early 1980s, Mote spotted new opportunities in areas related to hoisting, and set out to further diversify the product line and expand his customer base.



That was instrumental in helping Northern Strands weather a downturn in the economy. Things began to pick up and in the early 1990s they started to sell a variety of warehouse products such as chains, rigging, slings and shackles. In 1998, Mote and his son and partner, Darrell, began to look for someone to come on board to promote these warehouse products. That's when Clarke found his home at Northern Strands. He had been working for mining service companies all over Saskatchewan, but was looking to settle into Saskatoon with his young family. His career had already included installing and servicing Northern Strands ropes in working mines, so he was well versed in their products.

Clarke added his own extensive knowledge to the small four-person team, using it to bring new opportunities to the firm. The company was soon rehabilitating and refurbishing attachments and fittings to meet the demand of an expanding mining industry. When that side of the business took off, it spurred an expansion of the office and the installation of a showroom in their original Millar Avenue location.

"We went great guns, because at the same time all this was happening, the rules governing mining were getting stricter," says Clarke, "...rules about fall protection, rules about mining attachments being recertified. So we watched those new regulations and focused our energy on

meeting those new needs. Whenever I went out to the mines, I would buy any surplus gear I could find," says Clarke. Items such as mining attachments and small hoists gave him a chance to rehabilitate and resell equipment, and it was a deep understanding of provincial regulations that was the key. By diverting equipment previously destined for the garbage bin, Northern Strands was saving money for its customers, who no longer had to buy new or send items overseas for recertification. Today, Northern Strands is still a leader in supplying major ropes and attachments to mines around the world.

The years between 1998 and 2001 marked significant change at Northern



Strands. Many new opportunities presented themselves, and Mote and Clarke were quick to take advantage of them. Clarke began buying into the firm at that time, believing there was a great opportunity at hand.

“We really knew what the rules were, because of Larry, and we really dug into things,” says Clarke. “We talked to the mine inspectors; we went through the Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) Act and we knew that stuff inside and out.”

They started exchange programs for the mines, guiding them through the implementation of scheduled replacement programs and work

plans. Northern Strands even began helping mines write up the procedures that would guide their maintenance programs into the future.

“In the old days, there were no written procedures,” says Clarke. “Mining requires them now. The great thing about a lot of the people that work here is that we’ve been all over. We’ve worked in places like Ontario where modern operational and safety regulations came in earlier than Saskatchewan. So what we’ve done as a company is adopted the best of the rules and we use them.”

By 2001, Northern Strands had started a successful branch in Regina, and it was becoming clear the company would

need more focused expertise as it grew.

“When you’re first building something like this, you need multi-skilled people,” says Clarke. “But you get to a point where your focus has to change and you go out and get the people who can concentrate on the one area they really know well.”

Clarke began bringing in people to specialize in swing stages, mining attachments, warehouse operations and engineered fall protection.

Another leap forward came when Northern Strands began fabricating many of the products it used to buy from overseas to resell. By making them here in Saskatchewan, Clarke could ensure they would meet customer needs. “We



When suspended access rules changed so companies couldn't just build their own suspended stages for working at height, Clarke recognized another opportunity, and Northern Strands began supplying suspended access companies with equipment.

"In the course of probably two years, I found the guys I needed, and bought all the right equipment, and we started to take those jobs. It just grew from there," he says. The suspended access division now offers training, rentals and equipment installations. "We're very likely the largest suspended access supplier in Western Canada, and are really well respected."

With a commitment to safety already embedded in the culture of the company, it was logical for Northern Strands to parlay its expertise into a training division.

Its fully certified training staff know the latest OH&S regulations, and can educate workers in fall arrest, tigger safety, First Aid and CPR, wirelock socketing and rigging. The training seminars are offered either on-site or at Northern Strands' facilities.

"The industry did lots of wrong things with rigging in the old days. There is no excuse for that in this day and age," says Clarke. "Nowadays, you have a critical lift plan, a rigging plan. We didn't have it back then." The company is a member of the COR (Certificate of Recognition) program, which provides Northern Strands with an effective safety and health management system. Safety has always been the cornerstone of Northern Strands. It was important for Northern Strands to become a COR member and show that they not only talk the talk — they walk the walk.

As a mature company, Northern Strands has a strong sense of corporate social responsibility and has been supporting children's wish charities over the years as well as local 4-H programs. When the company makes a donation, Clarke insists it be one of the other team members that make the presentation because they are all integral to the donation. "I want them to know it's not just me as the owner; it's the company. We did this. We are making this province a better place." ■

seriously try to listen to our customers and find out what they are looking for. When you watch them and realize something is a real pain for them, it's an opportunity for us."

In 2006, the firm bought its new 18,000 sq. ft. building on Millar Avenue, and expanded its manufacturing ability, including bringing in more highly talented staff. "It really helped us a lot," Clarke says. "It gave us the room we needed for manufacturing, storage and, of course, better customer access."

In 2007, Northern Strands started the engineered fall protection division, recognizing an industry need for working safely on roof tops. "Overseas

this was quite a common thing, so we did some research and got our suppliers to come over here and train us. That was one of our major expansions, into fall protection and life lines." It was around this time that provincial regulations became more robust to keep workers safe when working at height.

"When we started into all this, you could hook onto anything you could find, but then OH&S started questioning industry methods and requiring certification of anchor points, regular inspections and pull testing." Northern Strands started providing the anchoring products and services other companies didn't want to be burdened with from both a technical and liability point of view.