



Ron Smith, founder of Agri-Gro pictured here at the Doniphan, Mo. plant, gets ready for the release of his new product Aqua-Veta this spring.

DAR/Pat Pratt

DONIPHAN COMPANY RISES TO TOP OF BIOTECH INDUSTRY

By PAT PRATT
Staff Writer

DONIPHAN, Mo. — As people are paying more attention to the foods they eat, environmentally friendly biotechnology is experiencing rapid growth across the board, but one local company is leading the pack with a line of products created more than 30 years ago.

Agri-Gro Inc. based in Doniphan, Mo. is a manufacturer and worldwide distributor of biotechnology for plant nutrition. Their namesake, Agri-Gro, was the company's flagship product and is a formula of nutrients, amino acids and enzymes that works to increase nutrient uptake in the plants and release minerals locked in the soil.

The company's founder Ron Smith, who is now "semi-retired" shares his story about how a small business can achieve success and turn into a global competitor helping thousands of farmers grow a healthier, more beautiful crop.

Unlike many other ag-chemicals, Agri-Gro products are formulated with environmental safety in mind, containing no poisons to contaminate the soil, water or air.

It also heavily focuses on safety to animals and humans. Smith's inspiration to form the company was forged in the throws of his father-in-law's health issues from working in the cotton fields before pure food and drug laws were in place.

"My father-in-law died at age 62 and they (doctors) deducted it could have been the result of some of the excess chemicals he used in cotton operations. Back in the '30s and '40s he was ginning cotton without masks and different things like that and using chemicals while growing cotton

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in the '60s and '70s.

"That's one of the things that caused me to look at a more natural approach to things," Smith said.

In the late 60s Smith and his wife Sue purchased an 80-acre farm north of Dexter. At the time he was an industrial engineer for Brown Shoe Co. During this time he was still farming his land and in 1976 discovered a liquid "foliage-fed" substance that showed promise.

"I knew the product worked. The company I was working with was out of Ohio, the Growers Chemical Corporation. They were doing research on this product that Sue and I named Agri-Gro. I used it for a year or two, but the company switched products," Smith said.

He believed in the product and thought it had great potential despite the provider's dismissal. Tracing the formula to the creator, he sought out the formula and began marketing it as Agri-Gro.

Smith traveled far and wide touting the benefits of Agri-Gro and how it could reduce the use of herbicides, pesticides and other chemicals. But in the early '80s, a shift toward organic farming was in its infancy or non-existent.

"There were some times when I would quit as much as three times a day. I've been out on the road myself, everyone

saying 'no, that's snake oil.' or 'I've heard that story before, the university says it doesn't work.' I was discouraged, but I didn't quit because I knew what it would do," said Smith.

Time and science would prove Smith right and those doubting the product wrong.

"Some of my friends who used to call me a 'snake oil salesman' now say I was 30 years ahead of my time. I can truthfully say this is not a fluke, not a freak. It is a product that has a viable demand in the marketplace and the business just keeps growing," Smith said.

Biotechnology is gaining popularity in not just plant and animal agriculture but feed nutrition, chemicals and materials, robotics, production, harvesting and use of natural resources, and synthetic biology.

"Let me stress, I am not against fertilizer companies or chemical companies. Everything in nature comes from a mineral or a chemical. My concern is the overuse of these things. And we have grown a tremendous business through people who believe our theory. They have found it to be true, whether they grow rice or corn or coffee beans," Smith said.

Dozens of studies, some by independents, some by the University of Missouri

support the products, which have spawned from the original Agri-Gro to include a wide range of bio-products, including Deer-Gro, which sprayed on food plots acts as a nutritional supplement.

Smith's newest product is Aqua-Veta, which he jokingly says "makes water wetter." In reality, it reduces surface tension and increases penetration by water molecules and is showing promise in arid lands that suffer from drought.

"It changes the molecular structure and electromagnetic frequency of water. It does some things that nobody knows how it does it or why it does it. I don't understand it, but I can tell you this, you pour it into water and it's like you put something alive in there," Smith said.

Smith sons run the business these days, but says he will be active in the launch of Aqua-Veta. He says he is "semi-retired," but is willing to share his secret of how he turned "a garden hose and a sump pump" into a wide range of products many growers are calling the future of the agricultural industry.

"I would say that perseverance is the most important ingredient, the greatest ingredient. That and 'Do you believe in what you are doing and are you willing to stick it out?'" Smith asked rhetorically.

But he also thanks the dozens of employees and supporters who have helped him along the way.

You can have the best product in the world, and the laziest people to talk about it and you will go no place. You can have a wonderful product and someone with no education but a heart to get out there and share what they believe in, get before people and service those people, that's the secret," Smith said.