Push for alternative fuels kept Vander Griend busy

BY PAT SANGIMINO

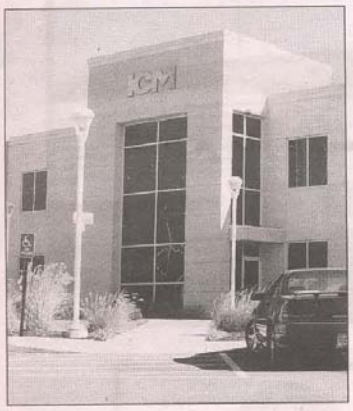
David Vander Griend is often reminded of a bumper sticker that was popular nearly 30 years ago — when Iraq was an ally and a peanut farmer could still get elected president.

"The bumper sticker said, 'A barrel of oil for a bushel of wheat.' " he says. "They used to be worth the same.

"How times have changed."

Back in 1978, Vander Griend, a native of Iowa, had already been working in the fledgling ethanol industry for a handful of years. The industry was so new — so unknown — that when he and his brother Dennis built a distillation column, it was granted license No. 00001 by the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms.

NEWSMAKERS: DAVID VANDER GRIEND



ICM Inc.'s headquarters facility in Colwich.

How times have changed, indeed.

Today, ICM Inc., Vander Griend's Colwich-based company, is one of the world leaders in the building of ethanol plants.

Since its founding in 1995, ICM's growth has been noteworthy. As America strives to find alternative energy sources to reduce its dependency on foreign oil, the ethanol industry is considered one of the solutions.

In 2005, ICM built an ethanol plant about once a month. Last year, the number of projects jumped to almost one per week.

"We went from building five or six plants a year to 45 or 46 plants a year," Vander Griend says. "It's just such phenomenal growth. There's no way you could ever be prepared for it."

It has happened more quickly than he would have liked, but there's no way to control the demand for ICM's product. Last year, the company doubled in size to more than 400 employees and it plans to add more than 300 new workers in the next year.

"It's difficult with the growth we have had trying to keep up with the industry demands," Vander Griend says. "I would prefer that things happen slower, but we have not been afforded that luxury."

A WIN-WIN SCENARIO

Vander Griend sees ethanol as a win-win situation for all involved. Finding alternative sources of energy is good for the environment, he says. And farmers now have other options for income sources.

"If you can add some value to a commodity like corn — especially value that doesn't appear to be going away anytime soon — it does nothing but help a farmer, help provide him with another badly needed source of income," he says.

ICM-designed plants utilize the dry mill process, where the entire corn kernel is ground into flour. The starch in he flour is converted to ethanol, a fuel that many predict will someday be an accepted alternative to gasoline.

For every bushel of grain used in ethanol production, a third goes to ethanol, a third to distillers grains used to feed livestock and another third goes to carbon dioxide. Kansas ethanol production creates a market for about 50 million bushels of corn annually.

Mike Erhart, CEO of an ICM-designed ethanol plant in Oakley, says effectiveness is the key to the success of his plant, which produces 42 million gallons of ethanol each year.

"What did it for us was Dave's technology," Erhart says. "It's a very efficient plant. Dave doesn't put one foot more of pipe or steel in a plant than necessary. It's a very simple, user-friendly plant that's got the best of the best technology."

In a town known for its entrepreneurial spirit, those in the know don't hesitate to refer to ethanol — and the role ICM is playing in the industry — as the next big thing.

The automakers' commitment to ethanol has been a driving force in the rise of an industry.

In July 2006, Ford, General Motors and Chrysler committed to increase the production of flexible-fuel vehicles to near two million annually by 2010 — a huge endorsement for the industry.

At the time, it was called one of the biggest votes of confidence for everyone from corn and sorghum growers to the companies that build the plants and the firms that manufacture ethanol.

ICM's rise coincides with that commitment. Now, ready or not, ICM is on the ground floor of this technological boom.