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Bend innovator looks to make fire work easier

'The Rookie' fire hose roller saves hours of exhausting grunt work

By Anna Sowa / *The Bulletin*



After firefighters squelch the last embers of a blaze and their 100-foot hoses fall limp without water, someone must roll the roughly 100-pound hoses up, pushing remaining air and water out, and lug them back to the truck. Bend resident David Johnston says his Rookie-brand portable fire hose rollers save rookie firefighters from doing the grunt work.

From the first roller he built in 2002, Johnston has created a business that's sold 100 products to municipal, government and industrial firms throughout the nation that need relief from the back-breaking work of hand-rolling thick hoses.

[Andy Tullis / The Bulletin](#)

David Johnston, owner of Deschutes River Manufacturing LLC, invented The Rookie and its many variants, including The Rookie Sidekick, hooked here to the trailer hitch on his truck Thursday, for quickly winding up a 5-inch-wide, 100-foot-long section of hose.

rolling mile-long hoses back on the truck. The hoses need to be long enough to reach from a pond - or other water source - to the fire scene. Done in 100-foot increments, rolling the hose back up takes less than an hour with The Rookie, Norman said.

The Rookie name comes from the new firefighters who often must roll the hoses, Johnston said.

For James Norman, chief of the East Bend Volunteer Fire Department in North Carolina, The Rookie has saved him and his crew the two-hour job of

"I tell you what, that's a great machine that saves lots of time," Norman said. "It pushes all the water and air out of the hose, which then lays flatter on the truck than when you do it by hand."

Johnston's business is called Deschutes River Manufacturing LLC, which he operates out of his 23-year home off the Old Bend-Redmond Highway on acreage with unobstructed views of the Three Sisters.

The Rookie, which rolls hoses up to 1 1/2 inches in diameter, is one of the company's five products, all of which are available with a Honda gas engine or electric motor, though gas machines are the most popular.

Johnston's other products are: The Rookie Sidekick, which is smaller but more powerful and fits on the back of a four-wheeler and rolls 3/4- to 3-inch hoses; The Rookie Sidekick LDH, which rolls a 5-inch hose; The Rookie Reloader, which allows firefighters to transfer the hose back to the vehicles; and The Rookie All-In-One, which rolls from 1 1/2- to 6-inch hoses and comes with a reloader and portable stand.

At the Bend Fire Department, engineer Brian Boyd says The Rookie saves him some aches and pains when he does semiannual hose testing. The department doesn't own a Rookie yet because of budgetary restrictions but hopes to buy one soon. Two years ago, Johnston offered The Rookie for the department to try during hose testing.

"Every year, I have 8 miles of fire hose we have to test," Boyd said. "(The Rookie) rolls it up faster and saves time and energy. ... (Doing it by hand) just wears you out."

From the mill to The Rookie

Before The Rookie changed his life, Johnston had been a 27-year millwright with Kor-Pine/Willamette Industries, a particle-board mill in Bend. Weyerhaeuser bought the company in 2001, Johnston said, and the mill closed for good in 2002.

"It was devastating," said Johnston, 58. "I had job offers for being a millwright over on the coast, but I'm established here. It was very difficult for a person my age to get a job and to change."

Luckily, the Ohio native had a little background in accounting earned from working summers with his father, who was an accountant for a large concrete company. Johnston has lived in Central Oregon since 1972.

"Numbers have always been easy for me, so that part was OK," he said of starting his own business. "And I totally enjoy people and getting to know new people. I like learning, I like running (my own business). It's not like work at all."

About a year after he lost his job, one of Johnston's friends asked him to work building fire hose rollers for the Pacific Northwest Interagency Support Cache, located at the Redmond Air Center, in 2002. The Redmond cache is one of only 11 in the country, which aim to provide timely logistical support to federal, state and other agencies in the Pacific Northwest for wildland fires, floods, earthquakes and natural disasters, according to the U.S. Forest Service Web site.

That first hose roller became The Rookie. Although the design wasn't Johnston's, the products became so popular nationally that he began experimenting with new models.

Eve Ponder works for the Northwest Interagency Support Cache, which supplies firefighting equipment to regional firefighters. She said Redmond has 22 Rookies, six of which they purchased from Johnston. While Johnston has trademarked The Rookie name and later patented his own designs, Northwest Interagency Support Cache still holds the original Rookie patent, which they can contract other manufacturers to build.

"Dave builds an excellent product," she said. "His machines work well for us."

By 2004, Johnston had a full-time business on his hands as he developed his own patented products that are lightweight and easily transported. Since he started, Johnston has sold 100 products, which range from around \$3,000 to \$5,000 each.

But getting to this point wasn't easy, Johnston said. His experience is in mechanical technology, in which he received an associate degree through Willamette Industries. But he needed help, which he found in the form of Dan Rohrer, owner of Rohrer Manufacturing Inc., located at Powell Butte.

Rohrer does all the metal-cutting and welding for Rookie frames, which Johnston then assembles with the rest of the parts in his barn-turned-shop at his home.

The industrial sector - oil refineries and chemical companies - is quickly becoming Johnston's next hot market.

"(The Rookie products) really cut down on the manpower and cut down on time," said Becky Gibson, vice president of sales and marketing for TSI Inc., the company that distributes Johnston's products to the oil and chemical companies up and down the Gulf Coast. "It also is a safety issue for saving people's back, that sort of thing."

In the two years she's worked with Johnston, Gibson has sold roughly 10 Rookie rollers to companies along the Gulf, notably to the industrial facilities of Dow Chemical, BP and Exxon-Mobile. Her company has bought three it uses for testing and training purposes. TSI Inc. sells fire equipment to industrial companies, primarily the major petrochemical firms.

"He's got an incredible product that the market needs," she said from Baton Rouge, La. "It's just a matter of getting it out in the marketplace."

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