

The Earthkeepers collection of footwear made by branded shoe company Timberland has its sole made of Green Rubber, a patented technology that is also used for high quality retreading of tyres. The technology developed by Kuala Lumpur-based conglomerate The Petra Group breaks down used tyres into rubber, which is as good as virgin rubber, says **Datuk Vinod Balachandra Sekhar**, President and Group Chief Executive of Petra Group and Chairman of the Sekhar Foundation, based in Kuala Lumpur

# SOLE OF EARTHKEEPERS

**Tyre Asia News Bureau**

*What is the current status in the usage of DeLink devulcanising Green Tyre compound by companies?*

Green Rubber is now fully commercial and is being used by a number of companies in Malaysia and abroad. Our most high-profile consumer goods customer is Timberland, which is using tyre-derived Green Rubber for its shoe soles. Timberland's Earthkeeper range, featuring Green Rubber soles, will begin appearing in stores from August onwards. We also have a significant retread tyre customer which is using Green Rubber in significant volumes. We are unable to disclose the identity of this customer at this time. However, we are extremely excited about the significant global impact this will have on the retread industry.

Broadly speaking anything that is currently made from sulphur vulcanised rubber can be made from Green Rubber, so the range of applications is enormous.

*How can this process cost-effectively help in the recycling of tyres?*

The DeLink process creates a high quality compound that can be used in a wide range of applications from retread tyres, shoe soles, sporting goods, industrial products such as roofing material and conveyor belts. Green Rubber is no more expensive than virgin rubber so it gives our customers a boost to their environmental credentials without raising their raw material costs. Additionally, the use of Green Rubber does not require our customers to invest in any new compounding equipment or to change their manufacturing process in any way. It is simple to use and simple to blend with virgin compound.

There are seven billion tyres in landfills around the world which cause a whole host of environmental problems. Tyre dumps are perfect breeding grounds for disease-carrying insects as well as being fire hazards and a visual blight on the landscape. It makes no sense throwing tyres away or burning them if they can be effectively recycled into high end applications.

*What market do you foresee for your products ?*

Rubber prices are only going to rise over the long term. So we see a massive opportunity for Green Rubber as the rubber goods industry continues to manage costs and reduce its impact on the environment. We are already in the tyre retread market – ahead of schedule

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– and the Green Rubber brand is going to start appearing on a huge range of consumer products. We have a solution

that is good for the environment, good for our customers and welcomed by consumers who are increasingly looking to buy recycled products. There is no reason why Green Rubber should not become a globally recognised brand within two years.

*What market possibility do you find in the usage of DeLink devulcanising compound globally?*

We are focussed on selling our revolutionary recycled Green Rubber compound, rather than DeLink.

This way we can better protect our intellectual property from copycats as well as sell higher volumes to our customer base. While we are not totally against selling DeLink if a particularly good opportunity arises, the company is focussed on Green Rubber sales and the expansion of our manufacturing plants globally will reflect that.

*What kind of business alliances are you looking for when tyre makers in China and India want to use your technology?*

We will look at opportunities on a case by case basis. Clearly China and India are two critical markets for us and we are keen to explore strategic partnerships in both regions. We tend to look for partners that are established in their industry who can provide a market for our compounds. That means they need to have rubber manufacturing expertise.

The great thing about our model is that it is quick and inexpensive to ramp up production in any given region to meet demand. So when the right opportunity comes along, we can exploit it quickly.

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Datuk Vinod Balachandra Sekhar

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*You have mentioned that Green Rubber compound can be a major component in re-tread tyres. Please elaborate?*

Retread is the single largest market segment that we are looking at right now. We expect growth to be explosive for us. We already have data that shows that Green Rubber can be mixed at levels of up to 30% in retread tyres. That produces significant cost savings for retread manufacturers without there being any concern about deterioration of tyre performance. In developed parts of the world, such as the US, you are already seeing legislation that provides tax breaks and other incentives for fleet owners who use tyres containing recycled material. Further, we are convinced the percentage of GR used can be significantly higher”

*What will be the cost advantage in using Green Rubber in tyre making and retreading?*

The exact answer depends on the prevailing price of new rubber and the discount provided by using Green Rubber as a replacement compound. However, savings are significant, even against the price of new rubber today, which has fallen from the highs of 2007 and early 2008. But look at the price of oil, which is already climbing again. The savings from using Green Rubber are only going to increase over time, as the cost of our raw material – i.e. waste tyre crumb – is never going to rise by the same amount as new rubber.

*Does this require new compounding facilities in tyre plants?*

No, not at all. Green Rubber can be used in the retread manufacturing process in exactly the same way as virgin compound. Our compounds work in exactly the same way as virgin rubber in the retreading manufacturing process.

*You hope to see Green Rubber to be a brand name for rubber products akin to Intel for computers. Please comment?*

We are getting there, but we have some way to go. Once more products appear with the Green Rubber logo, consumers will come to know the brand. We are committed to enhancing the value of the brand and raising awareness of the global issue of waste tyres. We hope to reach a stage when the Green Rubber logo will become synonymous with recycled rubber. ▲